

Dilettantes, Virgins and Queens: Postfeminist Auteurship in English 20-1

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Introduction

Saddled with another upcoming quarter amid the enormous stresses and pressures of in-person teaching during a global pandemic, I quickly decided to completely revamp my program for English 20-1. Over the years, I have refined, revisited and reshaped my teachings in this course several times: rolling through new texts, incorporating new ideas for poetry (such as the exploration of concept albums that were written about for Volume 1, Number 1 of this journal in the article “Tear Down the Wall: Increasing Student Engagement with Poetry, Pink Floyd and Concept Albums”), or creating a new overall theme for the course in an attempt to keep it

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fresh, invigorated and (hopefully) engaging. The levels of success in these changes have—at times—fallen admittedly short of perfection. Some texts, ideas or assignments enjoyed a mere one-semester stay in my program; others have emerged to become staples of my teaching. However, another shift was needed, something new that would attempt to engage not only the students in a new way but me as well. Something that was to go beyond the small tweaks and changes usually undertaken prior to a new group of students entering the room was needed, something that shifted the

fundamentals of my 20-1 program while, of course, maintaining the required ties to traditional text and curricular outcomes.

For many years I have admired the films of Sofia Coppola, and I consider *Lost in Translation* (2003) to be both my all-time favourite film and one of the best made films ever. For its revered position both in my musings on its merit and personal attachment to the film, I had always made the conscious decision *not* to teach it in the classroom. Concerns about the students not enjoying it as much as me overrode the value I believe it held as a text for the classroom setting, and I simply did not want the film to be marred if they did not enjoy it, engage with it or get it.

Instead of incorporating one of Coppola’s movies into my quarter plan as a new film study, I decided to take it a step—or, more accurately, several steps—further. It has been an ongoing concern for me that in the study of literature, students are typically only afforded the opportunity to engage with one text per author before moving on to something new, another story, another author, another era.¹ They are provided with a snapshot of the lives of the author, connect their writings to that moment in time, that precise era of their lives, and then they move on. Might the deeper study of one author and their career development allow students to engage more significantly with that work, and would this be demonstrated in their own critical thinking and writing? I sought a method for the study of a career, not simply of one text. Sofia Coppola presented me with this opportunity. She offered a divisive filmography that is controversial for their artistic pacing, immediately creating points for what I thought could be engaging areas of discussion for students. Her work is unique and interesting in that it “defies

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Structure of the Coppola Course

Prior to embarking on this classroom experiment, it was important to see if there were matches for Coppola's films to more traditional texts. This is not a film studies course, and I was aware of the perception that would have been created had I only used her filmic works as the textual substance of the class. There needed to be traditional written text; I wanted there to be written text. My goal was to go through Coppola's work chronologically to afford the opportunity to witness her growth

as a storyteller, the highs and lows of her career. This meant that I would try to attach text to her films in the order in which they were released. The connections that I was looking for were primarily thematic as well as being related to a set of literary and scholarly definitions that would guide the course (these are explored below). Clearly, there would be no perfect matches based on character or setting, but there were definite and surprising connections between the films and some of the texts that I would traditionally use at this level or are commonly used at the 20-1 level.

In the end, the following was the text list that I decided on for the course that would be taught chronologically with her films: *The Virgin Suicides* would be combined with the short story “Seraphim,” by Gaye Jee (2002). The primary connection here is the notion of parental constraints and limitations and the impacts that it has on the development of identity and decisions. Much attention can be placed on the significance of the male gaze in both texts and how this establishes gendered regulations that create rebellious desires. *Lost in Translation* is paired with Ernest Hemingway's (1927) “Hills Like White Elephants” and focuses on the notions of being lost at different stages of our lives and the sense of ennui prevalent among the privileged. *Marie Antoinette* is combined with “My Last Duchess” (short story), by Margaret Atwood (2006), and “My Last Duchess” (poem), by Robert Browning, exploring the constraints of social conventions and their impacts on women in different eras. *Somewhere* serves as a contrast to the feminine ennui of her prior films by focusing on a male protagonist and is matched with the film study of *Almost Famous* (Crowe 2000) to examine differing views of fame and its impacts on the human condition and ego.² *The Bling Ring* pairs with *Macbeth* to examine the notions of ambition and the endless desires created by materialism. Her more recent films, *The Beguiled* and *On the Rocks*, are combined with the novel *Half Blood Blues*, by Esi Edugyan (2011), and a selection of poetry that can include classics such as Walt Whitman's “O Captain! My Captain!” The connections here stem from the controversies and problematic nature of some of her films, and then the emotional connection and struggle between parents and their children, specifically the complex relationships between fathers and daughters.

Over the duration of the course, the intention was to incorporate typical assessments that the students would need as they advanced further in their academic careers. The focus would be on critical writing and responding, as well as engagement with the personal response. In this course, there would be a broader array of texts to choose from in the creation of their larger writing pieces. As a final assignment, my intention was to have the students create a critical assessment of Sofia Coppola's career encompassing her life's work and her development as a filmmaker and auteur.

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Structure of This Paper

The goal of this research is twofold: to examine the study of an auteur to see if it engages students further and if this familiarity is revealed in their work. This examination will run parallel with the examination and analysis of postfeminist text in the English 20-1 classroom. The paper is written through a combination of research styles. During the first attempt at running this course, I kept detailed notes and observations on the reactions and discussions with the students based on the films viewed. I was interested in which films they would be drawn to, which ones they would reject, and if their overall understanding and critical thinking were enhanced by examining multiple texts from the same creative source. These will be reviewed, reframed and rewritten to be incorporated as brief ethnographic observations intended to bolster the philosophical and academic analysis. The focus on this paper will be primarily on Coppola's first three films and their connecting texts. There will be mentions of the other films and their paired texts, but they will serve as complementary elements to the first three films, which are associated within the realm of Coppola's career as a "nameless trilogy" (Handyside 2015, 1), tied together through the thematic connections of girlhood. The

intention of this paper is not to suggest a radical change, it is simply an effort to demonstrate an alternative way in which a course can be delivered in an attempt to not only reinvigorate students' joy of learning in unprecedented times, but to reinvigorate the joy of teaching in a time when the levels of stress and lack of control is unlike anything experienced in recent memory.

Choosing Coppola

Typically, teachers seek texts that will garner as much interest and engagement as possible: when selecting films, the teacher (typically) hopes that students will enjoy the film, engage with the film and learn from the film. A risk with the auteur study of Coppola is the awareness, even before starting the study, that many of her films will simply be disliked by the students. Aware of this upon entering into this study, this prediction was worked into my lessons and discussion points for the texts. I wanted to discuss their interpretations of validity. There was little doubt that many students would struggle with the slow, deliberate creation of the story, the lack of dialogue and action, and the abrupt endings of the movies. Through her storytelling and directorial style that highlights the importance of silence and privileges the image over the spoken word, she "manages to code into the details of her films' sensory triggers, evoking feelings that can't be paralleled through words" (Deschanel 2020). Simply, students are used to dialogue filling in any blanks in the stories they consume. Coppola does not spoon-feed the audience with intention and meaning but insists that the viewer engage in this search themselves. She does this primarily through her attention to the visual, to the "process by which an image comes to be meaningful culturally" (Backman Rogers 2019, 7).

With her visuals, she has created a "dreamy, feminine look [to] her light-saturated films that deliberately linger on girlish pleasures" (Handyside 2015, 10). Coppola is considered a "pioneer of the delicate, the beautiful, the gloom of being a female" (Deschanel 2020), and her films generally focus on the female experience in a male-dominated world. Her focus on feelings—or the affective results of an image—are essential in the understanding of her films, even if "bittersweet is not a quality that is easily defined; it is felt" (Backman Rogers 2019, 16).

The moods she creates with her images are felt by students, if they allow it. There is a heaviness, a longing, an emptiness.

Her work is divisive, and this was an important component to the selection of her work. Often, thought evolves from controversy.

Many of the themes she tackles in her work are mature and out of reach for the average teenage student. The sense of misguidedness and aimless wandering postcollege or the struggle of being in a lengthy, loveless marriage; the recognition of being trapped by fame or awareness of gender constructs and their limitations—perhaps these are issues that will be tackled in their lives at some point, but in high school they are distant unknowns. These themes are not new, but Coppola does not simplify them in hopes of reaching a wider audience: she creates the stories she wants to tell and that are important to her; those who engage with it often feel a deep sense of connection, while those who do not, do not. She can provide the sensations that she has made a film specifically for you, capturing your own sentiments, or that she has made a film that is pretentiously unrelatable. These disconnects and struggles create points of conversation that may not have been available to a text that is universally adored by students. It is important to explore these tensions while continuing to attempt to draw value and learn from a disliked text. This is a unique challenge and twist to teaching: it is not the selling of a text to those who have liked it, but it is the creation of understanding in students that meaning can be gleaned from anywhere, even—or perhaps especially—when we do not enjoy a text.

Background and Style

Sofia Coppola burst onto the scene with *The Virgin Suicides* and has since made a name for herself over years of filmmaking, moving out of the shadow of her famous father, Francis Ford Coppola, to compile her own list of accolades and awards.³ Her work is (generally) highly regarded, having been called “instant classic” (Brewster 2019, 1), as she creates modern cinema that incorporates many European and French New Wave elements, including slow pacing, lengthy shots and minimalist dialogue. Reviewers alternate in their observations of her work, crediting her films as

both “exploring sophisticated humanist questions and as overly concerned with image, fashion and frivolity” (Smaill 2013, 149). Her films are artistic, with an “eclectic and highly pleasing visual style” (Backman Rogers 2012, 80), and literary in their viewings, generally without significant action, instead offering a slice-of-life snapshot of the lives of her characters. Her stories are told through the

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visual. Her signature style evokes controversy and debates among students who argue its validity in comparison to the films typical of their viewership. An argument for using Coppola’s films is their distance from the Hollywood blockbuster or feel-good films that are the central purveyors of popular culture. They are different and offer students an alternative view of what film is and what film can be. Her films are a challenge to the normativity of film text, yet offer the opportunity for a novel-esque level of study and analysis.

Coppola demonstrates many tenets of auteurship (repeated themes, actors appearing in multiple films, similar camera shots and angles, soundtrack style and so on) in her work. Her films focus on similar themes such as the “emptiness of living in excess, alienation, girlhood” (Deschanel 2020), ennui, a sense of being stuck in circumstances, and “characters caught in moments of transition” (Smaill 2013, 151). Throughout her filmography, she uses similar film shots and angles, general storylines and styles of music. She also has used several of the same actors in her films: Kirsten Dunst appears in four films (including a cameo in *The Bling Ring*), Elle Fanning in two, and Bill Murray in two, along with him being considered as Coppola’s muse for *Lost in Translation*. However, the most apparent commonality of her films is her use of pacing. Coppola prefers a slow-moving film, a sparseness that allows the viewer the opportunity to use their own

imaginations and intellect to fill in the blanks. There is “considerable attention paid to dead time: the films are marked by everyday events” (Handyside 2015, 5), by the realistic events that we all face instead of the overblown and hyperbolized Hollywood-ification typical of film. Her work is directly opposite of the big moment-driven Oscar vehicle, the *Forrest Gump*-style film that offers a series of unrealistically important historical and cultural events thrown together into one narrative. Coppola engages, and thrives, within the mundane. Her first three films form a “very particular kind of trilogy, formed in the crucible of reception and self-conscious auteurist assertion of personal creative autonomy and individual style” (p 1). These three films, that serve as the primary focus of this paper, demonstrate a connection to one another that is important in the study of an auteur: they demonstrate the start of a career and the beginnings to the development of her style.

Controversy

Sofia Coppola’s work is riddled with critical and academic controversy, and she has frequently been accused of whitewashing her films, only portraying lives of privilege, and ignoring people of colour in what has been deemed an “association of femininity with whiteness” (Kuperman 2015, 3). This critique has become more frequent recently, especially in retrospective viewings of her work and in light of modern social and antiracist cultural movements. Many connections can be made to very modern issues, including discussions of Asian stereotyping and racism in *Lost in Translation* and her removal of a central Black character in her adaptation of *The Beguiled*. Coppola seems to “waver (it seems deliberately, in hindsight) between insight into the comedy of cultural differences and cliched cultural stereotyping” (Takemura 2017, 2). These are important elements of controversy that open the auteur to discussion and debate on her intentionality of including elements of her films that could be viewed as racist, or as the overperpetuation of stereotypes that, while perhaps meant to be ironic or hyperbolized, are in fact harmful. Even if those scenes “have likely happened, over and over” (p 6), it does not remove their basis for critique.

Her role as a female filmmaker has also created

an interesting spot for dissection as her films do not necessarily encompass the feminist lens that many may envision or hope for. Despite the feminine aesthetic of her work, the women in her films “take on a passive, observed role while men serve as the active observers” (Kuperman 2015, 7). Coppola has created films in which her characters often demonstrate the tenets of postfeminism, opening her to critique that she does not portray revolutionary or gender role-defiant characters, but women disaffected or uninterested in using their voices and advancing women’s causes. It has been noted that her “films make little effort to subvert mainstream representations of femininity and thus end up at times reinscribing harmful systems of power” (p 17). This argument could be made in many of her films, yet countered with her gender power struggles depicted in *The Beguiled*. The controversial elements to Coppola’s work create conflict and tension for student discussion after viewing her films.

To begin the Coppola study, an examination of her personal history provides context to her films and sets the stage for the many autobiographical (or semiautobiographical) elements within her work. These “biographical details have become bound up with the reception of her films in ways that dismiss her films as too preoccupied with frivolity and privilege” (Smaill 2013, 148). Coppola has dabbled in many artistic ventures aside from filmmaking, stating that “I only want to make a couple of films in my lifetime. I don’t want it to be like a job” (Coppola quoted in Smaill 2013, 151), providing ammunition to the accusations of her being a spoiled dilettante. She has spent time as an actress,⁴ model and fashion designer, encompassing a life of youth, money and beauty that is portrayed in her films and equally serves as fuel for critique. Prior to her film career, she was perhaps best known as being among the generation of “celebutantes”—Hollywood kids born into privilege—and starting the trend of girls wearing baby tees, literally T-shirts made for babies. She exists in a “privileged position that allows her to change her career at will, a position that serves to enhance her reputation as a dilettante” (Smaill 2013, 151). This invites controversy as to how well she can represent the lives of girls and tell their stories, as Coppola’s life has been dramatically unlike those who are her audience.

Critics recognize the autobiographical elements to her work, and many of the attacks of her films use unnecessarily (or excessively) gendered language that “links the feminine aesthetic of [her] films to [a] frivolity and irrelevance” (Kuperman 2015, 3) unseen in the critiques of her male counterparts. Rarely would film critique focus on a director being “too masculine” in their work, or that a film has no value because the aesthetics are “too manly.” She has personally been critiqued as being a “shallow, spoiled daughter of privilege who spends excessive amounts of her father’s money on frivolous girlishness” (Handyside 2015, 3), and opinions on her personal life frequently bleed into opinions of her films. Personal attacks are ironically acceptable in critique of Coppola films, yet not for the disproportionate number of male directors whose work manages to be separated from their real-life crimes that are far worse than Coppola being born privileged (the example here is Roman Polanski, still considered a directorial genius and frequent award nominee despite being a statutory rapist). Her work has consistently been labelled as “girly,” but to “call them all girly is to dismiss the content of each individual film, and the person making them” (Deschanel 2020). Critics often point out the feminine qualities of her films in a derisive manner, even likening them to “cinematic pastry, a delightful cream puff, full of delicious air but lacking in meaty (and masculine) substance” (Backman Rogers quoted in Deschanel 2020). Her films are often problematic for the overly traditional male viewer, as Coppola offers a “kind of cinema that is not merely made by, but for women; that is, it places the male spectator in the position of feeling the *affects* to which a patriarchal regime of images subjects the female body” (Backman Rogers 2019, 14, original emphasis). Her films have the ability for the male viewer to understand the impact of a male-dominated society and the male gaze on young women. This threat to the patriarchal structure can be difficult to acknowledge or understand for many.

Marie Antoinette, specifically, garnered much critical derision that was specifically aimed at the feminine aspects of the film: the female focus; the soft, pastel colours; the observation of traditionally female hobbies such as shopping, clothing and sweets. The film was accused, by different critics, of being “tedious vacuity, uncritically rendered; only for girls

and gays; like a manicurist claiming to capture the inner experience of your pinkie” (Deschanel 2020). These serve as examples of critiques that are overly gendered, used only because she is a female director.

Further, despite her own successful career, she remains connected (or inseparable) from her father. The review of *Lost in Translation*, by Masaaki Takemura (2017), for example, mentions her Hollywood lineage in the very first sentence of the review. Students analyze reviews and critiques of her work (both positive and negative) to observe the focus on her sex and her famous father that is unseen in review of films directed by men. For years, specifically following her derided acting performance in *The Godfather: Part III*, “Sofia’s name was the butt of a cultural punchline, synonymous with nepotism” (Deschanel 2020). This adds another layer to conversation surrounding feminist texts and a woman who has achieved success in a traditionally male-dominated field.

Her work is frequently critiqued as much for its content as it is critiqued by a patriarchal establishment seemingly defensive that its traditional values have been breached by a woman. An example here is the cringey interview Coppola was subjected to on the *Late Show with David Letterman* on February 13, 2004. Coppola had just received four Oscar nominations for *Lost in Translation*, including becoming only the third-ever woman to be nominated for Best Director and the third woman to be nominated for Best Original Screenplay. Her nominations were groundbreaking, yet rather than focus on her work or accomplishments, Letterman repeatedly asked questions concerning her father: if she “received advice from her father, and if her father visited the film set, rather than posing questions about her own style, technique, or decisions” (Handyside 2015, 14). The interview is obvious in the undertones that a woman is unable to accomplish anything of significance in the film industry on the merits of her own work, especially without the help of a man.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Definitions

In this study of Coppola, several definitions are discussed and established with students to serve as a guide through the theory and understanding of her work. These terms become an expected part of

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their vocabulary in discussion of the films as well as with the texts that they are associated with. The goal with them is to provide students with a graspable theoretical framework for critique and ongoing themes to serve as a touchstone for their analysis.

The definitions are created and discussed at the beginning of the study and developed through the rest of the course. The majority of Sofia Coppola's works engage with all of these theories and definitions. The students have generally found strong points of connection to the theories and by the end of the study are incorporating these notions of their own accord, without prompting. The terms have not only entered their vocabularies but also their consciousness as a continual point of reference in their discussions and work. They work as something the students can continually return to in the study of all their texts during their 20-1 year and onward.

The Auteur Theory

The Coppola course uses auteur theory as its primary theoretical underpinning. Here, a filmmaker has had the opportunity to develop a recognizable style of their own through their career, and this has been aided by the “development of a cult of personality that makes directors into stars” (Handyside 2015, 9). In contemporary filmmaking, “the cinematic auteur functions as a brand” (Backman Rogers 2019, 5). People, perhaps more than ever, will view a film because of the director making it. The established director brand has become a major draw for audiences. The auteur theory was developed and introduced by reviewer Andrew Sarris, who established three primary tenets for auteurship in a film director. These are the three “criteria of value” (Brewster 2019, 1) that allow a director to be considered an auteur. These criteria are technical competence, distinguishable personality and the “interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as art” (p 2). The auteur typically uses common elements in their films and generally takes on more roles than director—their

fingerprints and style are all over the final film product, allowing them to be considered the true *author* of their project—the primary creative force, not just the person bringing the script of another to life on film. Film auteurism has “been traditionally constructed as masculine” (Handyside 2015,11), yet these constructs are being defied by the likes of Sofia Coppola and Kathryn Bigelow. Commonly referenced auteurs would include the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, who developed a unique style of filmmaking that was revolutionary in his era. He often used common elements in his films, such as themes of mistaken identity, the use of the McGuffin, his own cameos and his repeated use of blonde actresses. While his themes contain many similar—or at least somewhat related—themes and plotlines, his work also has the *feel* of a Hitchcock film in its writing and directorial style. A modern auteur is Quentin Tarantino, who has created a mood and tone in his work that is unmistakably Tarantino, down to the use of similar actors, lengthy monologues and the glorification of artistically excessive violence. When watching a Tarantino film, the viewer knows that they are watching a Tarantino movie. The same is true for Coppola.

Postfeminism

Postfeminist ideals can be applied to all Coppola films, therefore serving as an essential philosophical lens for this course. Postfeminism is a controversial and “somewhat ambiguous political and theoretical” (Kuperman 2015, 16) term in that it does not have a firm definition, but one that is continually developing or is somewhat fluid. There are three dominant accounts of what postfeminism is: an “epistemological or political position in the wake of feminism’s encounter with difference [...], a historical shift within feminism, or as a backlash against feminism” (Gill 2007, 148). It is typically employed as a pejorative term, a noncomplementary view of people or characters that live their lives without consideration for the advances that feminism has made on their behalf, a taking for granted of the struggles of women that have

provided what semblance of equality that does exist in their worlds. This can be manifested as being “uninterested in women’s rights and gender equality or taking these for granted” (Kuperman 2015, 16). It creates a disaffection from the characters and the realities in which they exist. This is the view that is typically attributed to Coppola and her films among those more critical of her work: that she herself can succeed in Hollywood as a woman simply because of the power her father wields and that she has not been required to face the struggles of a normal woman facing an uphill climb in a male-dominated industry. That her privilege outweighs any struggles she may have experienced as a woman.

Yet, postfeminism also “promotes an image of femininity in flux” (Handyside 2015, 4), of a woman that is always partially an adolescent because the “postfeminist woman is always in process, always using the freedom and equality handed to her by feminism in pursuit of having it all” (p 4), yet never quite “managing to attain full adulthood” (p 4). This is evident with many of Coppola’s characters, from the eternally teenaged Lisbon sisters, their ages frozen in time due to their deaths at a young age, to Charlotte’s stagnant development, or Marie Antoinette’s perpetual living a life of youth.

Rosalind Gill (2007) offers a view into postfeminism through her view of media culture that explains it as “best understood as a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes” (p 147). These themes offer many connections to the works of Coppola and provide innumerable points of conversation within the classroom setting. The connecting themes include femininity as bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis on self-surveillance; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; dominance of the makeover paradigm; a resurgence of the ideas of sexual difference; the sexualization of culture; and the commodification of difference (Gill 2007). These important ideas relate to the texts as well as serve as important observations relevant to their current teenage realities.

Sofia Coppola’s place, rather than “being a feminist, anti-feminist, or ever quasi-feminist, [she] is strongly located in the current climate of postfeminism” (Handyside 2015, 3). This lens

offers interesting points of consideration and discussion—who we are and who we are supposed to be, especially in a society allegedly more open and considerate than ever before. Within this are there questions of “girlhood itself as an affective state that privileges serial repetitions, [and] visible performance of the self” (p 2)? Does Coppola need to be a feminist director simply because she is a woman? Does she need to perform the expectations associated with her gender? Or, does her work offer more inroads for analysis as “what makes contemporary media culture distinctively postfeminist rather than pre-feminist or anti-feminist, is precisely this entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (Gill 2007, 161)? Perhaps her work offers more cultural insight than initially credited for: instead of offering a stereotypical feminist oeuvre simply because she is female, her films are exploring the tensions within feminism. The exploration of the definition of postfeminism as a part of this study offers a point of critical thinking for students and the expectations that are placed on them and on the text creators that they study or interact with.

Shoegaze

Shoegaze is an indie musical subgenre that features extremely loud bands playing catchy music that sounds pleasant, but in which instruments blend together amid the volume. Shoegaze bands focus more on the overall sound of the music than its individual distinctive pieces. This includes the lyrics, in which the melody and cadence of the words are more significant than the words themselves. It is the sound over the substance. The subgenre was so named because shoegaze bands, when performing live, tended to stare at their shoes due to the amount of effects pedals they were required to control with their feet while playing. This gave an appearance of disinterest or disaffectedness to the audience, as though they were bored by their playing instead of attempting to put on a good show for the crowd. Important bands within this subgenre include The Jesus and Mary Chain, My Bloody Valentine, Slowdive and, more recently, Deafheaven.

Coppola often uses shoegaze music, along with “indie classics and 70s radio singles” (Brewster

2019, 3) to score her films, and “music is central to the overriding sensibility of the films and Coppola’s signature style” (Smail 2013, 163). Yet, the connections between shoegaze and Coppola go beyond her music choices in her films; the music is also representative of her style of filmmaking. It is not the individual components that necessarily make her films interesting—the acting, the dialogue, the scenery, the music, the plot points—but the sum of all these parts. The final image, and the feeling created by it, is of the utmost significance. The feel of her work encompasses the ideals of this subgenre as her stories contain an icy coolness, a disaffected tone similar to the performance of the music her work emulates. Shoegaze music and the shoegaze cinema of Sofia Coppola “blends sub-cultural cool and art house aesthetics” (p 173) providing her work with the tone that spans her entire career.

Ennui

Ennui—more specifically female ennui, which has been “central to women’s lives and culture” (Handyside 2015, 5)—is a central theme in *The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette*; therefore, ennui is an essential definition for students to understand and apply to their demonstration of knowledge. While ennui is often considered as interchangeable with boredom, it is important to expand the definition to indicate that it is a listless state in which an individual feels lodged within their own circumstances. Ennui is not a depressive state but a phase when one feels stuck to the point of being unaware of how to escape, or are unable to escape, the circumstances that have trapped them. Ennui can be considered a chosen boredom caused by a lack of inspiration to try to not be bored. Her films offer a “growing sense of claustrophobia and despair [that] characterizes the emphasis on repeated actions that become increasingly futile and meaningless in their very repetition” (Handyside 2015, 6). Her characters are frequently stuck—literally and metaphorically—inside rooms that represent the claustrophobic containment of their hopes and dreams. The rooms take on varied appearances: a bedroom, a hotel room, the many rooms of Versailles, an old school. They serve a similar function of entrapment and ennui.

Hauntology

The original notions of hauntology stem from Jacques Derrida and his discussion on the return of elements from a social past to cast a shadow over the present. To Derrida, hauntological elements are like a ghost: present, yet invisible, but still able to exert power over our lives. However, in the context of this study and the Coppola course, the definition of hauntology is more closely aligned to the ideas of Mark Fisher, who applied the term to discussion of music theory. His notion of hauntology is that of a nostalgia for lost futures, a sadness for a future that never happened. Students generally show interest in this idea—they have a grasp of how a person can be haunted by their past, but are intrigued by the possibility of also being haunted by a future that has not yet happened—and perhaps never will.

Hauntology saturates Coppola’s stories. An example from *The Virgin Suicides* are the adult recollections of Trip Fontaine, the high school dreamboat and the only person to get truly close to Lux Lisbon (Kirsten Dunst). After he leaves her alone on the football field after their first—and only—sexual encounter, Tripp is left with a hauntological life, tortured by what could have been had his choices been different. The notion of a potential life with Lux truly cast a shadow over the rest of his (presumably average) existence. He is forced to be consumed by what could have been. The film contains within it a “dark desire to return to the half-light of a past that never really existed in actuality—and for that its nostalgia is insidious and troubling and desperate” (Backman Rogers 2019, 26)—it is hauntology.

Iceberg Theory of Writing

Also called the theory of omission, this is a style of writing most often attributed to the works of Ernest Hemingway. The iceberg theory indicates that an author deliberately withholds the metaphorical elements of a narrative, allowing the reader to fill in information and significance themselves. The author will provide the basic details that are required to tell a story, providing only a minimalist level of detail. Iceberg writing will not include rich descriptions, symbolism or motifs, nor will it discuss the underlying themes. Hemingway believed that in good writing, the theme and meanings should shine through implicitly, and the reader would not be

required to be reminded of details that the author deemed important—the intelligent reader would be able to decipher the meaning and intentions themselves. Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” (1927) is an excellent example of this style, as the narrative features very minimal description or context of a conversation being held between two young travellers. Even the details of their discussion are not mentioned explicitly, leaving it up to an intelligent reader to assign their own meaning and purpose to the conversation, discovering what the couple is discussing.

Sofia Coppola frequently uses this restrained style in her work, including the famed closing scene of *Lost in Translation*, in which Bob (Bill Murray) whispers something unintelligible to Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson). The unheard line is of great significance to both characters, changing the tone of their departure and altering the ending of the film from a tone of sadness and loss to one of hope. Coppola withholds what is said, however, crediting the audience with the ability to create their own interpretation. The style of this scene forces us to think of what those perfect words might have been. Her plots are often an “alternation between what happens and what fails to happen” (Smaill 2013, 169), offering a realism unseen in many films. She is a filmmaker “of the void, of the empty moment, of absence” (Backman Rogers 2019, 52) and the credit for the interpretation of her work is provided to the viewer, as the iceberg theory intends.

Male Gaze

Notions of the male gaze originate within feminist theory and examine the way in which women are portrayed through an idealized male perspective that typically represents women in a sexualized manner. This becomes of particular interest in the study of Sofia Coppola because she is a female who often incorporates the male gaze into her directorial style, whether it is a part of the story or a subconscious addition to her style. Conversely, perhaps her “films are important above all because of their reformulation of the gaze” (Handyside 2015, 3)—the male gaze as interpreted through the literary eye of a female. This manipulation and interpretation of the male gaze has allowed Coppola to develop an “aesthetic that simultaneously invokes foundational gaze theory [and] pushes

back against societal devaluation of the feminine” (Kuperman 2015, 2). Her work serves a dual role in this sense.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the story is told through the eyes and narration of a middle-aged man looking back on his teenage years when he lived across the street from the doomed Lisbon sisters. The story often focuses on the manner in which the girls are idealized and sexualized by the boys on the block, becoming their objects of affection and obsession. They construct a narrative around the Lisbon sisters as “an attempt to lay claim, to possess and to control” (Backman Rogers 2019, 39) them, or at least control their story. As noted critic Roger Ebert stated, in a way “the Lisbon girls and the neighborhood boys never existed, except in their own adolescent imaginations. They were imaginary creatures, waiting for the dream to end through death or adulthood” (quoted in LeCheminant 2019, 6). They were creations of the male gaze, an “indefinite and anonymous holding space or void for the boys’ most intimate projections” (Backman Rogers 2019, 35). The story concerns “male midlife yearning for youth as much as it does the plight of its girl protagonists” (Handyside 2015, 12). They were mysterious creatures misunderstood by the boys but viewed as the pinnacle of the feminine aesthetic regardless of their individual personalities or damaged psyches. It mattered not how the Lisbon sisters actually looked, but what is important is “how the teenage boys in the neighborhood thought they looked” (LeCheminant 2019, 6). Within this perception of the girls lies the tensions and points of discussion as Coppola—through the gaze of the boys—tends to lump the girls together instead of affording them individuality.

The Virgin Suicides and “Seraphim”

Outlines

The five Lisbon sisters appear as though they could have it all; if only they had wanted it, or if their ultra-strict parents would have allowed it. This film tells the story of the doomed family and the attempts by the boys across the street to piece together the contexts of their suicides, trying to understand why all five girls decided to take their own lives when there appeared to be infinite possibilities. It “revels in beautiful surfaces, but works to subvert those surfaces and reveals them as brittle,

hollow and false because it is about a regime and ideology of images [...] that forces upon the female body a form of internal death” (Backman Rogers 2019, 27). It is a film of sadness and remorse, an attempt by the boys to understand themselves by attempting to gain some small piece of understanding of the Lisbon sisters. *The Virgin Suicides*, despite its controversial central theme of death, offers instant connections for many students: the strong—and seemingly always unfair—rules imposed on their lives by their parents; the struggles of “the girl coming-of-age within the specific production context of the postfeminist auteur film” (Handyside 2015, 2); the desire for human connection; notions of infatuation; masking the reality of the self; the veneration of beauty; the desire for rebellion; the quest for individual recognition. The film wants to “explore and display the confusion and transformative years of adolescence” (LeCheminant 2019, 3) and explore the “underbelly of femininity, how it can be dark and grotesque, and she does it with subtlety” (Deschanel 2020). The demise of the sisters is tied to the economic demise of their suburban town, again making connections between beauty and neoliberalism.

The film that “hovers on the mundane and trivial aspects of suburban life” (Deschanel 2020) is connected to Gaye Jee’s short story “Seraphim,” the tale of a mother (Josephina) and daughter (Katarina) attempting to escape the abuse and absurdity of Josephina’s failed-artist husband, Jakub. When Josephina, forced to resort to prostitution to pay the family bills, accidentally kills herself falling from the Charles Bridge in Prague, she attempts to fulfill her promise to Katerina to “always be together” (Jee 2002, 3) from beyond the grave. The moody story, thick with colour imagery and female archetypes (witch, temptress, good mother, terrible mother), focuses on the question of what it is to be a good mother and how far someone must go to protect who they love the most.

Points of Connection

The obvious connections between these two texts, and what drew me to place them side by side initially, was the inclusion of suicide and death in each of the texts. The connections, however, run much deeper than this, and both stories can serve as an evaluation of the complex mother–daughter (or parent–child) relationship that many teens understand. “Seraphim” observes a mother

making questionable decisions (such as prostitution, the possession of her daughter and forcing her to die) that can be argued both as for the good of her daughter or as completely selfish. *The Virgin Suicides* provides a view of a mother who “represents the ideals of a bygone era, a declining society” (Deschanel 2020). Her overbearing and highly regimented rules are intended to protect her girls while doing the exact opposite, playing a major role in their decisions to end their lives.

Both texts provide insight into a matriarchal family structure in which the mother is the dominant parent, taking the lead from weaker men who struggle socially, professionally and as fathers to daughters. There are interesting points of evaluation and reflection embedded in the familial structures presented in the texts. Students have noted how it is interesting that in both cases when the mother essentially serves as the head of the household, there is a tragic ending. What commentary is being made by the author and director of these pieces, both women (despite the novel *The Virgin Suicides* being written by a man), regarding a world controlled by women? Through her first three films, Coppola reveals a “sympathetic approach toward older male figures [that] is in stark contrast to a hostility toward middle-aged women” (Handyside 2015, 12). This is developed in the nearly pathetic and powerless depiction of Mr Lisbon (James Woods) as a man destroyed by the death of his youngest daughter.

There is also an important connection related to voice in these texts. In “Seraphim,” the young Katerina is mute for her entire life, until she discovers a hauntingly beautiful singing voice after she is possessed by the spirit of her dead mother. Lux, on the other hand, has a loud voice that is silenced by the strict rules under which she is expected to abide. In both cases, the “girls are without a voice in their environment” (Brewster 2019, 3) and are attempting to find it and learn how to use it appropriately. Neither succeed, casting doubt over the author commentary of girls growing up—that they need to embrace a life of silence as they will be muted in one way or another.

Students have demonstrated an attraction to the commentary of individuality among the five girls lumped together because of their similarly idealized slender and blonde physical appearances. Their looks, in the eyes of those around them, replace the need for individualized personalities.

There also is a connection to Trip Fontaine, the male object of desire in the school who seeks out Lux because she provides the illusion of unattainability, the girl who is too good for everyone, the “dream girl who is forever unreachable, unattainable and lost to the boys” (Backman Rogers 2019, 44). Trip was recognizable to all; he is a high school archetype that has changed very little over the course of time. He is the “consummate high school ‘jock’ [who] must seal his status as such by sexual conquest” (Backman Rogers 2019, 37). Students sympathize for Lux as she crumbles as the film moves forward; Lux is crushed by the rules imposed by her mother and she cannot be saved through her increasingly rebellious acts. She becomes more confined instead of liberated, and there is empathy for her character, something that can be difficult to foster in modern students. Lux, by the end of her downfall, is more Blanche DuBois than homecoming queen, and it is a sad plight to watch. Coppola does well to capture the “confusing mixture of emotions teenage girls were experiencing but lacked the tools to navigate” (Deschanel 2020).

Lux attempts to rebel against the strict regulations of her house in a similar fashion to how Josephina attempts to rebel against the financial constraints of her failing marriage: through sexual experimentation. Lux, once the hard-to-get teen queen of her school, engages in several illicit rendezvous with random men on the roof of her house. Josephina, on the other hand, turns to the selling of sex in order to pay the bills and serve as a final defiance to her husband and their marital vows. In both cases, the women allow themselves to be objectified, for different reasons. This “sexual objectification can be (re-)presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects” (Gill 2007, 153). Are the women truly empowered, or have they fallen in the patriarchal trap where they believe their actions are assertive, yet end up further catering to the male gaze?

Outside of classroom discussion, the primary activity for these texts was a comparative analysis in which students focused on certain connections between the two texts. They are provided with choice on where to make these connections: between the characters, the themes, in viewing the texts as feminist readings, the role of death, the perceptions of traditional gender roles or patriarchal roles. Students tend to connect the most with

The Virgin Suicides, as the age of the characters is similar to their own. Living under strict rules and the teenaged search for freedom is an easily recognizable connection for students to make.

Reactions and Observations

Over the course of this study, The Virgin Suicides ends up being the students’ favourite of the Coppola films. In running this course more than once, I assume that at the end of the day, this is because the story and the themes are more directed toward teenagers. At this point, they enjoy the idea of connecting text to film all through the year, and perhaps there is some initial excitement about this—a way to look at English class differently, and a way to look at text in a fashion that is more in line with the way that they themselves consume text: so many students are visual learners, and they absorb and consume massive amounts of text in their daily lives. Streaming videos and films in pretty much every waking moment, they need to be taught how to think about what they are consuming. Simply, students do not read books like we would want them to, yet their formal education spends the majority of its time teaching them how to dissect and analyze the written word. If their focus is more on the visual, then it can become our responsibility to adapt our teaching to their needs. And at this point, they need to learn how to “read” a visual text.

There was some initial trepidation with the teaching of this text—even the title itself could serve as a trigger or as a difficult point, but the students have been strong with this. Unfortunately, suicide has become a part of their lives, and they are willing to discuss the deaths of the Lisbon sisters in a mature fashion. I am sure to provide a preamble to the study of the film to ensure they know that it indeed involves young people taking their own lives and offer explanations on the services available for help related to the topic.

In both attempts with this Coppola course, I am buoyed by the initial reactions to the film and story. At this point, there is hope that the course will run seamlessly and the students will be constantly engaged in every text, that they will be able to deeply analyze the texts and that by the end of the course they will not only be stronger readers and writers but also Coppola experts, art film buffs and multimedia critical thinkers, all with a desire to visit Tokyo or study French royalty.

The best laid plans, to be sure.

***Lost in Translation* and “Hills Like White Elephants”**

Outlines

Ernest Hemingway offers up a minimalist look at a young American couple as they wait at a train station during their travels in Spain. The couple is at a literal and figurative crossroads in their lives as they discuss an unnamed procedure that could alter their lives forever. Sitting, talking and drinking alcohol, the couple euphemistically dances around—attempting to delay or avoid—the life-altering choice before them. Hemingway creates a very simple story that is embedded with much deeper symbols and themes upon analysis, very much in the vein of the iceberg theory of writing.

Conversely, Sofia Coppola tells the story of two Americans at vastly different points in their lives spending their time in a Tokyo hotel in her acclaimed film, *Lost in Translation*. Bob is an aged actor clinging to his career and clinging to his relationship with his distant and passive-aggressive wife while in Japan to film a commercial for a whiskey company. Charlotte is in her early 20s and in the third year of her marriage, visiting Tokyo with her photographer husband. She feels a displacement in her life that goes beyond the foreign land she is visiting, as she is unsure of who she is, what her marriage is and who she is meant to be. The story speaks to “solitude and loneliness even in the bustling, noisy, super-frenetic context of Tokyo; alienation in the midst of frenzy” (Takemura 2017, 6). *Lost in Translation* is the story of two people who are very much lost, finding an unlikely friendship with each other as they attempt to figure out their lives and figure out how to get some sleep, along the way demonstrating that perhaps there is “no perfect translation” (p 4). For Coppola, this film is a part of an “ongoing metaphorical autobiography” (Handyside 2015, 1), and many of the elements of the film are derived from her own young marriage.

Points of Connection

Both texts tell of people who are at a crossroads in their lives, whether this is literal, metaphorical or both. The stories demonstrate that people are continually attempting to discover themselves, to

continue their becoming, regardless of age, and that there are many instances that can set these considerations in motion.

All characters face big decisions that will guide their lives from that point. In “Hills Like White Elephants,” the characters are discussing an unnamed operation that analysis reveals is an abortion, a revelation that is initially lost on most students but once revealed, offers them a renewed perspective on the story and its events.⁵ The abortion is the missing element to Hemingway’s minimalist puzzle. The confusing back-and-forth conversation becomes clear as the text warrants multiple readings once the nature of the operation is revealed. Bob and Charlotte are both faced with choices regarding their careers and their marriages, important aspects of their lives and their identities. They must decide what may be worth fighting for. All grapple with the crossover theme of talking versus communicating and the chasm created between people when they believe the two are equal or contribute to a successful relationship. Travel through a foreign land adds a dimension to the feelings of being lost for all characters. They are not at home, they are immersed in the foreign and lost in the language and the unfamiliar. The sensation of being alone in a foreign land is enhanced through the iceberg theory, as the audience, given the lack of information provided, can feel lost as well. The stylistic choices made by the authors enables the engagement of the audience to experience their own sensations of lost alongside the characters.

Hemingway and Coppola have created characters perceived as dilettantes permitted by lives of privilege. Charlotte, for example, has a philosophy degree from Yale but is unable to put this Ivy League education into practice. She has attempted a variety of artistic ventures, such as writing and photography, yet is hesitant to commit to them for her own fear of failure and desire to attempt something new and temporarily exciting once again. Charlotte does not want to commit to something that she is not instantly good at. There is a sense that she feels that her work should be representative of what she views as a superior intellect—but she does not want to work for it. She exists in a self-created ennui that protects her against failure by never truly trying at anything. The couple in “Hills Like White Elephants” are embroiled in ennui despite the exciting appearance

of their jet-setting lifestyle. They are bored by the repetition of travel and drinks despite the new opportunities this affords them. Even the exotic taste of licorice has become unexciting for them (Hemingway 1927, 2). Both texts offer views of “young women who are trying to find their place in the world and to map out their own identities” (Backman Rogers 2012, 81), yet remain mired in ennui as they choose to do nothing to change their circumstances.

The texts offer the stories of people attempting to find their direction while in foreign places, Spain in “Hills Like White Elephants” and Tokyo in *Lost in Translation*, and there is a disconnect between the characters and the places where they travel. There is very little to demonstrate a desired connection to the world of travel or the exotic locales of their stories: they play the roles of tourists, of casual observers to worlds unlike their own. They desire the excitement of the foreign, but want the familiarity and comfort of home. The protagonists of *Lost in Translation* have been accused of not wanting to “understand different cultures, nor encounter real cross-cultural experiences. They were only interested in each other” (Takemura 2017, 2). This self-focus and disconnect from the environment is echoed through their disconnect from their partners, and in the end, from themselves.

Both women, to a certain extent, fall into Gill’s (2007, 156) “makeover paradigm,” that “requires people (predominantly women) to believe, first, that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way” (p 156). There is a sense in both characters that an incompleteness to their lives must be remedied. In “Hills Like White Elephants,” it is starting a family that could fill the void in the girl’s life of ennui, and in *Lost in Translation*, it is the discovery of one’s calling that will rectify the perceived lack. The quest for these “solutions,” which follow the “production of toxic shame” (p 156) backhandedly engineered by their husbands, are intended to drive them to become “more ‘successful’ versions of themselves” (p 156). There is a system that exists within their own marriages and relationships that tells them they are broken. They are left to work within that system in an attempt to “fix” themselves, even if the women are smart enough to understand that there is “nothing wrong with [them]. [They] feel fine” (Hemingway 1927, 4). The system points out these

flaws despite their resistance that there are flaws at all. There are societal pressures placed on women that they must have children or must have a career to be considered complete.

Students engage easily with Hemingway’s story but struggle with *Lost in Translation*. The slow pacing of the film is difficult for them, and they struggle to connect with Charlotte. While her character is only a few years older than them, she is at a far more adult place in her life. This disconnect was surprising upon first teaching this film; there was an expectation that the students would recognize their own feelings of ennui or notions of being stuck somewhere they do not want to be (in high school) in Charlotte; this has proven to be rarely the case. Perhaps they are too well versed in plot-driven filmmaking, or perhaps they struggle with a film that attempts to capture a series of moments of reality between two people. In Coppola’s films, “mood and form are of far greater consequence [...] than narrative” (Backman Rogers 2019, 20), counter to what students would typically view or consider as enjoyable. Perhaps even they struggle with recognizing their own ennui in Bob and Charlotte on the screen, and it is a startling revelation that they don’t want to watch an uncurated version of their own lives stripped of Hollywood grandeur.

I wanted them to recognize their own lives in the characters, to show them that they are the same, and that if they don’t do something to not be bored, they will always be bored.

Reactions and Observations

They didn’t like Lost in Translation. Of all the texts I have taught in my career, I wanted them to like this one, to feel the importance of seemingly simple moments, to understand what it is to be lost and the simple things we cling to when we want to be found. I wanted them to not only be challenged by a text, but embrace the challenge and rise up to it, to move beyond their constant state of existence that is too focused on

“being bored.” I wanted them to recognize their own lives in the characters, to show them that they are the same, and that if they don’t do something to not be bored, they will always be bored. At this point, it is as though they do not know what it is to not be bored or that there are choices to escape this. Yet, they return to their phones to continue scrolling through images they aren’t really looking at and are not really seeing. Sometimes I wonder if they have become so adapted to their own choices of boredom that they are no longer aware of what it is that makes them not bored, what it is to be excited about something again.

Despite the majority of students disliking this film, I do not feel like it was a lost cause in teaching it. They were challenged, and I believe that the film offered them an opportunity to see a different way that the medium of film can be created, a different version of text. Teachers, blessed/cursed with optimism, can feel as though this film is one that students will appreciate. Down the road. Five years from now. Or ten years from now. Just not now. Now it is too much for them—perhaps it is too frightening that the sense of being stuck that they feel now in their lives is something that they may never be able to shake.

For me, Lost in Translation is a film of moments, within the film itself, but with our connection to it as well. I truly believe that there will be a moment in their lives when they will remember the film and see themselves in that place, that things will click and that they will finally get it.

Marie Antoinette and “My Last Duchess” (and “My Last Duchess”)

Outlines

Canadian author Margaret Atwood tells the tale of a female secondary student nearing the end of her schooling and facing the uncertain future in “My Last Duchess.” As she studies the Robert Browning poem “My Last Duchess” under the tutelage of her tough, but inspirational, teacher Miss Bessie, the girl realizes the difficult decisions that lay before her and the need to move on in her life. She recognizes the importance of “lasts” as she breaks up with her steady boyfriend and faces the rigid gender conventions of her mid-19th century upbringing. She struggles with the tensions between her femininity and her cutthroat manner

of thought when faced with obstacles that stand in between her and her aspirations.

Marie Antoinette was also faced with rigid gender structures, absorbed in the “mechanistic procedures that maintain[ed] Versailles as an institution” (Handyside 2015, 6). A divisive and controversial historical character, Marie Antoinette, stars Kirsten Dunst in the title role of the doomed French queen. Always distrusted as a foreigner to the court of France, Marie Antoinette eventually—and very briefly—clawed her way into public favour before this joy quickly turned to disdain, then pure vitriol, as her life progressed. She is frequently blamed as a primary cause of the French Revolution and the dissembling of the French monarchy and the Bourbon dynasty. Coppola’s pastel-soaked interpretation of Antoinette is a “deliberately anachronistic and flagrantly postmodern” (Backman Rogers 2012, 81) look at prerevolutionary France as the queen attempts to grow into her role while faced with a difficult marriage and enormous public pressure influencing all aspects of her life. This includes the aspects of her body that become public knowledge and a primary source of gossip and rumour. Her child-bearing and her sexual exploits (whether true or complete fabrications) were common topics of conversation both within the walls of Versailles and on the streets of Paris, often fuelled by the cruel pamphlet makers of the time. Coppola, instead of using the “female body as the site of spectacle” (Backman Rogers 2012, 82), as is traditional in film, “delineates how that body is harnessed and regulated via ritualistic processes” (Backman Rogers 2012, 82), processes that stifle not only femininity, but individuality.

In Coppola’s interpretation of her life, Marie Antoinette is dubbed the “world’s first rock star” because of her extravagant living that is frequently misaligned with historical fact. A sense of impending doom weighs over the film: we know what happens to her in the end, even if Coppola does not take us up to the conclusion of her life. We know her brutal ending; instead, Coppola paints a humanizing portrait of a dehumanized historical woman, an appeal “to the viewer’s empathetic capacity and also reveals the historical figure of Marie Antoinette as a creation” (Backman Rogers 2012, 83) of half-truths and historical inaccuracies. Instead of aiming to provide an accurate historical

depiction of Marie Antoinette “the ruler, Coppola gave us a depiction of Marie Antoinette the girl” (Deschanel 2020).

Points of Connection

Atwood writes in a style completely opposite of Hemingway’s theory of omission; she writes a text rich with metaphors and detail, engaging the reader with a judgmental female character who scrutinizes her high school milieu, the actions of others and the gendered biases that are heaped upon her. “My Last Duchess” provides an alternate view of a young woman facing the struggles of rigidity and uncompromising patriarchal structures in a different way than Coppola’s subdued iceberg filmmaking in *Marie Antoinette*. The main point of connection with these texts is the methods in which the two central women of the stories attempt to rebel and escape the structures meant to keep them docile and reined in. They hope to combat the “repetition and domesticity [that] suggests not only tedium, but also isolation and alienation as a gendered experience” (Smaill 2013, 170). Both women, against the normativity of their respective eras—postwar America and prerevolutionary France—recognize that they are being held down by the power structures of their times. Their “female identity [...] is constructed and imposed” (Backman Rogers 2012, 82) instead of being created on its own, or from their own interests. Both texts invite the readers to “laugh at the sheer stupidity of treating banal activities such as getting up in the morning with such high ceremony” (Handyside 2015, 7) or the consumer-driven face cleansing rituals of the teenage girl. For Marie Antoinette, her “body is contested terrain. It becomes a cultural battlefield” (Backman Rogers 2012, 82), whereas Atwood’s girl must deal with, unfortunately, typical male advances and commentaries on her body and its features. This leads them both to flirt with sentiments of ennui, finding their own methods to escape the dreary expectations of their gender. Both texts use “retro imagery and nostalgia [as] a key device in the construction [and recognition] of contemporary sexism” (Gill 2007, 160). Audiences can laugh at the nearly ridiculous stereotyping before recognizing that many of these structures remain in place in modern times.

The queen is in an endlessly losing situation, as the rejection by her husband (and subsequent lack of an heir) drives her to her excesses to alleviate loneliness and ennui. The perception of this excessive lifestyle (shoes, exotic dresses, elaborate desserts and ever-growing hair) triggers the French people turning against her. She perceives this shopping and extravagance as a manner to please herself, of “using beauty to make [herself] feel good” (Gill 2007, 153), but her actions could be questioned as catering to the male gaze, as attempting to garner the attention of her husband. This serves as a “deeper form of objectification—one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime” (Gill 2007, 152)—Marie Antoinette is trained to blame herself for the struggles in her marriage, driven toward outside sources to attempt to rectify the situation. This is the beginning of the domino effect that leads to her public downfall and death.

Marie Antoinette finds solace in the Petit Trianon, her home away from home on the Versailles grounds, where she can explore her interests—sexual, creative and intellectual—with a freedom unavailable within the walls of the palace. Here, she becomes a “liminal entity” (Backman Rogers 2012, 82). Atwood’s girl finds a similar escape in her own literary pursuits, and in consideration of nonconformist futures, defiant of typical female expectations. They both struggle counter to the moments that when “female creativity is expressed, it is also contained within an immature or daughterly model” (Handyside 2015, 5); they are attempting to create their own path. They are also attempting to show they can be mature without the help of a man.

The stories are divergent in their conclusions, however. Marie Antoinette is forced to flee Versailles, rejected by France and hated by its people as a symbol of all that is wrong with the monarchy. To the end, she remains by her husband, trapped by the expectations placed upon her not only as a queen, but as a wife. She submits to the will of the people, bowing before them as they storm the palace as the only world she has ever known crashes around her. Despite attempting to defy convention, to try and rebel “against many of the rituals that are associated with the performance of idealized femininity” (Kuperman 2015, 12), she is “pulled down

by and dissolved into her environment; [...] she disappears into the very structure of the institution whose norms and codes govern her life” (Backman Rogers 2012, 92). The life and expectations placed on Marie Antoinette are not only unjust but ironic: “As the queen, she’s expected to shine—be better, prettier, more stylish, more vivacious—until she’s vilified for it” (Deschanel 2020). The very thing that she becomes known for, and is expected of her, leads to her demise.

Coppola leaves us with a vision of Marie Antoinette’s bedchamber, looted and destroyed, the decadent chandelier crashed to the floor and a bird invading through a broken window. It is the final destruction of her existence. Her defiance, her rock star lifestyle, in the end, did nothing to improve the conclusion of her life. Her body was always a “political bargaining tool between countries” (Backman Rogers 2012, 85) and her execution is the final bargain. The girl in “My Last Duchess” rides her defiance to opportunity, the chance to step into the great unknown, to possibly follow in the footsteps of her English teacher Miss Bessie: off to college, perhaps graduate school. That her mind questions the structures around her and her place within them, she demonstrates not only the desire to escape them, but the mental fortitude required to run counter to conventions. The girl has opportunities that Marie Antoinette did not.

The two protagonists run a counter narrative regarding their identities. The girl spends the story building her identity, the person she feels is the true representation of herself, by shedding that which is unnecessary around her: her boyfriend who offers very little for her, and her female classmates who she looks down upon for being facsimiles for the male gaze, for being “dumb bunnies and floozies” (Atwood 2006, 72). She adds to herself through the subtraction of others. Marie Antoinette experiences the opposite, as she is continually stripped of her literal and metaphorical identity in order to leave behind all aspects of who she was as Austrian archduchess to become the queen of France. She is a possession, the fate which the girl in “My Last Duchess” hopes to avoid at all costs. Marie Antoinette is owned; she is “owned firstly by the court of Versailles and, finally, by the state and the people to whom she must sacrifice herself” (Backman Rogers 2012, 94). Everything is

removed from her through “disturbing rituals that function as a form of control over the female body” (Backman Rogers 2012, 90) to provide an identity suitable to her position, and she struggles, and ultimately fails, through the film to carve out a version of herself that she believes is the authentic one. The film, in a sense, is about “the politicization of the female body” (Backman Rogers 2012, 80) and the losing battle faced when attempting to defy those who control the politics. The battles faced by both characters provide interesting points of comparison regarding the societal battles that people face and the different ways in which control is put upon them and the possible reactions to it. Students tend to recognize this quest for independence at a time in their lives when their individuality is being both encouraged and suppressed: they are at the age when they are faced with the dichotomy of being told to “grow up” and warned not to “grow up too fast.”

Reactions and Observations

Marie Antoinette is one of those real-life people that comes across as the perfect literary character: misunderstood, hated, beheaded. Yet, she is a character with a completely different side than the one history has typically painted her with, providing an alternative point of analysis. Like any good character, she has layers and lies associated with her that must be interpreted and uncovered to provide her life and character with a fair assessment by the reader. For her film representation, students agree that this Coppola film is the most attractive one to look at—the soft colours, the elaborate period pieces, the stunning scenery of Versailles palace; it is all there to make for a stunning film.

Students enjoy this film more than Lost in Translation, yet they continue to struggle with Coppola’s minimalist style. They want to see more shown on the screen; they want more detail. There is a genuine difficulty with them filling in the blanks to a story. Film is traditionally a medium that reveals all that they need, or want, to see in a story. Simply put, I don’t know if they are used to thinking as much with film as with other forms of text. Perhaps there is something traditional and more scholarly about a book, a novel in particular. A challenge in its completion. This challenge does not really exist on film. One just pushes play and in a couple of hours, it is over. The story has been signed, sealed

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The Rest

Somewhere

Somewhere somehow feels like Marie Antoinette for men. The story focuses on famous actor Johnny after he has completed his latest film and is working the press circuit prior to its release. Johnny is bored with life, riddled with ennui: his “life is replaced with indifference and detachment from feeling” (Backman Rogers 2019, 101). He spends his time with his broken arm, Coppola's exploration of “the masculine body in crisis” (Backman Rogers 2019, 90), aimlessly driving his Ferrari, and watching twin sisters pole dance⁶ for him in his hotel room. The dance that the twins perform, that which should be highly sexual in its nature as it encompasses a cliched male fantasy, is “captured in static framing that works to de-eroticize their dance as a sexual display” (Backman Rogers 2019, 96). He stays at the Chateau Marmont, his own personal Versailles, where his life is ordered and regulated by the requirements of his fame and his team of handlers.

Johnny is eventually snapped from his repetitive lifestyle—often literally going in circles as evidenced by the minutes-long opening scene in which he drives his car in an endless loop—when his daughter comes for an extended stay with him. There is a sweetness to their relationship, a reality of the bonding between father and daughter over seemingly mundane events: a lengthy

figure skating routine, eating together, playing in a swimming pool. There are interesting points of reference to the lives of students as Johnny is a man “constantly waiting for something to happen to him” (Backman Rogers 2019, 103). He does not seek life, but sits back expecting life to seek him. This can easily be paralleled with student reliance on cellphones and other technological devices that serve as a replacement for traditional social lives. There is a passivity to their existences that removes them from engagement with possibility and an expectation that excitement will simply occur.

Students struggle with *Somewhere* primarily because Coppola extends her usage of lengthy scenes, moments of “‘dead’ time in which nothing is quite literally made to happen onscreen” (Backman Rogers 2019, 108). This creates difficult viewing, more so than her other works. The aforementioned figure skating scene takes the viewers through an entire child's routine lasting several minutes. The scenes with the strippers are several minutes long, forcing their awkwardness to the forefront creating viewing that is laughably uncomfortable. There is a scene where Johnny is being fitted for a prosthetic mask for an upcoming film of his in which he sits with putty poured all over his face for an interminable amount of time. While these scenes serve their function in advancing the tone of the film, they are a difficult sell for students. Simply, *Somewhere* pushes the boundary of their ability to view film as art to, and beyond, its limits.

Through the second iteration of the Coppola course, I chose to omit the viewing of *Somewhere* for both the purposes of time and based on the gauging of the particular group of students in front of me. While the first group of students engaged with each of the films understanding that they were text for analysis, the second group consistently struggled with the notion that films were more than media for pure entertainment. Despite the study of auteurship in the course and the knowledge that Coppola

clearly has a distinctive style over her career, it felt as though students still expected something wildly different from the next Coppola film. *Somewhere* has merit, both as a film and a text for analysis. It is an award-winning exemplar of both Iceberg filmmaking and a shoegaze-style film, but as an unpaired text, it is more likely to be cut from the course.

The Bling Ring and Macbeth

Many students enjoy *The Bling Ring* (the based-on-a-true-story retelling of a Hollywood crime spree in which a group of young people robbed vacant celebrity houses while they were out of town, taking millions of dollars worth of cash and apparel) because of its connections to real-life celebrities, fashion and partying. While they recognize the vapid and unsustainable lifestyle exhibited by the young thieves in the film, they place value on their materialistic pursuits and enjoy observing their “rise and fall on their own shocking sense of apathy and greed” (Kuperman 2015, 13). There were deep revelations within the study of this film, the understanding how powerful the media and celebrity culture is in students’ lives. Typically, these ideas would come through in personal writing and classroom discussions, where the students often felt comfortable sharing their own, often blind, quest for materialism. They acknowledge their nearly reckless pursuit of trends, even aware that the trends are merely temporary. Yet, there remains a dramatic importance for them to continue the pursuit, as material goods are deeply ingrained as representations of our value and our own sense of worth. This provides connection to the boundless ambition of the characters of *The Bling Ring* and the celebrities they steal from. There is an endless pursuit for more. *The Bling Ring* is an “unmitigated celebration of vapidness, superficiality and consumerism” (Backman Rogers 2012, 94), and it could demonstrate how “pre-feminist ideals are being (seductively) repackaged as postfeminist freedoms” (Gill 2007, 162). This film differs from Coppola’s prior work, and she has stated that her films prior to *The Bling Ring* were “really slow and quiet so I was just in the mood to do something obnoxious and faster, and something kind of in bad taste” (Coppola quoted in Kuperman 2015, 13). Despite many recognizable tenets of auteurship, *The Bling Ring* is her most plot-driven film in that it provides a distinctive beginning-middle-end structure.

These ideas were connected to research into celebrity culture, how many people acquire their money and what they do with it. The primary theme of ambition was easily connected to Macbeth and his fatal flaw, and there are also interesting connections between the perceptions of women, as the “long-standing associations between femininity and frivolity” (Kuperman 2015, 14) are directly opposed by the bloodthirsty, unsexed ambition of Lady Macbeth.

The Beguiled and Half-Blood Blues

Two powerful stories collide in this comparative unit that focuses on telling the stories of the marginalized. The Civil War-era gothic drama *The Beguiled* demonstrates a matriarchal world, where a group of girls are left behind while war rages all around them in the South. When they stumble across a wounded Union soldier, they take him in and the manipulations for power within the household begin. There is a “dynamic within which men and women are always trying to second guess one another’s motives and outwit or outmaneuver their opponent or enemy” (Backman Rogers 2019, 49). In a sense, *The Beguiled* is the “Lisbon sisters [...] reborn [to] have their bloody revenge on the patriarchy” (Backman Rogers 2019, 46). The film revisits notions of ennui, sisterhood, feminism, the male gaze and male dominance, but is most significant for this study because of Coppola’s removal and ignorance of any nonwhite characters in the adaptation from the novel to the film. The novel contains a Black enslaved character who serves as the servant to the school and a biracial woman as the teacher for the girls. Coppola removed the enslaved character entirely and cast white actress Kirsten Dunst in the role of the teacher.

Coppola has attempted to explain her rationale behind excluding people of colour from her film adaptation of *The Beguiled*, stating that “young girls watch my films and this was not the depiction of an African American character I would want to show them” (Coppola quoted in Deschanel 2020). This writing and directorial decision is problematic, however, as it “shows there is no strength to be seen in Black female slaves, [and] she also demonstrates she is unable to write these characters with nuance or care” (Deschanel 2020). Coppola is essentially suggesting that “all female experience can be reduced to the white female experience”

(Backman Rogers 2019, 51). Through her films, Coppola has demonstrated that she writes what she knows and rarely veers outside of this comfort zone. The inclusion of a Black and biracial character would have provided positive results, as “Black women and girls would be able to see themselves in the soft femininity they are so often excluded from in media” (Deschanel 2020). The question is raised and discussed as to whether Sofia Coppola was better off writing out a Black character, as she did, to protect perceptions of African American characters, or to write a Black character as a wealthy white woman. Questions arise of who has the right to tell the story of others, specifically the stories of the marginalized written from positions of privilege. This falls into the critique of feminism that “only those who have it can play with not having it” (Backman Rogers 2019, 10), in terms of the privileged attempting to reveal the plight of the underprivileged. Only because she has not experienced the same struggle has she gained position and power to be in a place to tell the story of others. There are struggles within the feminist ideals here, exposing conflicts and areas of tension within the quest for equality. Is there true sisterhood, or warring factions of feminism that will stall the cause? Is it Coppola’s duty to attempt to tell the stories of highly marginalized women only because she is also a woman?

Students, upon learning of the removal of the characters of colour in this film, combined with their observations of previous Coppola films (specifically *Lost in Translation*) generally demonstrated interest in these conversations. They grasp the problematic nature of these directorial decisions, and there is ample space in our modern society to place these discussions. Generally, they enjoyed the film and some of the intrigue and manipulation that play out between the female characters. At this point in the course, and having a strong understanding of feminist and postfeminist ideas, they can strongly critique the motivations and actions of the characters through these lenses. In a simple analysis, they enjoy that something happens in the film.

The Beguiled is countered by the harrowing tales of the Black jazz musicians facing the increased influence of the Nazi party in prewar Germany in *Half Blood Blues* (2011), a story of sin and redemption among a group of great musicians attempting

to save their own lives and their music in the face of endless hardships.

Author Esi Edugyan provides an exciting read that enables the reader to witness the layers of struggle and racism faced by the characters. While tackling the racial issues head-on, Edugyan provides a text that directly opposes Coppola’s whitewashing of the issues of the American South. The author brings us right in to the struggles of the musicians as they face discrimination in every aspect of their lives, including among themselves. Students tend to struggle getting into *Half Blood Blues* because it is not written in a linear timeline, and much of the dialogue is written in the slang of the era and of the jazz world. However, once they provided the text with an opportunity, many of the students were quite engaged and enjoyed the novel. The ending provides particular points of discussion among them.

Students can compare Edugyan’s writing to the issues first witnessed in *Lost in Translation* and the Asian stereotyping. They see that while Coppola (presumably) does not intend to be a racist in her film, her privilege often creates a difficult or oversimplified relationship with characters of non-European descent.

On the Rocks and Poetry

Coppola’s most recent film (as of this writing) features the return of Bill Murray and a more light-hearted film to end the study of her auteurship. The tale, which for the first time features nonwhite actors in primary roles, focused on themes of mistrust and family relationships. Murray and his daughter (played by Rashida Jones) investigate the possible infidelities of her husband, rediscovering the importance of their own relationship along the way. This film can be connected to any number of poems thematically, a selection that has changed for me with each reteaching of this final unit.

There are interesting points of conversation with this final film, in that Coppola has seemingly accepted some of the criticism her work has received and adapted to it. She includes people of colour in her work as well as those outside of privilege. In this sense, she is attempting to connect with a wider swath of her potential audience. Students, at this point, recognize the growth (or at least attempted growth) in Sofia Coppola’s work. *On the*

Rocks also works well as a final film as it is not as thematically heavy as much of her work. Despite the lighter tone to the film that blurs its deeper intentions and very human struggles, it offers strong thematic connections to a variety of poems that are far weightier. For example, notions of leadership and questions of who we look up to can be explored in connecting to Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" or his tone of loss and disaffection following betrayal in "Manhattan Streets I Saunter'd Pondering." The themes of family in *On the Rocks* are fairly universal, providing a variety of poetic inroads, allowing the teacher to make connections to the poems that they enjoy or have used with success before.

The Study of an Auteur

Through the observation of an entire career, it is possible to see those moments in which we get stuck: themes that we can never seem to shake, never fully reconcile in our own lives or our work, stories that we are never truly done telling. The issues can be observed from any number of different angles and perspectives, to shine a light on that which we have found to be the most significant aspect of our ever-changing personality and identity. We are a never-ending becoming; this is reflected in the stories that we tell and the art that we create. This is the filmmaking of Sofia Coppola—she continually returns to the themes and stories that she is still working through in her own life. As she reconciles elements of her past on film, viewers are taken along on this attempted experience of growth.

Students viewed her growth as a filmmaker in her consistent return to similar stories and themes: the ideas of the feminine within the postfeminist and the ideas of ennui within a world of adventure and excitement. Students recognized Coppola's struggle with her own famous father through the development of Laura in *On the Rocks* and Cleo in *Somewhere*. They can witness the tensions in her young marriage through Charlotte in *Lost in Translation*. And they can see that she has felt stuck in her own gilded life, through rules and expectations, like Marie Antoinette. This life is viewed through the art that it created. All of Coppola's work was viewed for dissection, the triumphs and the missteps.

Most significantly, seeing all of her films can "encourage us to interpret them according to auteurist principles—as part of a body of work" (Handyside 2015, 4) instead of as a standalone text. We get to know Sofia Coppola through her work, as she is reflected in every film. This is a significant advantage to the study of a whole career—there is a new knowledge of the person behind the camera, the creator. Through this knowledge there is a gained intimacy with their work, whether it is liked or disliked, because we have become more open to the connections of someone we feel close to. This familiarity was the key component in this experiment, to see if it enhanced the connection between author and reader. Regardless of the struggles with the texts themselves, this sense of familiarity was evident among the students—they spoke about Coppola as though they knew her, which in a sense, they did.

The elongated study of one text creator has, overall, been beneficial for students. In their writing, they have demonstrated the acknowledgement of growth—both in the actual creation of the films and in the development of themes across multiple texts. There has been more maturity in the writing, more thought and understanding, and students have been stronger at analyzing multiple texts within one writing piece, at writing comparatively, and creating arguments that function across multiple texts. They know the stories because they know the storyteller. There is a stronger ability to predict the work because they know who is creating it and their tendencies. This enables students to move beyond the basic comprehension of the text—because they already know it—to engage in more thought, consideration and analysis. In discussion of these texts, this proved to be invaluable to their arsenal of textual conversation, adding layers of depth to their analysis. There was enhanced use of textual evidence, given the many available sources; there was the incorporation of newly familiar vocabulary and there are interesting connections made to philosophical theories. This was noticeable in the conversation of students who traditionally struggled: they were armed with a familiarity that was helpful, providing them with ideas and terminology not just to fall back on, but to apply to new text after new text. They were aided by consistency in style and theme.

Success and Failure—Conclusions

As with any teaching unit, there is a hope that it will be perfect: it will be planned and executed to perfection, the students will be engaged throughout, and will be able to touch on every possible topic related to the films and their corresponding texts. But this is not the case; this is never the case. Many of the notions and theories that have been discussed in this paper are items that have transpired in the teaching of the Coppola course; some of them are wishful thinking in that they were not topics yet broached in the first attempts to teach this class. There is always planning ahead, considering the next time something is taught: what can be improved on, what could be scrapped completely, what could be added. I hope that there are more opportunities to teach this class, to further incorporate all the ideas that have been discussed in this research and beyond. There is an astounding amount of scholarship on the work of Coppola, inviting this class to become even richer and more elaborate in the future.

An important aspect with teaching controversial, or even unpopular, text is for students to engage in intelligent critique, to provide reasons, rationales and evidence to why they like or dislike something that they read or watch.

The Coppola course is not complete. There is a need to build more activities and have less reliance on student discussion and conversations on the topics. The course, as is, is predicated on the ability of a class to openly discuss and debate issues and ideas related to the films. Strong options for activities throughout the study would offer a helpful backbone to the course, as well as a potential fallback should the conversational aspect of the course not always work seamlessly.

To hear students discuss, and write about, the trappings of the male gaze as ironically perpetuated by a female director is a success in this

course and in Grade 11 as a whole. To read about the hauntological impacts on character development, or how the use of shoegaze music is reflected in the visual aesthetic created by Coppola, or how ennui is connected to notions of postfeminism, these are the victories that can be taken from this course. These ideas developed in student thought and writing have moved beyond many of the typical responses in Grade 11. Through these experiences, I have noticed a definite increase in the complexity, or at least attempted complexity, of responses and ideas among the students. They push their boundaries of thought in their critical writing, perhaps due to the comfort with the subject matter that is clearer to them through the auteur-ish repetition.

An important aspect with teaching controversial, or even unpopular, text is for students to engage in intelligent critique, to provide reasons, rationales and evidence to why they like or dislike something that they read or watch. This reveals a critical viewer; this our intention at the end of the day. Through this course, particularly because of the divisive nature of Coppola's films, I push students to elaborate on their likes or dislikes; they cannot complain that something is boring when it is intentionally created to evoke emotions of ennui in the viewers through the characters. They need to move to the next criticism and consider how it can be elaborated on and defended with evidence from the texts themselves. Often, students have found it difficult to determine what it truly is about the film that they disliked besides the slow pacing. This creates further points of discussion and analysis.

The course will be altered and revamped for each class that engages with it. I will tweak the assignments, find new connecting texts, find other strong secondary texts (reviews, academic articles, interviews) to aid in the development and understanding of the stories. Students will engage more frequently with academic texts and scholarly reviews of films, to continue to become better critics themselves. I will continue to learn and read about Sofia Coppola, and learn and read the texts she has based her films on.

The Coppola course, despite its flaws and areas for improvement, will continue to run and continue to grow until that teacherly desire for

change sets in once again. There is value in the extended study of one text creator as it becomes more than the study of a text; it becomes the study of a person and how that person—their very humanness—is reflected through art.

My hope is that in the future, students will connect with these films, be “entranced by the beauty of these films and struck with melancholy for days after” (Deschanel 2020). 🍷

Notes

1. Of course, many teachers create thematic or era-focused units to incorporate more literature from a specific period of time, such as the literature of the Roaring '20s, the Beat Poets or Victorian classics, for example.

2. I have also used *Somewhere* as a stand-alone text, using it to examine the tenets of film study or the modern play.

3. Her award nominations are highlighted by three Oscar nominations related to *Lost in Translation* (Best Picture, Best Director and Best Original Screenplay—the latter which she won), winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival for *Somewhere*, and a Best Director win at the Cannes Film Festival for *The Beguiled*.

4. This includes her critically derided role in her father's film, *The Godfather Part III*, for which she was “awarded” two Golden Raspberry (Razzie) Awards for Worst Supporting Actress and Worst New Star. She was also nominated for a Razzie for her small role in *Star Wars, Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.

5. In all the years that I have taught this text, there are only a handful of students who have deciphered that they are discussing an abortion without referring to Google to provide them with the answer. While it seems very obvious after being told, Hemingway's use of the iceberg theory of writing buries this idea pretty deeply in the subtext.

6. Teachers note: There is no nudity in these scenes, but the dancers are scantily clad and the scene lasts several minutes. While it is integral to viewing Johnny's ennui and boredom with that which may have once been perceived as thrilling and exotic, it should be addressed prior to viewing.

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