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« Teenagers in Crisis: Fascination, Transformation and the Quest for Identity in *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001) »

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## Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur deux films qui évoquent la crise de l'adolescence en associant une approche sociologique et esthétique. Richard Kelly et Sofia Coppola situent leurs fictions dans un passé récent évoqué par des références culturelles, musicales et filmiques. Les deux réalisateurs proposent une satire amère de certains aspects de la société américaine, en particulier le poids étouffant de l'autorité parentale. Dans les deux films, les jeunes protagonistes sont victimes d'un enfermement spatial et psychologique et doivent créer un monde alternatif imaginaire. L'adolescence est vue comme un entre deux et l'évolution psychique des personnages et un puissant moteur narratif. Dans *Donnie Darko*, l'évolution prend la forme d'une altération de l'identité qui conduit à une révolte ouverte alors que dans *The Virgin Suicides*, les jeunes filles essaient de se rebeller, mais l'accent est davantage mis sur une forme de régression et d'impuissance, mais aussi sur la perte de l'innocence. La mort est un thème majeur des deux films. Chez Coppola, elle exprime le désespoir et la frustration alors que chez Richard Kelly, le sacrifice de Donnie permet de sauver sa petite amie, mais aussi de préserver l'ordre du monde. Enfin, les deux œuvres mettent en relief la subjectivité et l'ambivalence des personnages. Donnie est à la fois une figure héroïque et un psychopathe ; les sœurs Lisbon, vues par leurs voisins, sont à la fois des objets de désir idéalisés et des adolescentes banales, superficielles dont l'image est sublimée par les souvenirs et la nostalgie.

## Mots-clés

crise, autorité parentale, nostalgie, mémoire, fantasme, subjectivité

## Abstract

This article focuses on two films that deal with adolescent crisis, associating a sociological approach and an aesthetic commitment. Richard Kelly and Sofia Coppola set their fiction in a recent past, apprehended through a number of cultural references, musical and filmic. Both directors offer a bitter satire of some aspects of American life, in particular the stifling influence of parental authority. In both films, the young protagonists are confronted with spatial and psychological entrapment and they have to create their own imaginary alternative world. Adolescence is seen as an in-between state and the mental evolution of some of the protagonists is also a major narrative motor. In *Donnie Darko*, evolution is seen as an alteration of identity leading to open rebellion while in *The Virgin Suicides* the young girls try to rebel but stress is more laid on a form of regression and impotence, and also on loss of innocence. Death is a major theme in both films, but in Coppola's work, it expresses despair and deprivation while in Kelly's, Donnie's sacrifice is a way to save his girlfriend but also to preserve the order of the world. Lastly, both works emphasize subjectivity and character ambivalence. Donnie is both a heroic figure and a psychopath while the Lisbon sisters, seen through the eyes of their neighbours, are both idealized objects of desire and ordinary, rather shallow teenagers whose image is sublimated by memory and nostalgia.

## Keywords

crisis, fantasy, memory, nostalgia, parental authority, subjectivity

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, numerous American independent films have focused on adolescence. Directors like Larry Clark, Gus Van Sant or Catherine Hardwicke revisit the teen movie, allying a sociological approach and aesthetic commitment, an association lacking in most productions of the eighties. This article focuses on two films that are characterized by this dual approach and which share some features, though they are quite different in tone and style. Both films situate their plots in a rather recent past apprehended through the presence of its vestiges, traces and cultural references. Richard Kelly situates the plot of his cross-genre (SF, horror, social satire) film *Donnie Darko* (2001) in 1988 and recreates the mood of this time quoting *Evil Dead Trap* (Toshiharu Ikeda, 1988) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988) while integrating in its musical score famous rock groups of the eighties like *Tears for Fears*.

With her first film, *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), Sofia Coppola adapts Jeffrey Eugenides' eponymous novel, inspired by a true story. It stages a subtle chronicle of adolescent feelings and emotions and focuses on the short-lived existence of five sisters in the 70s, who are stifled by authoritative, morally strict and highly religious parents and perform a collective suicide. Both films share a sense of nostalgia, a feeling of belonging tinged with irony. They also offer a bitter satire of some aspects of American life and show how painful it can be for a young American boy or girl to live in the 70s or 80s. We shall outline some topics or motifs such as time and space, characters' evolution (or lack thereof), rebellion against parental or institutional authority, death and sacrifice, myth making and demystification. Both films seem to offer an ambivalent vision of adolescence, tinged with nostalgia, but also pervaded by irony. The young protagonists are seen as seductive and victimized, extraordinary and banal, autonomous and submissive, sensual and spectral, objects (of desire or fear) and subjects, hence also the emphasis on voyeurism, especially in *The Virgin Suicides*, which provides a good illustration of Laura Mulvey's well known theory of the "male gaze"<sup>1</sup> on the female body. In Coppola's film, what is also at stake is the status of the narrative voice and the limits of its reliability.

## **Settings (space and time)**

In both films, we never physically leave the hometown of the protagonists. *The Virgin Suicides* is set in a little town in Michigan while *Donnie Darko* takes place in a suburban area of Los Angeles. In both films, the typical American house with its lawn is present almost from the outset and remains to the end. Almost everything revolves around it, especially in Sofia Coppola's film where the house is also the locus of the suicide of the Lisbon sisters. As in *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), the lawn conveys a sense of order and quietness behind which can reside deep troubles or dark areas. The anchoring of the town into an eternal present is

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<sup>1</sup> Laura MULVEY, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* 16, vol. 3, Autumn 1975.

underlined by a long static shot of the Lisbon house seen at different moments, day and night, and different lights while the image remains identical. Instead of the widening of the universe, which should be offered to the teenagers, they are submitted to a more and more restricted, confined, prison-like space. After the episode of the Prom's dance which generates a crisis in the household, the only time we see them go out at night, the sisters are taken out of school, they are confined to their bed-rooms and bars are put on their windows. Some medium shots show them sprawled together on their beds, bored and doing nothing.

The circle motif conveys this predicament from the outset. Circles are traced on the blackboard by Mr Lisbon, enclosure appears as circles of smoke from the cigarette smoked by Lux, in the mother's protective, enveloping gestures when she prevents her daughters from looking at Cecilia's body, impaled on the railings, lying prone in her father's arms, and in the circle made by the sisters around the diseased elm tree to prevent its sawing off. *The Virgin Suicides* inscribes space and time in a closed system. The narrative (by means of a voice over which is meant to represent the collective voice of the boys) remains within a geographical and topographical background, mostly the Lisbons' house or neighbouring houses and the school.

The only images of places exterior to the suburban area are mental images, fantasized by the four boys, seen as almost a collective entity. The only scene that is set in the future is the one featuring older Trip Fontaine (Josh Hartnett), Lux's seducer, who 25 years after the events, is still haunted by his leaving Lux alone on a football ground after having had sex with her. The whole of the film seems to take place in an eternalized present, the time of adolescence is perceived as a time of expectation, of longings, of frustrated desires, leading nowhere. This may partly account for the initial failed suicidal attempt of Cecilia the younger sister, in the scene that opens the film.

In *Donnie Darko*, the stress is less laid on parental authority and spatial confinement, but space and time are also structured as a closed system. At the end of the film, the main character Donnie carries out a journey in time which brings him back 28 days earlier, at the very beginning of the story, when a plane engine crashes accidentally upon his house, crushing his bedroom. The chronology of the film takes the form of a loop, within which is inscribed Donnie's experience. The diegetic world remains the daily reality of suburban life in the 80s at the moment of the election campaign that opposes Michael Dukakis and George Bush senior (1986).

Because of this drab, uneventful, monotonous reality, the notion of outsidership, of an "elsewhere", alternative world is foregrounded. This notion is also filmic as it suggests an interplay between what is on screen and off screen. In *Virgin Suicides*, the Lisbon sisters are deprived of any elsewhere. Their weak, submissive father, (James Woods) teaches maths at their own school while their bigoted, authoritative mother (Kathleen Turner), controls all their outings and their readings. After the Prom's night, they can't get out of their house and we can

hear the neighbours commenting on their enduring seclusion. Lux is compelled to burn her favourite rock music records (Kiss, Aerosmith) despite her pleadings. The girls, stifled and bored, seek some compensation either by means of a diary (Cecilia's is discovered, decoded and read by the boys while we see corresponding flashback images) or by reading fashion magazines that carry them far away in remote exotic countries such as India. Their imaginary "elsewhere" is shared by the neighbours next door as they buy the same fashion and travel magazines. While these boys only achieved their dream once in real life as they drove together to the Prom's night, they imagine travelling with them in India or Africa, helping them with their backpacks, "pressing our hands on their warm moist shoulders", "gazing off at papaya sunsets", "we drank tea with them at a water lagoon". Their rather chaste fantasies are shown through idealized snapshots shot in quick editing of them together seen as couples or as a group while the voice over describes their activities. We see a series of images of them trekking in the mountains, swimming in the ocean, smiling at the camera, kissing one another. This imaginary reconstruction implies even a denial of death as Cecilia is fantasized as alive and married in Calcutta (we see an image of her dressed as a cliché demure Indian woman in a pink dress with the Taj Mahal in the background). The narrative voice comments about the enduring imprint of "these impossible excursions which have scarred us for ever, making us happier with dreams than wives." As Debra Shostak states: "The film's voiceover enacts the nostalgia of Eugenides's collective narrator by capturing a sense of longing and loss – a tone that emerges almost inevitably when a narrator in the present regards past youth – and by suggesting that the girls' suicide permanently arrested the boys in time."<sup>2</sup>

Donnie is alienated in another way and he also creates his fantasized universe. It does not consist of a geographical elsewhere outside of the city, but of a reimagined reading of the here and now. In this parallel world, his main friend is a fantasized one, a giant anthropomorphized rabbit with monstrous teeth, who controls his actions and announces the end of the world. Time travel becomes a scientific possibility and people are guided on a track materialized by a kind of liquid flow, a transparent excrescence identified as a vortex (a worm hole) enabling to shift to another time.

## Evolution of characters

Despite this family entrapment partly compensated for by the creation of an alternative fantasy world, adolescence is seen an in-between state and the mental evolution of some of the protagonists is also a major narrative motor. In *Donnie Darko*, evolution is seen as an alteration of identity. Donnie is a sleepwalker (the opening scene shows him at dawn asleep in the middle

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<sup>2</sup> Debra SHOSTAK, "Impossible Narrative Voices : Sofia Coppola's adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*", *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Penn State University Press, vol. 15, N° 2, 2013, p. 183.

of a road) who receives medical treatment to alleviate his bouts of depression and fits of anger (he also sees a woman analyst who uses hypnotherapy to find out the causes of his anxiety). In the course of the film, Donnie develops a form of paranoid schizophrenia, as diagnosed by his analyst, that leads him, through the mediation of Frank the rabbit, to commit violent, destructive, desecrating acts, as if against his own will. He breaks up with an axe the water main and floods his own school, then buries the axe in the head of a monstrous dog statue, the school's mascot. He thus leaves the sentence "they made me do it", which leads the police to analyze the writing and suspect him, but no evidence is found. His change is mediated through the figure of the alter ego. Donnie is guided, manipulated by Frank the rabbit, a monstrous emanation of his disturbed psyche (mirror shots suggest this). Later in the film, he also rebels against Frank, rejecting his authority and wounding him in the face. When Frank, urged by Donnie while he attends a screening at the movie theatre, takes off what was a rabbit mask, we can see his bloodied, bruised eye.

In the case of the Lisbon sisters, mental evolution as such is not emphasized and there is even a form of regression after the first drama, but loss of innocence is foregrounded and connected with sexual initiation, in particular as regards Lux (Kirsten Dunst), the most attractive and fascinating of the sisters, the true dream-girl for the boys. The sexual intercourse between Lux and Trip, the college Don Juan, accelerates the death-like enclosing process triggered by the mother seen as overtly possessive and stifling while her husband appears totally submissive and passive, after his only initiative (favouring Trip and Lux's relation). After the magical moment of the Prom's scene where Lux and Trip are elected King and Queen (a wink or tribute to Brian De Palma's *Carrie*), comes disillusionment. Trip, quite unexpectedly, abandons Lux after having had sex with her on a football ground. A high angle camera movement emphasizes her loneliness as she is sprawled on the green grass, in her white dress, yet no longer a virgin.

Another sign of change or evolution is the rebellion motif. Rebellion is most often directed at parental authorities. The Lisbon sisters do try to resist their mother's strongly rigid moral rules and religious fanaticism, but with no avail. We are far from the "Girl Power" analysed by Kathleen Rowe in films like *Thirteen* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2003).<sup>3</sup> The mother proves inflexible even when Lux begs her to spare some of her favorite records. The sisters also complain they are stifled by their being confined within the house, but their mother pretends they are safe. The father overhears their complaints off screen, but does not react. The other form of rebellion consists of sending letters to their neighbors or having them listen to some music as the only means of communication while no one attempts to rescue them. Their ultimate lethal gesture can be seen as a challenge to their parents, but also to the whole neighborhood. It is very

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen ROWE, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers, Redefining Feminism on Screen*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

carefully staged and it is meant to have witnesses, the four boys they have at last invited to go for a ride at night. While the boys expect the girls to go out and fantasize a joyful outing in flash images, the sisters kill themselves in various ways. Bonnie hangs herself, Teresa swallows sleeping pills, Mary puts her head in the oven, Lux is found inside her parents' car, asphyxiated by the engine fumes. We only see metonymic shots, part of their bodies, legs or hands, not the head. The rebellion of the sisters is also expressed through their concern with the diseased elm tree that must be sawed off. They make a circle around the tree to prevent the workers from carrying out the deed. Lastly, they rebel against the manipulation of their life by the media, represented in the film by Lydia Perl, an unscrupulous journalist in quest for sensational events. Once the TV van arrives, they shy away from the tree.

Donnie Darko also rebels against authority at different levels. He underlines the lack of understanding of his parents who he treats badly enough, insulting his sister and his mother, calling her "a bitch", challenging his father's choices. A former scene shows a rather dysfunctional family. However Donnie's main target is his own school. He proves very critical towards the educational methods of one woman teacher in particular, Miss Farmer, showing the vacuity of her course based on the new age precepts of a local celebrity who reduces human feelings to a mere linear opposition between fear and love. At first Donnie challenges this teacher, eventually insulting her, leading to his being expelled from afterschool activities, then he denounces publicly the very popular and charismatic guru, Jim Cunningham, exposing his sham, superficial ideas.

He ends up burning Cunningham's house where compromising documents are found leading to his arrest, on account of his paedophile activities. Thus Darko is presented as a sick, abnormal child for the community, but he stands for positive values and shows a lot of intellectual capacity and vital energy. His new girl friend Gretchen who also comes from a dysfunctional family (her father is in jail for stabbing his wife) even remarks that his name, Donnie Darko sounds like a super hero's name (like Clark Kent or Peter Parker) to which he answers: "Who says I am not?" Indeed, he behaves like a super hero: his sleepwalking makes him lead a second nocturnal life, he feels vested with a mission and even dons a costume in the final sequence. He does exert a certain fascination on his surroundings and has admirers. He ultimately saves his mother and little sister and girlfriend's lives, but he does it at the expense of his own.

## **Death and ghostliness**

Death holds indeed centre stage in both films. In *Virgin Suicides*, everything revolves around death. The collective death is announced from the outset and one of the first striking images is that of Cecilia's body filmed in a high angle close shot, wide-eyed and inert in her

bathroom. Then many sequences are marked by the imprint of death. The film is swathed in a lethal atmosphere which is also associated with the disease and death of the trees which obsess the girls, especially Cecilia who is also concerned by the disappearance of some animal species, like a specific kind of frog from Brazil. The parallel between the girls and the elm tree reinforces the death motif. The film also emphasizes ecological issues. As stated by the voice over, the suicide of the sisters is followed a few months later by a form of local ecological disaster: “a spill at the plant increased the rate of phosphate in the lake and produced a scum of algae so thick that swamp smell filled the air”. Asphyxiation even becomes the theme of a party given by a local notability, guests wearing pseudo gas masks. This party is filmed in a greenish, blurry atmosphere thanks to color filters.

Though the stifling education of the parents may explain the collective suicide of the Lisbon sisters, the film rather chooses to invite the spectator to consider the suicide as an enigma. The fascination exerted by the sisters on the boys endows them with an aura of mystery, generating desire and stirring up fantasies, even sexual fantasies, as testify the dialogues and the numerous voyeuristic scenes involving the four boys who watch the sisters’ activities by means of a telescope. The collective suicide is part of a theatrical staging aiming at impressing the boys. The girls play upon their expectations and want them to discover their last gesture at the moment they were about to be reached concretely. The boys even fantasize a car excursion that we visualize, but it takes place in full daylight while it is night in reality, so the scene is exposed as fantasy. The girls finally remain inaccessible to the four neighbours (even if Lux has sex on the roof) and acquire an almost mythical status. They remain forever the image of the “dream girls”. Death implies a mourning process, which the boys in *The Virgin Suicides* seem unable to carry out. They remain as adults, 25 years later, obsessed by this suicide, which they can’t fully understand.

*The Virgin Suicides* also privileges an aesthetics of evanescence, of the ephemeral, of the transient which conveys the fascination of the boys for the living and dead sisters. They are seen as vaporous, half spectral, unattainable, already absent. Their image on the screen is fragile, almost translucent, bathed in a cotton-like atmosphere. The choice of white dresses emphasizes this “spectralization” that is also enacted as visual hallucinations of Cecilia at the beginning of the film. Mr Lisbon thinks he sees his daughter in her bedroom. Cecilia also appears in one of the boys’ bedroom, complaining about his snoring too loud. But the subjective reverse-shot reveals no physical presence. Lastly while Chase is passing in a car, he sees Cecilia smiling at him twice, her body sprawled nonchalantly in the middle of a tree. Thus a form of uncanny, haunting presence is foregrounded.

*Donnie Darko* is also deeply marked by death and spectral presences. One character, an old woman, is nicknamed “Grandma’s death”. She later proves to be Roberta Sparrow, the author of



a book on time travel. Donnie's new girlfriend, Gretchen, is run over by a car. Donnie sees himself as potentially dead since Frank, his imaginary friend, has told him the end of the world is near. Donnie also keeps a gun hidden and we may imagine he wants to commit suicide. When he wakes up on the golf course, he can see that the lapse of time remaining is written on his forearm: "28 days, six hours, 42 minutes, 12 seconds". The film is structured as a countdown, divided in sequences where the number of remaining days is written on the screen, as a title-card. While Donnie's somnambulism has enabled him to escape certain death, he takes the time which separates him from the moment of the accomplishment of the prophecy to set things in order and ultimately to replay the night the reactor crashed, thus obliterating the events taking place after the crash and his own destructive actions. The final act carried out by Donnie dressed in a skeleton suit for the Halloween party is presented not as a suicide, but as a sacrifice. First, as he goes to Grandma's death house he is assaulted by the two college bullies intent upon robbing the jewels of the old lady. When a car arrives, it runs over the body of Gretchen, lying in the middle of the road. While the bullies leave for fear of the police, Donnie shoots Frank who has appeared from nowhere in rabbit costume, but is now deprived of his mask. Meanwhile the plane on which is his mother and sister has begun to crash. The scene is rather confused. Donnie comes back to his house and accepts to go back in time to prevent his girlfriend's death. We revert back to the beginning of the story as the images of the film unroll backwards until the day of the engine crash. Donnie chooses to stay in bed while the plane reactor crashes in on his bedroom. Thus Donnie must die to save his family and also "save the world", but he has to part with his own fantasy universe that he created with his adolescent look and feelings, as part of his intellectual and spiritual quest for identity.

## **Subjectivity and unreliability**

Sofia Coppola proposes a rather nostalgic look on past traumatic history as we witness most events through the mediation of the boys. The construction of the film is quite complex. Each scene is conceived as a flashback, but we never have a clear reference to the moment of enunciation, except when Tripp gives his own testimony facing the camera. The boys Tim, Chase, Parkie and Tom seem almost indissociable, but they lack the charisma of the sisters. It's impossible to identify precisely the source of the voice over that can be attributed to none of the boys. The narrator refers to Tim as "this genius who could decode the diary", Parkie is spoken of in the third person: "Parkie was chosen for the Cadillac." Lastly Tom is also referred to in the third person when the group seeks to communicate with the sisters. Tom suggested a kite with a message. Only Chase is never quoted by the voice over and this may mean that he is the narrator, but the first person singular is never used. Discourse is always plural, including all the members of the group in a collective "we" or "us": "we understood, we learnt." The boys are filmed as a

group, sometimes in a two shot. Few shots isolate one of them, which may have implied a specific centre of consciousness. The four boys are inseparable, they share everything, collect the objects together, sharing the moments of voyeurism (Tim calls his friends when he sees Lux making love on a neighbouring roof) and even their fantasies. Thus the voice over represents the collective entity of the neighbours. This device gives the narrative voice a general dimension and the tragedy affects the whole youth community, symbolizing the loss of their innocence. The voice, nostalgic and melancholy is endearing, but it is in a way detached from the individual characters and constitutes almost a protagonist, both internal to the story and external. It is embodied by a different actor, Giovanni Ribisi, thus setting up a distance between narrator and characters, leading the spectator to identify with this voice, not any specific protagonist.

Because of this collective narrator, point of view is made complex. The narrative voice gathers several memories through the four boys it represents and its knowledge of events is broader than all the protagonists. However, the narrator can't be considered as omniscient as many events escape from his knowledge. His discourse stresses the fact there are missing pieces in the puzzle and that the story of the sisters can't be fully deciphered. Indeed some scenes or shots are divorced from the narrator's look as none of the boys attended particular moments: the hospital room, the moment when Mrs Lisbon forces Lux to destroy her records etc. The film is a polyphonic narrative combining different voices: the narrator controlling the flashbacks, the boys as teenagers, the testimonies of other minor characters, the comments of the other neighbours, the media discourse, Cecilia's through her diary, even the final remark, in voice over by Mrs Lisbon who still can't understand the deed, etc.

The structure of *Donnie Darko* is more simple and linear, though punctuated by a countdown. The time portal that is seemingly crossed over by Donnie brings him back to the beginning. The film thus defines a loop, necessary to set things back in order as if it were a narrative in the conditional tense, a more uncertain form of narration which suits the fantasy mode (mingling the conventions of the SF and horror genres), which offers an original representation of adolescent troubles.

To convey the sensation of the characters' points of view, Sofia Coppola uses slow motion and speeded up images, conspicuous camera movements and also color filters: blue during the idealized ballroom scene, greenish during the asphyxiation party after the girls' death. These devices impart a distance, that of the fiction of memories, in relation to the story she stages. In *Donnie Darko*, Richard Kelly has also chosen to cast a non-realistic look on the narrative, which often adopts the subjective vision of the main protagonist. The imaginary universe of Donnie is shown as if it were real, without any visual or sound alteration. We visualize everything: Frank the rabbit, the worm holes, etc.

Moreover, objects are also associated with subjectivity and intimacy. They are

foregrounded, almost fetishized, especially in *The Virgin Suicides*. On the one hand, some objects are clues in the investigation led by the boys. Rather common objects are weighed with mystery because they belong to and help define the girls' universe. These artefacts such as the plastic images of the Virgin Mary, crucifixes, records, perfume bottles, religious statues, but also abandoned socks and stockings (not to mention the pile of tampons protection found in a bathroom cupboard), function as an extension of the girls' personalities. Cecilia leaves a physical trace of her passage on earth by means of her handprint shown twice, first on a sheet of black paper in her bathroom, then cast on the fresh plaster on the elm tree trunk. Clelia Cohen defines Sofia Coppola' cinema as: "un cinéma de la trace où les choses, les époques et les êtres ne disparaissent pas, ils hantent."<sup>4</sup> The five pairs of children shoes testify to the refusal of their parents to let them grow into adults. The spectator is led to entertain three different types of feelings: complicity, fantasizing and fascination. In *Donnie Darko*, mirrors, masks and disguises suggest the divided psyche, the identity troubles from which Donnie suffers.

Both films play upon the spectator's memories by means of referring to cultural codes he may share with the characters. This concerns in particular the musical references. The eighties sound of *Donnie Darko* (*Tear for Fears*, *Duran Duran*, *Joy Division*) or the musical score of *Virgin Suicides*, mostly original pieces by the group Air, meant to conjure up spectators' nostalgia, added to the various references to famous rock groups such as *Kiss*, *Aerosmith* etc. Film references are added in *Donnie Darko*. Donnie and his girlfriend attend a performance of *Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981), a scene in which the evil force holds sway over the land while the same cinema also shows *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988), an explicit wink to the sacrificial part played by Donnie.

## Conclusion

*Donnie Darko* offers, as we saw, an ambivalent approach of its main character, both a rebellious and troubled, possibly psychotic adolescent unable to control his destructive instincts and a brilliant boy, intellectually mature, capable of challenging the adult world and denouncing its shortcomings and alienating discourses, as illustrated in the classroom sequence when Donnie challenges his teacher's authority and intellectual competence.

In *Virgin Suicides* we are also given a rather ambivalent image of the Lisbon sisters who are both idealized and fantasized, and also seen as rather ordinary, banal teenagers, not devoid of defects. There are many ways through which the film conveys a sense of demythification. The young girls are seen as a collective entity (even if individualized by their name and age at the beginning), diaphanous and seductive. They are also part of the fantasy world of the boys who

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<sup>4</sup> Clélia COHEN, "L'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs", *Cahiers du cinéma* n° 550, October 2000.

imagine them in various pleasant situations, always chaste however. When the girls are allowed to devote themselves to the same activities as other girls of their age, they become as attainable as any. During the ball scene, they sit on their partners' laps, dance with them, kiss them under the stage, express their happiness verbally. Thus Teresa states to Conley: "I have never enjoyed myself so much." However their being accessible makes them lose the aura of mystery that so fascinates the boys. Lux is a case in point. Tripp's testimony is cruel when he refers to his last night with her: "I liked her very much, but on the football ground it was different." What he liked about Lux was her distance, aloofness and indifference. When she is conquered, he loses interest. He abandons her and won't talk to her again.

Thus inaccessibility reinforces the girls' attractiveness. Desire for them is all the stronger as it can't be fulfilled. At the beginning of the film, Peter is made uneasy by Lux's attitude, kicking and caressing his feet under the table, but the boy is fascinated when he explores their intimate space, the bathroom where they hold their secrets. The neighbours take more pleasure in spying upon them or dreaming of them. Sofia Coppola first stages the idolization of the girls, then unveils them as ordinary, banal adolescents.

Thus the Lisbon sisters are partly mythical, partly associated with concrete everyday reality. They oscillate between the incredible and the trivial, the universal and the particular, the eternal and the ephemeral. The circulation of the narrative, its polyphony of voices, the making up of stars, idols, contemporary deities, all contribute to convey a universal value to the narrative, a sense of intimate and personal experience which appeals to the spectator. At the same time, the young director also demystifies her characters, exposing their banality. She creates, by means of humour, oneirism and fantasy, a distance between what is being narrated and shown on screen, between the story and the spectators, between fiction and reality.

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