


## Representation of the Objectification of Teenage Female Characters in Sofia Coppola's Film

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<b>Keywords:</b> objectification, mise-en-scène, representation of women	This study examines the representation of objectification of teenage female characters in Sofia Coppola's film, <i>The Virgin Suicides</i> (1999). The study employs feminist theory, focusing on Martha Nussbaum's (1995) classification of objectification and Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze. Mise-en-scène is the primary framework for describing the representation of objectification experienced by the Lisbon princesses. The analysis shows that the film consistently uses mise-en-scène to depict the objectification of the Lisbon princesses as objects for the fulfillment of male desires and fantasies. The study identifies six of the seven forms of objectification defined by Nussbaum, with instrumentality, inertness, and fungibility as the most dominant.
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### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in the representation of women in film, driven by audience interest and the increasing presence of female directors who bring new perspectives to the representation of women in film. This shift has not only resulted in more nuanced, complex, and diverse representations, but also opened up space for critical analysis of issues such as the objectification of women. In this context, the theory of objectification, particularly by Martha Nussbaum (1995), provides an important foundation for understanding how someone can be treated as an object, through various forms to limit their agency, autonomy, and humanity. This phenomenon is further complicated when the target object is a young woman, whose identity as she approaches adulthood is still unstable and often shaped by narratives that emphasize physical attractiveness and vulnerability. This results in an inner conflict regarding personal growth and development, a theme explored in the film *The Virgin Suicides* (1999). *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), directed by Sofia Coppola, is a film that explores the suffering and tragedy of the suicides of teenage female characters, namely the daughters of the Lisbon family. As a film narrated from the point of view (POV) of a male neighbor, the Lisbon family daughters are no longer seen as human beings, but rather as fantasy objects to fulfill the male neighbor's imagination. This phenomenon is in line with feminist theory, especially the theory of the male gaze by Laura Mulvey, where the narrative structure of the film places women as the subject of the gaze and men both in the film and

the audience act as the bearers of the gaze (Mulvey, 1975 as quoted by Kuperman, A., & Weber, S., 2015). The objectification of the Lisbon family daughters is not only present through the male gaze, but also from the strict supervision and control of their parents. Their parents' treatment that limits their social life and demands religious obedience shows that the Lisbon family daughters have lost autonomy and agency over their lives. This study assumes that *The Virgin Suicides* uses *mise-en-scène* as a tool to represent the objectification and emotional impact experienced by the Lisbon family's daughters. This includes the use of clothing that depicts innocence, dreamy lighting that glorifies them as fantasy figures, and the choice of camera angles and obstructed framing that convey isolation and reinforce their position as objects. Thus, *mise-en-scène* functions not only for visual aesthetics but also plays a crucial role in presenting representation and affirming objectification as a mechanism that shapes the experiences of the Lisbon family's daughters in *The Virgin Suicides*.

In the current literary landscape, there is no work that specifically analyzes the mechanisms of female objectification in *The Virgin Suicides* through *mise-en-scène*. However, several other works highlight themes that correlate with this research, such as the use of male characterization and perspective, female representation, and depictions of girlhood aesthetics. According to Vuillaume (2021), *The Virgin Suicides* takes a regressive nostalgia perspective, representing a reaction to feminism in the 1960s and 1970s through the perspective of a male narrator. This story constructs a narrative of what they perceive as the past regarding women, and shapes the women's identities and experiences according to their own ideals and fantasies. Meanwhile, Hovland (2011) emphasizes the importance of visual style, performance, narrative structure, and messaging as an analytical framework for understanding how Coppola's adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* constructs characterization and articulates point of view through its storytelling. Overall, these studies demonstrate the rich potential of *The Virgin Suicides* for critical analysis from various perspectives. However, this research will focus on examining how and why Sofia Coppola's visual style choices specifically reflect or reinforce mechanisms of objectification in the film. Therefore, this research seeks to fill this gap by exploring the film's *mise-en-scène* comprehensively to shape the representation of the objectification of female adolescent characters.

This paper was written in response to the shortcomings of previous studies that have not specifically and in-depth discussed the objectification of adolescent girls in the film *The Virgin Suicides* through *mise-en-scène*. Issues related to the objectification and representation of women have quite important urgency and are a constantly evolving discussion both in the world of film and in the media with the awareness on feminism and gender equality. This research positions film not only as a narrative form but also as a visual medium capable of expressing and questioning the concept of objectification. The *mise-en-scène* in this film can serve as a tool to visually depict the construction of ideology, perspective, and power relations on screen. Therefore, this paper aims to show how and why *The Virgin Suicides* constructs and presents views on the objectification experienced by its female teenage characters through *mise-en-scène* elements.

This research will use *mise-en-scène* analysis using objectification theory and feminist theories such as Laura Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory to examine how *mise-en-scène* not only constructs the narrative atmosphere but also represents the forms of objectification experienced by the Lisbon family's daughters. The results will also analyze why *mise-en-scène* is used as a visual mechanism to represent objectification. Thus, this study combines visual analysis and feminist theory to find a correlation between cinematic construction and the depiction of objectification in films.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Research Object

The formal object of this study is the depiction of the objectification of adolescent girls as represented in the film "The Virgin Suicides," analyzed through *mise-en-scène*. The material object of this research is the film "The Virgin Suicides" (1999). The research population is the film, which has a running time of 1 hour and 37 minutes. The unit of analysis is the scenes in "The Virgin Suicides" that contain elements of *mise-en-scène* that refer to the representation of objectification. These scenes will be selected using purposive sampling based on the criteria that they demonstrate the power and dominance of the *mise-en-scène* (setting, costumes and makeup, lighting, staging) that are significantly relevant in constructing the representation of objectification.

### Synopsis of the Film "The Virgin Suicides"

"The Virgin Suicides" (1999), directed by Sofia Coppola, is an adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides' novel of the same name. The film is set in suburban Michigan in the 1970s and is narrated through the eyes of a group of neighborhood boys, now adults, as they share their fascination with the mysterious Lisbon sisters: Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese.

The story begins with the youngest sister, Cecilia, attempting suicide, leading to family intervention, including throwing a party to help her socialize. Despite these efforts, Cecilia ultimately commits suicide, triggering the family's tragic breakdown. The Lisbon sisters become increasingly isolated as their overprotective parents impose stricter rules after Cecilia's death.

The neighborhood boys, captivated by the Lisbon sisters' beauty and mystery, attempt to connect with them. The narrative reaches its climax when Lux, the most rebellious sister, has a brief romance with Trip Fontaine. After breaking curfew on homecoming night, the Lisbon sisters face total isolation under their parents' control.

In their desperate situation, the Lisbon daughters invite the neighbor boys to help them escape, but when they arrive at the Lisbon home, they find all of them have committed suicide. The film concludes with the neighborhood boys reflecting on the lingering impact of the Lisbon daughters on their lives, unable to fully grasp the depth of the tragedy they witnessed.

### Data Collection Techniques

This study uses a qualitative method because this approach allows researchers to understand phenomena within a specific context. As explained by Clarke (2005), qualitative research is often used to explore complex, difficult-to-measure phenomena, seeking to

understand meanings, experiences, or social processes from the perspective of participants or through in-depth examination of texts, media, or cultural artifacts. Therefore, this method can be used to examine how social, cultural, or environmental factors influence these phenomena. In the case of "The Virgin Suicides," this approach is crucial for examining the prevalent objectification of adolescent girls within the social and cultural context of the film, which is set in suburban America in the 1970s.

The data collection technique in this study involved two stages: observation and documentation.

a. Observation

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative observation is a data collection process in which researchers take field notes on the behavior and activities of subjects at the research location and record their observations. In this case, the observation method was conducted by watching and carefully observing the film "The Virgin Suicides" to identify scenes containing relevant *mise-en-scène* elements, such as costume, lighting, color, space, and camerawork that represent behavior and representations of objectification.

b. Documentation

The documentation method in this study involved capturing visual data through screengrabs from the film *The Virgin Suicides*. These images were collected and analyzed as visual evidence to support the interpretation process and answer the research questions. Each screengrab represents a scene selected based on its relevance to the representation of objectification through *mise-en-scène* in the film.

c. Data Analysis

This study will analyze the depiction of objectification experienced by the Lisbon family's daughters as teenage girls through a descriptive qualitative approach, using a *mise-en-scène* analysis framework and a foundation of feminist theory. The research data will be sampled through purposive sampling, which means selecting data samples based on specific criteria that represent key themes, patterns, or concepts relevant to the research questions. In this study, data samples were taken based on scenes that contain dominant *mise-en-scène* elements relevant to representing objectification.

The first stage, the data will be analyzed using *mise-en-scène*, based on Bordwell and Thompson's (2010) definition, which includes setting, costume and makeup, lighting, and staging (blocking and acting).

This analysis aims to identify elements that represent the depiction of objectification in the Lisbon family's daughters, based on objectification theory and Martha Nussbaum's classification of objectification. Then the results of the *mise-en-scène* analysis are interpreted using feminist film theory, especially the classification of objectification by Martha Nussbaum and the concept of the male gaze by Laura Mulvey (1975), to examine how and why the representation of objectification through *mise-en-scène* strengthens the

depiction of the psychological and social vulnerability of the Lisbon family's daughters, leading to the tragedy of suicide.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **General Meaning of Objectification in The Virgin Suicides (1999) Through Mise-en-Scène**

Based on the findings of the previous analysis, it can be concluded that *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) consistently displays elements of objectification throughout the film. This is evident through the use of mise-en-scène elements that systematically depict the Lisbon daughters as objectified figures. The analysis revealed six elements, based on Martha Nussbaum's classification of objectification, present in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), with the exception of ownership. Instrumentality, inertness, and fungibility are the most dominant forms of objectification found in the film. These three elements are constructed through the use of mise-en-scène elements, such as the property in the form of personal belongings belonging to the Lisbon daughters collected by a neighbor's son, demonstrating a form of instrumentality. Furthermore, the use of religious iconography in the Lisbon house depicts moral constraints and social controls that contribute to their passivity, while the uniform costumes emphasize the loss of individual identity and render them as homogeneous, interchangeable figures.

The depiction of the Lisbon daughters in *The Virgin Suicides* is inextricably linked to the aesthetic and romantic elements of female suffering resulting from their objectification, particularly because the story is told from a male perspective. This is where the mise-en-scène plays a role in rendering the Lisbon daughters no longer as human beings but as idolized figures to satisfy the obsessions of the neighborhood boys. This illustration is achieved through several techniques such as the use of camera angles, soft and warm lighting, and the use of superimposition.

Thus, it can be concluded that the general purpose of depicting the objectification of teenage girls through the mise-en-scène in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) is to construct a visual language that emphasizes the forms of objectification and the suffering of the Lisbon daughters as manifestations of the objectification process constructed by the neighborhood boys' narratives. These findings will serve as the basis for a more in-depth examination of how each element of mise-en-scène constructs elements of objectification and the rationale behind its use as a visual tool to depict the objectification of the Lisbon princesses.

### **How does mise-en-scène represent objectification in The Virgin Suicides (1999)?**

After identifying the general meaning of the representation of the objectification of the Lisbon princesses through mise-en-scène, this sub-chapter will address the first research question: how does mise-en-scène represent the objectification of the teenage female characters in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999).

This analysis will examine each element, including mise-en-scène, setting, lighting, costume and makeup, and staging, and how these patterns are manifested in the research findings. The results of this analysis will identify the relationship between the use of mise-en-scène and the objectification manifested in the film.

Development of Science Modules  
Based on Scientific

- a. Analysis Module Requirements  
Study conducted in grade V of elementary school in the sub-district Mranggen Demak Regency began with do collection information about media needs or analysis need for students and teachers of class V towards science learning material water cycle. Media needs are based on the problem about low ability breakdown problem science lessons. For get analysis need done observation and interviews.
- b. Science Module Planning Based on Scientific  
In planning done step as following : (1) analysis curriculum, (2) determine objective development science based module scientific, (3) analysis material, (4) development science based module scientific started with drafting of science module based on scientific.
- c. Development of Science Modules Based on Scientific  
Module design based on scientific developed in form supporting teaching materials For help the teacher explain material water cycle. While development module This expected to be able to help student in understand material water cycle to be able to solve related issues with water cycle complete.
- d. Validation Science Module Development  
Validity test science based module scientific material the water cycle is implemented with do validation by validator. Validity science based module scientific material water cycle from material by experts material and media carried out by media experts.
- e. Science Module Design Revision  
In general overall design beginning science based module scientific Already fulfil need module. Development science based module scientific become interesting and fun module However still capable fulfil function from module. From the design beginning There is some suggestions from the validator, then researcher do revision design, both media and the material.

## CONCLUSION

This study aims to understand how and why *mise en scène* is used to represent the objectification of female adolescent characters in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999). The analysis utilizes Bordwell and Thompson's (2012) definition of *mise en scène*, Martha Nussbaum's (1995) theory of objectification and classification, and feminist theory. The results reveal patterns of objectification, including instrumentality, inertness, fungibility, denial of autonomy, violability, denial of subjectivity, and sexual objectification, in the film. These elements are clearly evident through the *mise en scène* elements of setting, lighting, costumes, and staging, which support the portrayal of the Lisbon princesses as idolized figures, yet they are passive and have lost their autonomy over their lives. From the construction of *mise en scène*, it can be understood that the representation of objectification is formed not only through narrative but also through visual language and aesthetics. *Mise en scène* also plays a crucial role in constructing the film's visual characteristics, influenced by the trope of the woman's tragedy or she-tragedy. The narrative, from the perspective of

the neighbor boy, plays a crucial role in controlling how the Lisbon princesses are portrayed in the film. The result is a narrative that transforms the suffering and tragedy of the Lisbon princesses' suicide into something romantic and poetic, fulfilling the neighborhood boys' obsessions, fantasies, and voyeuristic needs. Based on the analysis, the study assumes that the reason for using *mise en scène* to represent the objectification of the Lisbon princesses is its ability to construct a visual language that is easily understood, recognized, and interpreted by the audience, allowing for a complex theme such as objectification to be conveyed subliminally. Another reason is the ability to control the audience's perception of the Lisbon princesses, allowing them to adopt the neighbor boy's perspective, thus effectively representing objectification. Therefore, it can be concluded that this study affirms the role of film as a medium that can represent women's experiences and the social constructs that influence them, thereby achieving critical awareness and insight into objectification, women, and the feminist movement.

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