

## Under the Sign of Television: *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides

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### Abstract

*The Virgin Suicides* is a backward looking quest of a group of adult narrators who attempt to reconstruct the jigsaw puzzle of a tragic, mysterious story that is inextricably interwoven with theirs. In so doing, they resort to all kinds of evidence that could actually help them grasp the truth of their adolescence, among which television is a key element. Watching television proves to be a means of avoiding truth, a form of escapism and compensation within the family, rather than a form of entertainment. As a commercial medium, television signals a consumerist, shallow society, while as a news provider, it is duplicitous and sensationalist, imposing a deformed version of reality on the public opinion. All these features shed light on a whole society that takes the artificial reality of television for granted, and is partially to blame for adolescents' choice of death over life.

**Keywords:** suicide, alienation, duplicity, manipulation, truth

When reading the title of Jeffrey Eugenides's first novel, one cannot but ask whether it is a misleading metaphor or a straightforward, compressed disclosure of its plot. The very first lines bear out the latter assumption as the death of some Lisbon sisters is related by a surprising "we" voice which, in so doing, presents the actual ending of a story before its beginning. The reader is thus invited to follow the narrators from the vantage point of their middle age on a journey back to their adolescence, eager as they are to grasp both the truth underpinning the five girls' dramatic story, and to make sense of their own life.

What the narrators actually do is to collect all the evidence they can produce, and use it as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Hence, memories, as well as supposedly hard evidence such as photographs, newspaper articles, TV footage, diary pages and letters, are put together to solve the riddle of the five sisters' fate. The role that television has in such an attempt to reconstruct the past is mostly negative. On the one hand, it sheds light on the drastic isolation enforced on the Lisbon girls by their own parents, which is the most

probable cause for the girls' suicides. On the other hand, television has the power to deconstruct reality, and to manipulate people into taking for granted a false version of life.

Throughout the entire novel, watching television is presented as a form of escapism and compensation within the family, rather than a form of entertainment. According to psychologist John Rosemond (208), the terms "family" and "watching television" are incompatible as the moment the family sits down to watch television, "the family process stops." He further argues that the two terms point to a false conception of togetherness which hides solitude, communication problems and estrangement:

Regardless of how many people are in the same room watching the same television, each has retired into a solitary audiovisual tunnel. TV may not actually spawning communication problems, but it certainly becomes an excuse for maintaining them. The more members of a family drift apart, the more watching TV becomes a conventional means of dutifully enduring one another's presence while simultaneously avoiding acknowledgement of it, all under the pretense that watching TV is a family affair.

It is in this sense that watching television in the Lisbon family is an outlet for alienation and entrapment. As the parents are unable or unwilling to communicate with their daughters, they "gravitate" towards the TV set whose voice fills the oppressive silence. Hence, the girls are compelled to focus on an alien reality in order to forget their own. Paraphrasing Andrei Codrescu (197), there is a crucial switch between the interior and the exterior. The electronic imperative redesigns the family life as it is pushed to its centre, while people's real feelings and concerns are marginalized. Therefore, as Codrescu argues, the language of television becomes the only language, that is no language at all.

*The Virgin Suicides* is a novel that addresses mostly to our visual perception. Photographs, postcards, images almost as static as pictures, are only a few visual elements lying at the core of a narrative that seems to claim, together with Merleau-Ponty (25), "the primacy of perception." The French philosopher argues that "perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action." Such an observation points to the foremost importance of the eye as the basis of other perceptions and, of course, thought.

In stark contrast to the objectivity provided by sight are the flickering images of the TV set. Their unreliability is revealed from the very beginning of the novel. When the

paramedics came to the Lisbons' house for the first time, moving too slowly in the narrators' opinion, one of them said: "This ain't TV, folks, this is how fast we go" (3). The remark is suggestive of the power of television to alter reality in order to present an improved version of it. It is such "counterfeited" images that viewers come to perceive as the norm, and any "derailment" from it is likely to be frowned upon, or even rejected. The narrators' comment that one of the paramedics resembled Wyatt Earp actually emphasizes people's tendency to relate to famous television/cinema figures that seem to impose certain definitions of physical appearance and moral values on the viewers.

Television is often presented as a profitable business whose commercials offer significant clues about what is important in a society. Aletha Houston (142) claims that, from its beginning, television "adopted the model of broadcasting as a profit-making enterprise already established by radio." Hence, the recurrent presence of commercials on TV signals a society in which we are assaulted, on the one hand, by infinite options of products, and, on the other hand, by unrealistic standards of physical and moral beauty. Barry Richards (4) does not underestimate the extent to which the role of advertising has been a negative one. He notes that the meanings used for confirmation and enhancement "have often been elitist, sexist or racist ones, or have valorised the selfish or the superficial." He further states that "the advertising industry, like other parts of the modern marketing apparatus, has on the whole exhibited an extraordinary tunnel vision, such that it has much of the time been able to judge itself only by its commercial objectives or by its own limited notions of aesthetic excellence."

Commercials of slimming products signal a society in which people are concerned about their body image. As television usually promotes and glorifies certain standards of body weight and size, the correlation between body image and self-esteem may be extremely significant. When people fall short of their own expectations based on media images, self-esteem can suffer. Moreover, if a good commercial should be both linguistically and visually unforgettable, the slogan is supposed to be catchy and clever, and the images striking.

There is one such slogan aimed to sell beauty that stems from a woeful event. The phrase "pain is natural, getting over it is a choice" (118) emerged as part of an encouragement speech addressed to pupils after Cecilia's suicide. One of the narrators was to reformulate this purportedly sensible remark some years later, and use it for a slimming

product commercial. Thus, “eating is natural, gaining weight is a choice” (118) is a catchphrase that actually took root in the subsequent events of a young girl’s suicide. It clearly highlights, in my view, a mercantile, shallow, easily forgetting society in which there is only a small step from death to beauty, from decay to health. Moreover, it stresses people’s excessive interest in their appearance at the expense of inner beauty.

There is another relevant episode for the effect of commercials on the viewers. When a local television decided to deal with the issue of teenage suicide, they invited three teenagers to talk about the reasons for such a desperate choice. In the narrators’ opinion, they proved to have had too much therapy as their answers including words like “self-esteem” sounded awkward, and were likely to have been learnt by heart. It seems that the single genuine moment of the interview is represented by the moment when one of the girls, having revealed that the deadly pie prepared for herself had been eaten by her grandmother, burst into tears. The unexpected sentimental outburst was brought to an end by a commercial whose perfectly timed interference actually “repressed” not only the touching scene, but most importantly, its effect on the viewers. The abrupt passing from one scene to another deprives viewers of the necessary time to ponder on what they have just seen, taken aback by completely different images and information. The episode stresses again, in my opinion, the artificiality and brutality of commercials that are invading our life.

One of the most important features of television is that it represents a major source for news. In *Journalistic and Commercial News Values*, Allern Siggurd defines news media as having a dual nature. On the one hand, “they represent a societal institution that is ascribed a vital role in relation to such core political values as freedom of expression and democracy.” On the other hand, “they are businesses that produce commodities-information and entertainment for a market.”

This latter characteristic is obsessively emphasized in the novel as television reporters seem to be in a relentless pursuit of the sensational. After the suicides, the local TV stations kept showing images of the Lisbons’ decayed house and photos of the girls taken from the school albums. Since Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon refused to give interviews, the reporters did not refrain from fabricating evidence. One of them, for instance, produced a wedding dress and pretended it had been Cecilia’ favourite outfit, hoping that such a piece of information would catch the viewers’ attention, and, of course, be taken for granted. Moreover, the very fact that one reporter from the national television would lie in a lounge

chair and make hamburgers while trying to catch the “local colour” of the events sharply contrasted to the dramatic situation he was supposed to investigate.

The TV shows imposed a deformed version of reality on the public opinion. Once the cause of the girls’ suicides ceased to be of interest for the reporters, they turned their attention to reconstructing the girls’ identity. But instead of gathering factual information, they resorted to people’s recollections and rumours about the Lisbon girls, and soon their findings had less and less to do with the actual truth. While one reporter, for example, revealed Cecilia’s passion for horses, the narrators could not even remember seeing her next to a horse. Due to such investigations, the girl was even labelled “the crazy sister” which gave rise to the narrators’ indignation. They became aware, nevertheless, of the television’s power of manipulation as they saw their parents relied more and more on the TV version of the events, “listening to the stupid reporters as if they could tell them the truth about their own lives” (254).

The uselessness and duplicity of television is again brought to the fore at the end of the novel. The Lisbons’ TV set, without its screen, was home to a stuffed iguana that Therese had used at her biology classes, and was now thrown away by the new owner of the Lisbons’ house. I find this gesture highly symbolic. Having been deprived of its purpose, the TV set becomes a futile, undesirable object. It may be well compared with a carcass without its vital organs just as the iguana is no longer a living creature, but an artificial “artefact” with plastic, numbered organs meant to copy reality. The violent gesture of having the screen broken also points to an attitude of revolt that people are likely to have when realizing that the reality on TV is illusory and harmful.

*The Virgin Suicides* portrays television as symptomatic of a society with an increasingly fast pace of living and insatiable desire for comfort and information. At a mere touch of a button, we have easy access to a forged reality that packages almost every aspect of our life, often setting unrealistic, extravagant standards. Eugenides’s novel is remarkable for reminding us the danger of considering such a reality a surrogate for comfort, peace, even happiness. With its grim touches, the novel reinforces the idea that manipulation is likely to take its toll only if we are not aware of it.

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