

# Introduction

## The Surface of the Image is Political

Despite the successes of feminist film theory, we still do not have a model for imagining the radical potential of the image. This is where the pretty offers a profound reordering of aesthetics and politics: if the image has been consistently denigrated as feminine and perverse, then prettiness deconstructs this rhetoric and opens up the productive potential of the aesthetic as feminist form.

Rosalind Galt (2011: 36)

The discursive strategy that aims at repossessing the feminine through strategic repetitions engenders difference. For if there is no symmetry between the sexes, it follows that the feminine as experienced and expressed by women is as yet unrepresented, having been colonized by the male imaginary. Women must therefore speak the feminine, they must think it, write it, and represent it in their own terms.

Rosi Braidotti (in Burke 1994: 122)

To perform the terms of the production of woman as text, as image, is to resist identification with that image.

Teresa de Lauretis (1984: 36)

## Author's Note

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I want to preface what follows with a brief admission: I became a film scholar because of Sofia Coppola's films. Watching *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), aged seventeen, alone in a small cinema in London was a paradigm-shifting moment for me; it has taken me most of my adult life to comprehend the profound impact that this film has had on me (its affects and effect) and the ways in which it initiated a shift in my own personal course in life. This is, primarily, a work of scholarship, but it is also one written out of passion, anger and the limitations of personal experience. As Tania Modleski (1991: 45) puts it in reference to any scholar's claim to think herself outside of the limitations of subjectivity formed in ideology: 'Today, we are in danger of forgetting the crucial fact that like the rest of the world even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a "cultural dupe" – which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, or political and cultural domination (even though we are never *only* victims).' Thus, all failures and faults of this text as follows are borne out of love and the limitations of my place as a feminist film scholar (a cultural dupe) in this world – and these are failings for which I alone take full responsibility.

## Coppola beyond Celebrity and Postfeminism

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Sofia Coppola possesses a highly sophisticated and intricate knowledge of how images come to work on us; that is, she understands precisely how to construct an image – what to add in and what to remove – in order to achieve specific moods, tones and cinematic *affects*. She knows that similar kinds of images can have vastly different effects on the viewer depending on their context: an image redolent with nostalgia and melancholy may contain or presage harm or threat in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), and yet when transcribed to the setting of couture (Marc Jacobs' 'Daisy' campaign), it will signal bucolic and halcyon youthfulness devoid of any sinister atmosphere. This monograph is an extended study of Coppola's outstanding ability to think *through* and *in* images. In what follows, from a resolutely feminist perspective, I will explore the mood, texture, tone and multifaceted meaning of Coppola's aesthetic. In short, I will take my cue from Coppola herself and take images and the affect and effect of images seriously by reading surface in order to reach depth. It is my belief that this is the essential work that Coppola's

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oeuvre asks of us as viewers: if we cannot engage with the surface of the image as a provocation, we miss its signification entirely. Surface, then, is deeply meaningful in Coppola's diegetic worlds.

Yet the surface of the image is continually denigrated as mere frippery – an insubstantial substitute for hard, scientifically rigorous, implicitly masculine knowledge (often associated with language rather than the image, or diegesis rather than mimesis). The image – especially the decorative image – is viewed all too often as seductive, beguiling, deceptive and false. In her groundbreaking study of the 'pretty' image, Rosalind Galt writes that 'even in the context of a positive evaluation of content, pretty images lead inevitably to the spectre of empty spectacle' (Galt 2011: 12). Film studies in particular has devoted a suspiciously copious amount of time to defaming decorative images and, moreover, associating this kind of image with femininity and femaleness; in other words, it is a discipline (alongside film criticism) that has worked assiduously to insist that there is nothing of import to consider once the curtain (surface and spectacle) is drawn back. As such, there is, I suggest, an alarmingly misogynist agenda at play here. My contention is echoed in Galt's suggestion that: 'The rhetoric of cinema has consistently denigrated surface decoration, finding the attractive skin of the screen to be false, shallow, feminine, or apolitical' (Galt 2011: 2). Moreover, Galt notes that: 'Many critics hear in the term (pretty) a silent "merely" in which the merely pretty is understood as a pleasing surface for an unsophisticated audience, lacking in depth, seriousness, or complexity of meaning' (2011: 6). Alongside Galt, I insist that the image itself as spectacle contains manifold signification and that this is what must be borne in mind when we are asked to attend to images such as those produced by Coppola. It is no coincidence, to my mind, that Coppola's latest film, *The Beguiled* (2017), overturns the clichéd priapic narrative of its original (*The Beguiled*, Don Siegel, 1971) by relating events from a female perspective through the trope of visual beguilement. Coppola has, after all, always displayed an acute understanding of how to use a phallic economy of images and words against itself. Feminist politics is, for her, a question posed through production design.

Therefore, it is telling, but sadly not surprising, that this lazy proclivity of critics and scholars alike to associate the surface of the image with superficiality and redundancy has extended into the popular and cultural reception of Coppola's films. Consider, for instance, the critical taxonomy and dismissive descriptors used on a regular basis to delineate Coppola's aesthetic appeal: 'tedious vacu-

ity' and 'uncritically rendered';<sup>1</sup> 'a day-dreamy and gorgeous-looking soufflé';<sup>2</sup> 'this is like a manicurist claiming to capture the inner experience of your pinkie';<sup>3</sup> 'it's only for girls and gays';<sup>4</sup> 'one of the daftest things I have seen for a long time';<sup>5</sup> 'no weight, depth or particular story';<sup>6</sup> 'shallow', 'superficial', 'psychologically diffuse', 'vague', 'vacuous', 'no depth' and 'blank'.<sup>7</sup> Readers may be curious to note that it is male critics who nearly always perpetuate the infuriatingly gendered tone prevalent in this cultural discourse that has irrevocably shaped the reception of Coppola's films. The misogynist implication that is embarrassingly evident here is that Coppola's 'pretty' and decorative mise-en-scène is taken to signify nothing beyond its pleasing surface; indeed, her oeuvre is frequently likened to cinematic pastry, a delightful cream puff, full of delicious air but lacking in meaty (and masculine) substance (a metaphor critics employed with alarming alacrity with regard to *Marie Antoinette* (2006)).

This monograph is a concerted attempt to attend to the form of Coppola's films within both a feminist and modernist philosophical framework (high theory, if you will); I admit that my approach probably renders the tone and content of this study somewhat old-fashioned, especially given the fact that the majority of studies of Coppola's films tend to centre on or situate her work within both a postfeminist and postmodern context (much of which is referenced in the body of this study). However, I contend that Coppola is responding to situations of postmodernism and postfeminism not from within, but from without, and I must concede further that I loathe the notion of postfeminism as both principle and lifestyle choice. In her recent study of Coppola, Fiona Handyside (2017) also suggests that Coppola's work bifurcates due to the tensions inherent in the material she explores perennially, writing that:

*Coppola's work straddles two differing, indeed possibly conflicting, definitions of postfeminism. On the one hand, her films participate in postfeminist cultural norms (interested in femininity, questions of female agency and power, and showcasing friendships, girliness, fashionable clothes and beautiful homes). On the other hand, they also draw on a significant feminist critical inheritance, showing her films as literally postfeminist (as in being able to learn from these interventions of feminist filmmakers from the 1970s, rather than disavowing them), and thus display a particular interest in questions of form that tend to be unusual in most female focused films. (Handyside 2017: 13)*

Handyside draws out the finer points of what she views as Coppola's 'quintessentially postfeminist aesthetic' (2017: 5) by situating her work within the context of girlhood, adolescence and the rarefied settings of sparkle and light. As I do, she also intimates at the darker undertones of Coppola's representation of female adolescence as a period of time in which one's ability to flourish can not only be stifled but also brutalized by the sudden realization of what it means to become a woman within a patriarchal society – the often catastrophic results of which result in insidious forms of internalized, self-inflicted violence. However, this study, as my work on Coppola preceding this has demonstrated (see Backman Rogers 2012, 2015), will argue adamantly that Coppola's critique is situated almost entirely on the side of an outspoken and at times radical form of feminism. It is in attending to the form of her films with assiduous care and attention to detail that this becomes apparent. It is for this reason that this study, as we shall see, employs a panoply of now well-known feminist texts on the image in order to render Coppola's feminist agenda clear. As such, this study exists in respectful dialogue with that of Handyside from opposite ends of a feminist spectrum with a great deal of common ground and agreement.

As a study of form, this book does not engage with Coppola as a personality or figure of celebrity. To come to the point, I am not exploring here the notion, after Timothy Corrigan (1991), that in the contemporary moment, the cinematic auteur functions as a brand. I do not dispute that this is correct, but in the case of Coppola I believe that this, to my mind, somewhat prurient fascination, ripe with double standards, with Coppola's private life and background has occluded careful and respectful assessment of her work.<sup>8</sup> After all, the fact that David Lynch and Terrence Malick (two American independent directors whose supposed brilliance is rarely questioned) have both made advertisements for high-end perfumes and yet that this has not become a central point of analysis for both their oeuvres is rather interesting; in contrast, critics appear to have read Coppola's work myopically through the lens of her own family history, her investment in the fashion industry and her admitted white, female privilege to the extent that every film she produces is assumed to be a hermetic iteration of her own life.<sup>9</sup> Once again, then, we face that old adage that a woman is too bound up in her own experience and her own thoughts (in fact, far too narcissistic) to make work about anything other than her own life; in many ways, we have not moved on critically from that moment in which Freud instructed women to leave

his audience since they themselves are the problem. It should be clear, then, that I find this approach (which is in fact bloviating nonsense dressed up as analysis) to be not only tedious and churlish, but also cerebrally indolent and sexist. I am surprised critics and scholars alike continue to get away with this kind of writing.

I am not wilfully misconstruing Corrigan's thesis here; the fact is that Coppola has, in fact, all too readily been turned into a brand that resonates far beyond the boundaries of her films (unlike the majority of her male counterparts or contemporaries, such as Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach). Indeed, scholars have devoted a lot of attention to the fact of her celebrity (see Diamond 2011; Lewis 2011), to the extent that Coppola's personal choices (as a facet of postfeminist discourse), especially in relation to commodity fetishism, have become inextricably bound up with the 'appeal' of her films and the manner in which they are read.<sup>10</sup> In other words, it would seem that Coppola as a brand has become increasingly difficult to extricate from any consideration of the formal properties of her work. This is troubling; a case in point would be the way in which the aesthetic appeal of, for instance, *The Virgin Suicides* has been extrapolated and reified in order to appeal to a youthful demographic. This process of commodification actually belies the devastating core of the film that tells us that leading one's life within precisely such a hermetic environment as the one Coppola's brand is used to create is claustrophobic, corrupting and potentially irretrievably damaging. In short, reading Coppola's films through the Coppola brand distorts their meaning entirely. Moreover, I do not expect Coppola as a person to be consistent with her filmmaking; that women making work that pertains to feminist concerns are held to increasingly impossible standards by the media (namely that they should be able to speak on behalf of all women everywhere all of the time) is, I insist, a form of patriarchal sabotage. I will allow Sofia Coppola her contradictions – the Coppola I write of here is therefore possibly closer to Seymour Chatman's conception of the 'ideal author' (just as I might assume that anyone reading these words is my 'ideal reader') or Michel Foucault's notion of the 'author function'. The concern of this study, then, is not Sofia Coppola herself, but her work. Sofia Coppola as she exists within these pages will be characterized, taking my cue from Corrin Columpar (in Levitin, Plessis and Raoul 2003), as a feminist auteure.<sup>11</sup>

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## Coppola as Feminist Auteure

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Thus far, I have defined the remit of this book by stating what it is *not*. My aim is not to demur with existing scholarship on Coppola – I do believe we are all contributing to a useful conversation on female authorship after all – but to situate my ongoing scholarship on Coppola (2007, 2012a, 2012b, 2015) from an alternative perspective than postfeminism, adolescence, fashion and celebrity. I will examine Coppola as a creator, par excellence, of mood (Sinnerbrink 2013) and beguilement through images that reveal, upon close reading, radical critiques of the gilded worlds in which her films are set. As such, Coppola's powers of beguilement draw us with ease into worlds of psychic fracture, loneliness and abjection. This is the essence of Coppola's power as a filmmaker: her images appear as pleasurable, but denote something we can only grasp by looking askew or awry – her images are troubling and vexing. Coppola understands that, as Tania Modleski puts it: 'Ideology is as effective as it is because it bestows pleasure on its subjects rather than simply conveying messages, and so it cannot be combated only at the level of meaning' (1991: 57). Coppola's feminist form of politics is precisely 'bestowed' via visual pleasure and this is the central assumption of this study. Hers is not a counter-cinema that takes its cue from Teresa de Lauretis' (1984, 1987) call for the de-aestheticization of images of the female body. As we shall see, Coppola understands that visual appeal can be used subversively as a form of Irigarayan masquerade; that is, Coppola's strategy is to reveal the process by which an image comes to be meaningful culturally (how images function as clichés that, in turn, inform our understanding of relations of power). Coppola also knows that an image always comes into being *for* someone and that in the case of representation of the female body, the male gaze is nearly always present as a structuring device. By extension, Coppola understands how the very mechanics of cinema, as an apparatus, function as a technology of gender (de Lauretis 1987). Coppola's highly specific form of feminist counter-cinema aims to dismantle or decentre the inveterate patriarchal project of classical cinema from within – she uses its imagery and its language against itself. And so, in order to extract meaning from Coppola's films, we must take their pleasurable properties seriously. In reading Coppola, it is not a matter of listening intently to what is said – after all, very little is articulated – but in remaining alert to the multiform, highly complex nature of her production design and what this connotes philosophically. Coppola, after all,

is known for using images and sounds as the point of inception for her work and rarely starts with dialogue (in fact, the most significant words in her films are, infamously, muffled and inaudible – fans will know to which scene I am referring). She is primarily a director who *thinks in images*. She is intensely cinematic in this respect. This study enacts a similar process by thinking *through* Coppola's images,<sup>12</sup> which is to say that the philosophical framework employed here, which I will go on to discuss in the latter portion of this chapter, is suggested or made sense of *by way of the image*.

Coppola's work has, I would suggest alongside Sharon Lin Tay (2009), far more in common with European waves of filmmaking and 1970s American independent film than it does with the postfeminist and ironic styles of the contemporary 'brat pack' (exemplified by Wes Anderson, Noah Baumbach and Todd Solondz), which Claire Perkins (2012), taking her cue from Jeffrey Sconce, has elaborated on as 'smart cinema'. Coppola's 'blank' style, I counter, should not be read in an ironic mode because its existential import is soundly based in critique. The playful and quirky (see MacDowell 2010) tone of hipster irony is not something, I would suggest, that Coppola brooks in her deeply serious and engaged work. In this sense, Coppola recuperates the tropes of what Robert Kolker (2000, originally published 1980) has delineated as a 'cinema of loneliness' from within a feminist framework by situating her own work in response on the side of critique. As Kolker remarks of 1970s American 'indie' filmmaking (especially in reference to Francis Coppola, Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese), this canon of film rarely challenges: 'the ideology many of them [these films] find abhorrent . . . [they] perpetuate the passivity and aloneness that have become their central image . . . their films speak to continual impotence in the world, an inability to change and to create change' (2000: 10). *Somewhere*, by way of example, is a film that clearly evinces a nostalgia for American indie filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s (Coppola uses the camera lenses deployed in *Rumble Fish* (1983) to create a specific grainy, washed-out aesthetic), but responds to that patriarchal and hermetically sealed historical moment in filmmaking from a feminist perspective. Indeed, the film sets out to critique the romantic notion of masculinity in crisis that the 1970s cinema of paranoia reified through the characters of Harry Moseby, Harry Caul, Johnny Boy and Travis Bickle. Coppola's work engages radically with American indie's cinematic inheritance by reconfiguring it as a critique of apathy and impotence. In a similar manner, we can read her engagement with feminist politics as an attempt to subvert and undermine the priapic nature of the cinematic inheritance upon

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which she draws. After all, this is the woman who asks what a Clint Eastwood/Don Siegel film from the 1970s might look like from an admittedly white and privileged female point of view (a controversy on which I will elaborate in the first chapter of this study).

It will be clear to readers by now that I will be referring to Coppola as the central agent and creative force behind her body of work. This is not to detract from the artistic team that has worked so consistently and assiduously on her films throughout her career to date (cinematographers Ed Lachmann, Lance Accord and the brilliant, late Harris Savides, editor Sarah Flack, production designer Anne Ross, bands AIR and Phoenix, producer Fred Roos, and actresses Kirsten Dunst and Elle Fanning), but rather to stress that Coppola is the agential or centrifugal force that determines the aesthetic for which these films are renowned; that is, Coppola knows precisely who can help her evoke these particular shades, tones and moods. Moreover, she is known for her discerning taste and quiet determination to achieve the meticulous cinematic effects she desires (she famously refused to make *Lost in Translation* with anyone else but Bill Murray, despite the fact that the actor had neither signed a contract nor turned up on set in Japan by the first day of the film's notoriously tight shooting schedule). Here again, I must confess to adopting a somewhat old-fashioned attitude to the notion of authorship. Poststructuralist auteur theory that emerged in the wake of scholarship by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault who announced the 'death of the author' and proposed the 'author function' instead, sets forth that the author is but an organizing principle within a text's internal structure. From a feminist perspective, this is, at best, purely common sense (we cannot claim to know the complexity and contradictions of somebody intimately through their work); that is, the work possesses its own logic, which is in turn interpreted by a viewer or reader with her own unconscious bias and experience. Indeed, the contradictions of the text, the moment at which it begins to unravel itself (as Jacques Derrida might have it) signal the impossibility if not the outright falsity of positing a consistent, abiding and wholly self-aware subject as its origin. However, just as the auteur theory in its original manifestation was a highly patriarchal theory that was all too heavily indebted to the Romantic notion of the lone male artist as genius, the work of the poststructuralists who influenced this deconstructive reiteration of the theory (broadly speaking Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze) were entirely blind to the realities and intersections of gender, class, race and their conterminous conferral of privilege or disenfranchisement. At the risk of sounding paranoid in tone,

it seems significant that the moment in which women started to make gains not only within society politically and economically but also culturally also happens to be the moment in which a theoretical course is set that is wholly inimical to any ability to lay claim to a name. To name is, after all, to harness a form of power. For feminist scholars, one cannot remain indifferent to the matter of *who* is speaking; as Kaja Silverman, who has resolutely rejected the notion of the author as a transcendent source of meaning in her work, argues: 'it is clearly not the same thing for a woman to speak with a female voice as it is for a man to do so, and vice versa' (Silverman 2003: 70). To divest a woman of her agency, to disregard her stance as the teller of her own tale is to deprive her of her own voice and her own authority and expertise.<sup>13</sup> It is a vehemently sexist manoeuvre that serves to blind us to the manifold ways in which female subjectivity is inscribed within a text – and one of the central facets of this inscription is the author as speaker (or one of many speakers) of a film. Again, as Silverman so persuasively argues, 'the crucial project with respect to the female voice is to find a place from which it can speak and be heard, not to strip it of discursive rights' (1988: 189). I concur that we cannot, and must not, pronounce as obsolete and defunct a form of agency (female, feminine, feminist, femme) that is still yet to be realized fully. It is for this reason that I will, as a political strategy, centre the figure of the female and feminist auteure (Columpar 2003) in what follows.

Tania Modleski, taking her cue from Nancy K. Miller, has remarked that it is Foucault's 'sovereign indifference to the matter of who's speaking, and not the concept of authorship itself, that is the mask behind which phallogentrism hides its fictions' (Modleski 1991: 33). The matter of who is enunciating the text, then, is a feminist issue. To lay claim to one's agency as a practitioner is a feminist act. This is not a trivial issue for, once more, as Miller reminds us, the matter of the signature for women 'by virtue of its power in the world of circulation – is *not* immaterial. Only those who have it can play with not having it' (quoted in Modleski 1991: 33). It is especially crucial that women are able to author texts in terms of both form and narrative within a cultural arena such as film. Hollywood is an industry that almost singlehandedly powers the norms and ideals that shape our notions of what constitutes a successful and therefore nebulously 'good' life and, by extension, who is represented. At worst, it is a minacious form of ideology that enacts and perpetuates forms of systemic violence that function through hierarchy, separation, elevation and degradation. Hollywood is notoriously racist, sexist and ageist as an industry, and it is responsible (as the factory of dreams)

for the creation of a cultural subconscious on a global scale. Indeed, it is hard labour to work against the grain of Hollywood. In terms of its treatment of the female body, Modleski has written of ‘the monstrous hypocrisy of a system which could so exploit a woman’s body while infantilizing, idealizing, and sentimentalizing women with its belief in female fragility and spirituality’ (1991: 21). Feminist agency as authorship within the film industry works to deconstruct, decentre and disperse these dubious cinematic pleasures by offering alternative strategies of seeing and desiring. Feminist authorship can employ a number of incisive rhetorical strategies such as the subversive use of genre, the centring of the female gaze, female desire and the female voice, a holistic approach to representing the female body and the foregrounding of the cerebral female protagonist; it also readily appropriates sardonic and scathing humour in order to undermine Hollywood’s pompous determination to take itself so seriously.

Within this context, Coppola is a curious case in point since, from the perspective of many scholars and critics, she is frequently cast in the role of Hollywood royalty (indeed, as a rarefied, privileged princess) – a compliant cog in the wheel of the tumescent Hollywood system that swallows up whole most attempts to function independently of its own bloated organism. However, as I will go on to argue, Coppola is highly proficient in undermining the rhetorical strategies of Hollywood precisely because it is a language that she knows how to speak fluently, even if this is not adopted with ease. If, as Audre Lorde famously reminded us (within the intersectional context of race, gender and sexuality, which is admittedly not the world of Coppola), it is impossible to dismantle hegemonic cultural capital by using the patriarchal tools that built such a behemoth, Coppola’s strategy is to undermine the foundations of that structure by recuperating its central assumptions and tenets through a gendered form of politics – a process that casts much of received male rhetoric within an absurd light.<sup>14</sup> In other words, she feminizes the master’s tools in order to reveal the weak and provisional foundations upon which his house is built. I would argue, by augmentation, that her relationship to the fashion and beauty industries functions in a correlative manner: Coppola understands intimately *how* images of femininity and ‘femaleness’ are constructed and used on women and young girls culturally, rhetorically and ideologically. Hers are the tools of the feminist auteure in that she seeks to interrogate those norms and not reify them: in this context, her fascination with whiteness in particular is crucial, for Coppola’s representation of whiteness is, in fact, one that hinges on impossibility and mortality.

## Addressing the Viewer as Female

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It is my belief throughout this study that Coppola not only functions as a feminist auteure within her own texts (the agential force and voice of the films), but that she also addresses the film viewer *as female*. A great deal of critical attention has been paid to the representation of the female figure or how ‘femaleness’ is constructed onscreen. Less, however, has been said about the female spectator. Indeed, Jackie Stacey’s study of stardom (1994) remains somewhat unique in its emphasis on the female spectator. Since Laura Mulvey (2001) argued in her celebrated polemic on visual pleasure that the female viewer is caught in a double bind and forced into a relationship of subjugation with – or is in fact made complicit in – the production of her own likeness as spectacle, feminist film theory has worked hard to grapple with the intricate complexities of the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class both on and off the screen. To point out the deep imbrication of representation and embodied, phenomenological experience may seem somewhat redundant or evident, yet Hollywood, as the dominant mode of narrative filmmaking, continues to eschew dense description of female perspectives in favour of glossy commodification. Despite voluminous (and mostly, in my view, ill-conceived) criticism of Mulvey’s stance (to which she in turn has responded), it would seem that Hollywood in particular still regards the task of representing the reality of the female body and lived female experience (in all of its complexities and varied intersections) as a dull, lacklustre or even otiose and abject matter. In 1984, de Lauretis opined that ‘the position of woman in language and in cinema is one of non-coherence; she finds herself only in a void of meaning, the empty space between the signs – the place of women spectators in the cinema between the look of the camera and the image on the screen, a place not represented, not symbolized, and thus pre-empted to subject (or self)-representation’ (1984: 8). Writing this book, some thirty-four years after de Lauretis first surmised that women in their multiplicity and difference are nowhere to be found onscreen (which has a lasting and profound impact on how female subjectivities are formed), I would argue that we find ourselves in much the same position on a quotidian basis. There have been outstanding analyses made of late on the considerable progress that women’s cinema is making (I recommend especially Sophie Mayer’s wonderful *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema* (2015)) and I am loath to suggest that female filmmakers and women working in visual culture at large have had a negligible impact; such a suggestion would be in flagrant

contradiction to the mere existence of this study after all (although, notably, it is dedicated to a privileged white woman). However, the egregious barriers that women face working in creative industries are well documented and we are far from reaching a state of equilibrium and parity. In terms of the representation of women on screen, Laura Mulvey (with whom I coedited *Feminisms: Diversity, Multiplicity and Difference in Film Cultures* (2015)) and I have argued that we are facing new frontiers of misogyny that subject the female body to an extensive process of dematerialization that seems to sanction the exaction of wanton violence on our onscreen likeness. That Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017), which tightly bound and likened the female body to a war machine, could cause such a furore that grown female journalists admitted in print to crying in the aisles of the cinema due to the simple fact of viewing an athletic female body enact the asinine procedural movements normally reserved for the male action hero frankly speaks volumes.

That the Hollywood image is so deeply bound up with fantasy – indeed, *is* a creation of fantasy – is precisely what makes it powerfully seductive; this in turn affects the production of subjectivity by redirecting and repurposing desire (that Hollywood's history is intimately related to the birth of the production line of capitalism – in particular the Fordist model – should not be forgotten). In other words, Hollywood drives us towards the unattainable: it generates a form of madness. As de Lauretis puts it: 'In this manner cinema powerfully participates in the production of forms of subjectivity that are individually shaped yet unequivocally social' (1984: 8). This is dangerous territory if this highly particular image is not decentred and deconstructed because it becomes the benchmark, the standard by which we judge and measure our own worth simply because of its saturation, which all too often is taken for granted as a given. And as we are well aware, the continuity editing system (which David Bordwell argues has 'intensified' (2002) in its very form rather than lost cultural ground) ensures that narration as an ideological effect functions optimally. That is, we perform feminist labour when we demand that viewers read against the grain of the image. De Lauretis, taking her cue I suspect from Mulvey, has argued that this has a detrimental, if not nefarious, impact on the female spectator in particular (her form/likeness already being subjected to ever-more preposterous levels of specularity); she writes that 'if female spectators find themselves placed in virtually the same position . . . as they are in classical cinema, it is because the inscription of sexual difference in the image(s) is not questioned but taken for granted . . . narrativity is what over-

determines identification, the spectator's relations to the film, and therefore the very reading of the images' (1984: 9). Despite this statement being issued from what would now be considered the annals of feminist theory, we only need to consider the harmful postfeminist confluence of supposed 'feminist choice' and the horrifically rigorous standards of the burgeoning beauty industry – an industry that has brought Botox, fillers and all manner of ghastly cosmetic procedures to the high street in the name of 'self-care' and 'self-investment' (as Jessa Crispin (2017) recently stated, it is not 'self-care' if you are paying someone to paint your nails or wash your hair) – to re-establish its contemporary relevance; this is fundamentally a relationship of commerce that is regulated and facilitated *through* images. Hollywood, as it were, has facilitated a new form of aesthetic labour that is entirely founded on and bound up with fantasy (a fantasy with which women are encouraged to collude). As reality recedes, we are expected to subscribe increasingly tightly to our own virtual, airbrushed image (a dilemma to which Coppola has devoted an entire film: *The Bling Ring*). To intercede in this is to deconstruct, which is precisely a feminist manoeuvre. Above all, a feminist film must address the spectator as female (as opposed to portraying the female body or character as strong or weak, which is far too simplistic a response) and reveal to her the 'terms of production of woman as text, as image' (de Lauretis 1984: 36). This intricate process of unpicking *how* a specific image of woman has come to take hold culturally and ideologically enables, in short, a form of resistance: a refusal to identify with such an image. Moreover, it can reveal to us how the image is weaponized and how the image can be brought into confrontation with its own limitations. For de Lauretis, this is feminist labour, for: 'Women are constructed through gender (and other forms of ideology) and feminism is the practice and consciousness of that ideology's limits, a "de-re-construction"' (2007: 3). This is, fundamentally, 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.

Coppola's films are notably marketed at women, and young women in particular. Indeed, distributors of her films have, somewhat infuriatingly, latched on to the pet themes and tones of a postfeminist aesthetic in order to appeal to a highly specific demographic of adolescent girl. I believe that in part, this has worked against Coppola's credibility and right to be taken seriously as a feminist auteure. To return to my earlier point, critics, viewers and scholars alike are all too ready to obfuscate surface with meaning when it comes to Coppola's work and

assume readily that the content of her films correlates to the pleasing exterior within which they are packaged; for instance, the DVD of *Marie Antoinette* in particular was encased in a shade of fuchsia that is normally adopted for trinkets and clothing marketed heavily at very young girls, thus ensuring that the film's politics of pretty and excess is nullified and infantilized by its own marketing campaign (the film's reference to this shade of fuchsia was actually meant as a homage to British punk, which its opening-credit sequence renders explicit). However, this somewhat misguided marketing of her films reveals, in essence, a core motif or concern of Coppola's oeuvre: that she assumes the viewer to be female. Coppola adamantly feminizes her cinematic worlds not in order simply to create a pleasing aesthetic (although her films frequently spur specious use of her visuals within the glossy innards of fashion magazines, proving perhaps how easily she is misconstrued), but in order to characterize vision (that of director and spectator) as *female*. Coppola's feminist politics lies in her offering to the viewer a *dispositif* in which the multifaceted construction of the eternal feminine is revealed as a new form of feminist counter-cinema. That is, Coppola gives to the female viewer (especially the young, white female viewer) what they *know already to be true* and she demands that the male viewer bear the burden of what it means to be made the object of the gaze; consider, for instance, the tracking shot of Marie Antoinette entering Versailles, in which her point of view registers a series of hostile and objectifying gazes that represent the power and authority of the patriarchal court. Likewise, *The Virgin Suicides* is a film that works to deconstruct how young girls are already always fashioned into suffocating roles that force them to internalize the role of *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 2001) that patriarchal narratives set out for them. The film adapts the nostalgia and irreparable pain of the original novel, but recuperates the priapic narrative as an absurdity that nonetheless facilitates gendered forms of violence and control. To refuse a young girl her becoming, to re-direct her desire, to make her carry the burden of meaning, to force her to be the psychic mirror of man is to destroy her. The film's dark revelation is that a young woman can kill herself without in fact ever committing suicide. These are films that reveal fundamental truths of what it means to become a woman under patriarchy. Notably, Coppola's films that centre male experience alongside that of the female (*Lost in Translation*, *Somewhere*) render masculinity as a hermetic shell inside of which it is impossible to become or to thrive. And as Kaja Silverman (1992) has argued, to produce an analysis that divides received cultural notions of masculinity into its extant parts is also to decentre and deflate it of its dominance.

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It is therefore crucial that Coppola's own cinematic dissection of masculinity (and, in particular, its fashioning as a dominant narrative by Hollywood) throws self-same, abiding identity into crisis – indeed, reveals it as, at best, a void and, at worst, a patriarchal farce.

### A Feminist Politics of the Image

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The task of defining the politics of Coppola's feminist imagery is rife with difficulty; scholars who write on her work often reveal its perplexing nature through their own choice of description. For instance, Amy Woodworth states that: 'Coppola's trademark slow pacing, privileging of *impression* over plot, and development of emotional texture and mood constitute a *kind of feminine aesthetic*' (2008: 151, emphasis added). Woodworth's intricate essay gets to the heart of why it is so hard to pin down what many view as the nebulous nature of Coppola's oeuvre (a presumption that is only shored up by Coppola's own reluctance to pronounce on the 'meaning' of her films – a track record she broke with only recently in reference to controversy over *The Beguiled*). In other words, Coppola's films are defined by mood and tone;<sup>15</sup> they are paeans to the fleeting and ephemeral moments in life that are nearly impossible to capture, centred and grounded as they are in subjectivity and embodiment, but that nonetheless come to define the course of a life. Consider, for instance, the sound of Marie Antoinette's dress delicately caressing the underbrush as she wanders back home to an arranged marriage and away from a lover she knows she will most likely never see again, or the sound bridge that carries over the muted yet explosive sounds of *My Bloody Valentine* from Charlotte's taxi ride through Tokyo into the Park Hyatt hotel as Bob cradles her in his arms. Both of these moments are, without doubt, infinitesimal *and* profoundly altering events for both female protagonists. The slightness or brevity of actual time is distended and subsists within lived experience – that is, within the body. Coppola documents those moments that change us on an atomic level and that we carry with us internally. Yet bittersweet is not a quality that is easily defined; it is felt. This is the magical territory that defines Coppola's work, which externalizes the turbulence of the inner life. Likewise, the politics of her image is also hard to define because she is describing fractious situations in which any attempt to articulate oneself is thwarted by a patriarchal society that would seek to shut down dissent and to disarticulate the female experience; in

other words, she is often describing a fledgling feminist politics of the body in its moment of inception – a politics to come, if you will. Handyside has aptly noted that this kind of culture:

*mitigates against connections across gendered, raced and class divisions. In the face of such a society, retreat to the domestic space, the comforts of home, or an attempt to fashion a new glamorous identity through fashion, seems an entirely logical response. It is not so much that Coppola and her female protagonists no longer enact collectivist feminist values, it is more than such collectivities fracture in the face of a society which promotes the model of the citizen as an active entrepreneur of the self. (2017: 31)*

I concur with Handyside that Coppola's critical engagement with contemporary postfeminist politics reveals a near-outright rejection of any possibility of thriving within an environment that demands that female agency is reharnessed as the ideal model for late capitalist consumerism. Coppola's feminist politics, however, are not uniquely focused on the postfeminist moment and its affective damages; her oeuvre engages with a history of patriarchal culture that has sought to subdue, silence, trade and deny the female body and experience. Her feminist politics are wide-ranging and deeply imbricate with the history of cinema as a patriarchal model of subjectivity. In other words, her politics is of the image.

As I stated earlier, Coppola's is not a counter-cinema that adopts strategies of de-aestheticization and reflexivity; it is in no way Brechtian and has negligible allegiance with the epic theatre. She has, in other words, far more in common with 1970s American independent filmmakers and their deployment of tropes of European filmmaking than she does with, say, the *nouvelle vague*. She enacts a feminist recuperation of the image that is *already always* based on and in recuperation. This is why Coppola's engagement with the history of filmmaking is crucial to understanding her aesthetic appeal. Moreover, Coppola's films positively revel in the decorative and even florid or baroque (see Walton 2016) aspects of the image in order to evince a feminist politics as a question of production design. Coppola's use of the cinematic cliché (the generic image) is subversive in that she reveals the process by which someone or something *becomes* an image to be read collectively: how, for instance, the female body is cultivated as specifically meaningful (objectified, sexualized, dematerialized). In doing so, she lays open the mechanic through which an image always comes into being for someone else. Exposing the

burden of the male gaze as wrought on, in particular, the female form and its detrimental effects lies at the centre of Coppola's project. It is cinema's inveterate patriarchal politics that she addresses and its phallic economy of images that she, by extension, seeks to dismantle.

Coppola's fascination with the cliché as a form of cultural shorthand – an image that we already always know how to read and to assimilate – is born out of a wider project: how to free the female body from the burden of iconicity. If this is a position into which phallogentric culture has forced women, it is the aim of a number of feminist filmmakers, of whom Coppola is a prominent visionary, to find alternate paths to express female subjectivity and experience. Yet this is not a task that can be accomplished with alacrity or ease; as Rosi Braidotti, drawing on Irigaray, reminds us, 'the image of Woman, or of woman-as-other, is a culture-specific, historical system of material and symbolic representation, against which feminist women are struggling. Moreover, insofar as this imaginary has been internalized by women and has constructed female identity, it is by no means external to women and cannot be cast off like an old garment' (in Burke 1994: 122) It is this struggle, which is played out through external and internal stratification, that Coppola addresses in her films, often to heart-rending or devastating effect.

I suggest, then, that Coppola's films are more appropriately attended to through feminist philosophies of *difference* (many of which I refer to in this study) rather than purely through postfeminism. I must stress, alongside scholars who have sought to recuperate thinkers such as Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva from utterly inappropriate and naïve charges of essentialism (see in particular Bray 2003; and Burke 1994), that a feminism of sexual difference – despite what many Anglo-American feminists have argued – asserts difference positively so that one may speak *strategically* as a woman. 'Woman' in this sense does not denote a homogeneous, monolithic, static presence that can be exhaustively defined once and for all on behalf of all women everywhere; furthermore, it has nothing whatsoever to do with her biological body and everything to do with her place as a social subject within an ideological discourse that already shapes and delimits the terms and possibilities of her experience. On the contrary, 'woman', under these terms, stands in for the site where a nexus of relations constituted by multifarious and complex intersections of class, race and sex may be taken into account. Women are multitudinous and contradictory, and Coppola's work aims to represent but one margin of such compound and phenomenologically composite female existence in the world. To come to the point, as a filmmaker, she speaks,

thinks, writes and represents *through* the feminine and *as* a woman. This is imperative to the feminist project because women have been made to bear physically and symbolically the detrimental effects of white masculine privilege as his Other in order to shore up male identity as dominant.<sup>16</sup> Materially, culturally and linguistically, women have been divested of a place from which to speak. Coppola speaks both *as* a woman and *to* women as her audience. To enact or activate a feminist politics through the image is vital because this is the site where dominant fictions come into being – the terms under which existence is, or is not, represented and given voice to. The dominant fiction of patriarchy does not exist in abstraction; Kaja Silverman, who defines it as ‘a reservoir of sounds, images, and narratives’, also asserts that ‘it has no concrete existence apart from discursive practice and its psychic residue. If representation and signification constitute the site at which the dominant fiction comes into existence, then they would also seem to provide the necessary vehicle for ideological contestation – the medium through which to reconstruct both our “reality” and “ourselves”’ (1992: 48). What Silverman defines here is a form of feminist counter-politics that attends carefully to the very construction of the dominant narrative that reveals itself through image and sound in order to expose it precisely as a creative fiction.

Similarly, Claire Johnston, writing in 1973, called for a determined confrontation with the ideology of mainstream cinema in order to challenge its depiction of women in particular – a representation that she argued is grounded in myths of the eternal feminine that Hollywood’s reality effect helps to pass off as natural and universal. She writes that ‘it is in the nature of myth to drain the sign (the image of woman/the function of woman in the narrative) of its meaning and superimpose another which thus appears natural’ (2008: 120). Critique of the image would therefore facilitate a dislocation between lived experience, identification and representation that would subvert patriarchal ideology and the phallic economy of words and images used to uphold it. It would render lucid the workings of myth (particularly in relation to cinema) as a form of cultural construction that suffocates those that live within its grasp (*The Virgin Suicides*, *Marie Antoinette*). Importantly, Johnston does not brook utopian thinking when it comes to forming a feminist counter-cinema (and nor, for that matter, do I). First, she points out that ideology does not function through deception – it is a reality within which we must live and we cannot erase it by mere effort of will. Second, it follows that the cinematic apparatus itself is part and parcel of that reality that we experience ideologically and is thus never neutral. In other words, it is impossible to capture

the so-called 'Truth' of experience. Bearing this in mind, it is therefore jejune to suggest that changing the conditions of production is enough to alter meaning. This concatenation of conditions, for Johnston, demands that new meaning must be made 'within the text of the film' (in Grant 2007: 124) – in other words, within the image itself. Johnston, unlike her contemporary feminist counterparts, argues that it is specifically Hollywood's dependence on stereotypes that renders it especially susceptible or open to subversion. If myth relies upon the use of certain iconographies, it is precisely this taxonomy of images that constitutes its most vulnerable and weak point: to denaturalize the icon, to push it to its limits is to foreground its textuality and, by extension, its place within received cultural discourse. Coppola's films work on us at the level of the image as a cliché; by drawing on a cinematic inheritance that works as a form of cultural and collective shorthand that serves the dominant narrative, she subverts the image by pushing it to its limit.

Coppola's strategy, I maintain, is to heighten and foreground the decorative and so-called 'feminine' aspects of the image in juxtaposition to a mood of crisis, disorientation, melancholy and rupture. The diffuse, light-filled and oneiric qualities of her images are always shot through with a dark and insidious undercurrent. It is within this disjunction between surface and depth, the cliché and its underside, symbol and mood that the feminist politics of Coppola's films emerge. In what follows, then, I argue that Coppola puts the pretty to 'critical, even political use' (Galt 2011: 6). For if, to return to Galt momentarily, 'the pretty is usually rejected as too feminine, too effeminate, and too foreign, it can surely provide aesthetic-political friction for queer or feminist film . . . Might prettiness in cinema be uniquely able to develop a politics that engages gender, sexuality, and geographical alterity at a formal level rather than simply as a problem for representation?' (Galt 2011: 6). Coppola, almost uniquely, takes the decorative surface of the image as a matter of high seriousness by addressing not only the problematics of 'pretty' as it is culturally conceived (even examining Hollywood masculine prototypes), but also as a way to directly reach questions of gendered identity. In reading Coppola, we must attend insistently to both surface and depth in order to garner meaning, for hers are films in which 'mood envelops and transfigures narrative meaning (and) . . . overrides conventional plot' (Sinnerbrink 2012: 161). Indeed, I suggest that mood and form are of far greater consequence in Coppola's work than narrative, for it is through the former that she decentres the latter as a stifling, if not violent, method of control and containment.

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## Notes

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1. See Philip French, 'Marie-Antoinette – Review', *Guardian*, 22 October 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/oct/22/philipfrench>.
2. See Sean O'Hagan, 'Sofia Coppola', *Guardian*, 8 October 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/oct/08/features.review1>.
3. See Anthony Lane, 'Lost in the Revolution', *New Yorker*, 23 October 2006, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/23/lost-in-the-revolution>.
4. See Peter Travers, 'Marie Antoinette', *Rolling Stone*, 20 October 2006, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/marie-antoinette-20061020>.
5. See Peter Bradshaw, 'Somewhere – Review', *Guardian*, 9 December 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/dec/09/somewhere-review>.
6. See Tim Robey, 'Somewhere, Review', *Telegraph*, 9 December 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8192556/Somewhere-review.html>.
7. For an excellent attempt at unpacking the critical language used to describe Coppola's work, see 'The "Problem" of Sofia Coppola', *It Equals*, 8 March 2017, <http://itequals.com/arts/the-problem-of-sofia-coppola>.
8. 'If, in conjunction with the so-called international art cinema of the sixties and seventies, the auteur had been absorbed as a phantom presence within a text, he or she has rematerialized in the eighties and nineties as a commercial performance of the *business of being an auteur*' (Corrigan, quoted in Wright Wexman 2003: 98).
9. For a recent and interesting celebrity study of Coppola in relation to white privilege, see Soraya Roberts, 'The Eternal Becoming of Sofia Coppola', *Hazlitt*, 19 June 2017, <http://hazlitt.net/longreads/eternal-becoming-sofia-coppola>.
10. See, for instance, but one example of a cornucopia of articles that centre on Coppola's guide to upmarket retail: Lynn Hirschberg, 'Sofia Coppola's Paris', *New York Times Magazine*, 24 September 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/24/travel/tmagazine/24coppola.html>.
11. Corinn Columpar coined the term 'auteure' in her article on Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson* (1997). See Columpar 2003.
12. The philosophical framework I employ here has become meaningful to me *because* I have interpreted these thinkers through Coppola's images. It is Coppola who has made me understand and assimilate Luce Irigaray's work on the female body as commodity and object rather than the other way round (*Marie Antoinette*); it is Coppola who, for me, outlined and clarified Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (*The Virgin Suicides*); it is Coppola who made a film that contextualized and took to its logical end Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle (*The Bling Ring*); it is Coppola who made Marc Auge's concept of the nonplace materialize for me (*Somewhere*); and it is Coppola who made me understand both Camus' notion of the absurd and Sartre's existential concept of human consciousness as nothingness (*Lost in Translation*), and that therefore an ethics of being in the world is always contingently founded as one of Beauvoirean ambiguity. That she has done all of this within the context of making a form of feminist cinema – one that privileges and centres the female point of view as both cinematic subject and cinematic viewer – is an achievement that should never be underestimated.
13. 'Feminist auteurship entails the impression of feminist authority, not necessarily that of the auteur herself, on screen. What is at stake here is the film's larger acknowledgment of an informing discourse that is ideological in both form and content. Whether visual, psychoanalytic, aural or

- narrative, this address transcends the personal; both the place and terms of address are derived from an understanding of the film's relevance to women' (Ramanathan 2006: 3-4).
14. See Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in *Sister Outsider* (1984).
  15. As Robert Sinnerbrink argues, mood is a difficult concept to define precisely because of its obviousness, yet it provides the backdrop to our cognitive and affective understanding of a film: 'Mood is one of those elements of cinema whose obviousness, like that of the everyday, is deeply mysterious. It is not simply a subjective experience or a private state of mind; it describes, rather, how a (fictional) world is expressed or disclosed via a shared affective attunement orienting the spectator within that world. Although mood remains a neglected topic in film theory, without it we cannot explain how meaning in film is communicated via style and composition' (2012: 148).
  16. Kaja Silverman astutely notes that 'disavowal also has a crucial part to play within the constitution and maintenance of sexual difference. However, whereas the Freudian account of that psychic mechanism explicitly posits it as a male defense against *female* lack, "Fetishism" implicitly shows it to be a defense against what is in the final analysis a *male* lack. Since woman's anatomical "wound" is the product of an externalizing displacement of masculine insufficiency, which is then biologically naturalized, the castration against which the male subject protects himself through disavowal and fetishism must be primarily his own' (Silverman 1992: 46).