

## **Gender Trouble: Cinema and the Mystery of Adolescent Girlhood**

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The year 2015 saw the release of two fictional films from very different contexts that bore an uncanny resemblance: both centred on an unexplained outbreak of psychogenic illness among groups of teenage girls. *The Fits*, directed by Anna Rose Holmer, is a low-budget American independent film set in a community sports centre in an African-American community in Cincinnati, Ohio. *The Falling*, directed by Carol Morley, is a British drama set in a traditional girls' school in the late 1960s. In both films, groups of girls gradually succumb to a mysterious sickness, in which they have uncontrollable fits and fall unconscious. Both films are loosely based on real events.

These two films might be seen as instances of the familiar 'coming of age' narrative; but both of them are rather more unsettling and disturbing. This is partly because the cause of the sickness remains unexplained. Only girls and younger women are affected; and while there is a sexual element in both cases, and other possible explanations are offered, the mystery is never properly resolved. Albeit in quite contrasting ways, the films represent girlhood as a source of 'gender trouble' – as something troubling, or troublesome, both for girls themselves and for the adults around them.

*The Fits* and *The Falling* have some historical precursors. In addition to these two recent films, in this essay I will be considering three older films that represent adolescent girlhood in similarly troubling and mysterious ways: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (directed by Peter Weir, 1975, Australia); *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994, New Zealand); and *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999, USA). While there are a great many differences between these films in terms of context, style and narrative, it is this common thread of 'gender trouble' that I want to draw out.

### **Adolescence, girlhood and the Gothic**

The notion of 'adolescence' is a relatively modern invention. The term itself originated in the fifteenth century, but its popular use is generally attributed to the work of G. Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association. Hall regarded adolescence as a particularly precarious stage in individual development. It was a period of 'storm and stress', characterised by inter-generational conflicts, mood swings and an enthusiasm for risky behaviour. From this perspective, the discussion of adolescence often leads inexorably to concerns about drugs, delinquency, depression and sexual deviance. Hall's approach is perhaps best termed 'psycho-biological': his symptomatically-titled book *Youth: Its Education, Regimen and Hygiene* (1906) includes extensive proposals for moral and religious

training, incorporating practical advice on gymnastics and muscular development (not to mention quaint discussions of 'sex dangers' and the virtues of cold baths).

Adolescence, then, is popularly seen as a stage in which the process of socialization may fail: there is a risk that the child may not successfully manage the transition to what is imagined to be a stable, mature adulthood. As such, at least in modern Western societies, adolescence is often regarded as a potential threat to the social order. That threat may take many forms, but it is especially inflected by gender. While the risk of adolescent boyhood centres primarily on violence and criminality (as I have discussed in my essay on the 'juvenile delinquent' films), the risk for girls focuses very much on their emergent sexuality. Representations of adolescent girlhood typically emphasise their fragility and vulnerability to sexual exploitation; or alternatively, the risks of an assertive, independent sexuality. These are girls 'at risk', but also girls who represent a risk to others. In this context, the 'protection' of girls, and the regulation of their sexuality, become key imperatives.

Conventional 'coming of age' narratives – both in fiction and in academic research – tend to present adolescence as a transitional stage on the road towards adulthood. It is a state of *becoming*, rather than one of *being*. Adolescent identity is often seen as erratic and shifting, and unclear to young people themselves. Achieving adult identity is a matter of conformity and self-control. In order to become men, boys must learn to curb their violent, anti-social instincts; in order to become women, girls must learn to regulate their own sexuality. 'Girlish' femininity is a symptom of immaturity, a kind of disorder, and it has to be left behind if girls are to make a successful transition to adult womanhood. And yet adolescence remains a liminal (in-between) stage, in which a limited degree of freedom has to be sanctioned, before it can be brought back under control.

However, as Cara Koehler suggests, there is another cultural tradition in which adolescence – and perhaps particularly female adolescence – is represented in a rather different way. This is the 'Gothic' tradition, which has arguably undergone a remarkable resurgence in Anglo-American popular culture over the past few decades. Here, adolescence appears to possess a dangerous and mysterious power. Rather than being contained, in these narratives adolescents subvert and transgress adult authority. Adolescent girls in particular are seen as a kind of inchoate, fearsome threat to masculine control. This image is perhaps most obvious in the case of horror, which has a long tradition of demonic girls, going back to *The Bad Seed*, *Carrie* and *The Exorcist*: notably, it is *Carrie's* first period that precipitates her telekinetic power. Meanwhile, in more recent 'splatter' movies, sexually active girls struggle against the adults who seek to repress and constrain them, and the monstrous forces they seem to have unleashed.

However, this tendency is also evident in a less spectacular and bloody form in more recent independent films, including those I'll be considering here. In these movies, the female adolescent often becomes a kind of conflict zone, a meeting point between sex, illness and death. The problem here is not so much sex itself, but the repression of it: it is repression that induces disease and pollution, and also provokes girls to wreak havoc. In these films, adolescent girlhood is somehow alien and unknowable, even supernatural: it induces feelings of discomfort, dread and dislocation. However, the process of maturation is often seen in negative or

ambivalent ways. Several of the key characters fail to make a successful transition to adulthood: they cannot be assimilated within the family or the wider society, and so they have to die.

This kind of disordered (and disorderly) behaviour is frequently described as 'hysterical'. Indeed, Carol Morley, the director of *The Falling*, willingly accepts the notion of 'mass hysteria' as a description of the kind of behaviour shown in her film. The idea that girls' psychological problems or repressed memories might be manifested in physical symptoms is a staple of Freudian theory, which Freud himself took on from his predecessors Josef Breuer and Jean-Martin Charcot. Hysteria is self-evidently a gendered term: the word derives from the ancient Greek for 'uterus', and the condition is sometimes seen to be caused by a 'wandering womb'. Some critics have condemned the idea as a kind of pseudo-diagnosis, and others have seen it as a manifestation of the misogynistic bias of psychoanalysis: yet the idea of hysteria has also been reclaimed by those who argue that it can be seen as a kind of proto-feminist rebellion against oppressive gender roles.

This representation of dangerous, 'hysterical' adolescent girlhood is a kind of counter-narrative, which stands in striking contrast to that of mainstream teen culture. It's not just that, unlike in most 'teen movies', girls take centre stage here. Rather, as Cara Koehler suggests, these 'sick teens' are also the very opposite of the 'healthy, bouncy teen bodies' that dominate most teen movies; and their film narratives are very much at odds with those of the normative coming-of-age story.

### **Representing the mystery of girlhood**

These characteristics are present in different ways, and to different degrees, across the five films I'll discuss. While male characters do appear in some of them, these are all films that are centrally preoccupied with girlhood. To different degrees, they show intense solidarity among groups of girls, which can extend to physical love; although they also show how girls can be competitive and violent towards each other. In different ways, all of the films are concerned with sexuality and sexual repression, although this is not always explicitly represented. However, conventional heterosexual activity is often shown as somehow deviant or at least unpleasurable. Adults (teachers, parents) typically seek to restrict the freedom of the girl characters; but interestingly, it is the adult *female* characters who are the most disciplinarian, and who are generally represented in the most negative terms. What's particularly striking here is that very few of the girls in these films manage to make a successful transition to adult womanhood: they disappear or die or kill themselves, or they are incarcerated. Even where they appear to be 'cured', the problem is far from resolved.

All these films create a degree of mystery. Several of them are based – in some cases fairly loosely – on real events; and even where they are not, they sometimes claim to be. Strikingly, all but one of the films is set in the past; yet the question of what really happened, or what is really happening, remains a focus of continuing uncertainty and anxiety, not just for the adults but often for the girls themselves. In different ways, all these films blur the line between reality and fantasy. They refuse to provide clear explanations for the characters' behaviour, and even mock those (like psychologists

and teachers) who attempt to do so. Through the use of music, and especially through the careful use of sound effects, they seek to create atmospheres of foreboding, threat and dislocation; and yet several of them also combine dark tragedy and absurd comedy, often to ironic effect. In all these films, adolescent girlhood remains mysterious and troubling in ways that cannot be reduced to any straightforward explanation.

### ***Picnic at Hanging Rock***

‘What we see and what we seem are but a dream – a dream within a dream.’ So begins *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, with this quotation from a poem by Edgar Allan Poe – a quotation that aptly summarises its hypnotic, dream-like atmosphere, and its refusal of rational explanations. Directed in 1975 by Peter Weir, and based on a historical novel by Joan Lindsay, first published in 1967, it is widely regarded as one of the defining films of the state-funded revival of the Australian film industry.

The film begins on Valentine's Day, Saturday February 14<sup>th</sup> 1900. Most of the students and staff of Appleyard College, a private girls' boarding school in Victoria, Australia, go on a day-long picnic to nearby Hanging Rock, a volcanic outcrop near Mount Macedon. They leave behind Mrs. Appleyard, the school's owner and headmistress, and Sara, a student who is being punished. Four of the girls, Miranda, Irma, Marion and Edith, go exploring up the Rock: they mysteriously fall asleep, and, having removed their boots and stockings, three of them eventually disappear, seemingly hypnotised, through a crevasse in the Rock. The fourth (and the misfit of the group), Edith, runs back down in a frightened panic. When the group returns to the school later that evening, it emerges that the maths teacher, Miss McCraw, is also missing. As the police begin questioning, and mount a search for the missing four, it appears that Edith cannot remember anything, beyond seeing Miss McCraw, dressed only in her underwear, climbing up the Rock as she herself was heading down.

Meanwhile, Michael Fitzhubert, a young English aristocrat, along with his somewhat older Australian valet Albert, had seen the four girls climbing up the Rock. Apparently smitten by Miranda, he feels compelled to go off and find them. When he does not return, Albert goes in search of him; and the seemingly dazed Michael gives him a small scrap of one of the girls' lace dresses. Albert eventually locates Irma, but she too remembers nothing – like Edith, she has unexplained injuries, and it emerges that her corset is missing. Meanwhile, Sara and the French teacher, Mademoiselle de Portiers, who had both idolized Miranda, are also affected. Miss Appleyard becomes alarmed by the number of parents who are withdrawing their girls from the school, and the effect of these events on its reputation and financial viability. Having taken to drink, she again punishes Sara, an orphan whose fees have not been paid, and Sara apparently commits suicide. The mystery of what happened on the Rock is never resolved; and we are told in a final voice-over that Mrs. Appleyard's body was found at the base of the Rock some days after Sara's death.

Apparently, the final chapter of Joan Lindsay's novel originally featured a bizarre explanation of the events, in which the girls disappear into a kind of 'worm hole' in space and time. Passing into a parallel dimension, they are greeted by a lizard-man,

and are then transformed into various kinds of animals. This ending was wisely removed by Lindsay's editor, although it was separately published in 1987 as *The Secret of Hanging Rock*. Some have argued that this ending is in line with some of the Aboriginal legends and beliefs that have grown up around the Rock: Lindsay later professed to be a 'mystic', and claimed that she herself had had a 'time slippage' experience while visiting the Rock at the age of four.

On one level, the film itself resolutely refuses any explanation. The survivors, Edith and Irma, do not seem to remember anything. Extensive search parties, using a range of then-current technologies, fail to locate the missing girls; and there are several unexplained details – why had Miss McCraw apparently removed her dress, why was Irma's corset missing, how did Michael find the scrap of dress, and so on. There are some inconsistencies in Michael's testimony to the police, and he initially fails to admit that he tried to follow the girls – suggesting that he may at least know more than he is letting on. Several additional mysteries are thrown up by the ending: it isn't clear whether Sara jumped to her death or was pushed by Mrs. Appleyard, or whether Mrs. Appleyard herself committed suicide at the Rock, or merely fell. This aura of mystery is reinforced by the girls' occasionally portentous statements – they seem to have a premonition of what is going to happen – and by the way these recur in later sequences. It is also accentuated by the use of other-worldly music (particularly Gheorghe Zanfir's pan pipe and organ themes) and electronic sound effects, and by the hazy photography. In the very final shot, we see a reprise of an image of Miranda's head, turning away from the camera as she starts to climb the Rock, as if refusing explanation.

On the other hand, the captions right at the start of the film, and the official-sounding voice-over at the end, convey the impression that it is based on real events – not least by providing precise dates and locations. In informing us in the opening caption that 'several members of the party disappeared without trace', the film deliberately removes a good deal of potential for suspense. The foreword to the novel maintains that the characters are now 'long since dead', and includes a fabricated news story from the time. The original foreword apparently contained a couple of sentences claiming that the story was 'entirely true' - although these too were deleted by the editor before publication. Lindsay herself remained evasive on the issue, suggesting that it was up to the reader to decide. There is still a considerable amount of speculation online about whether the events in the film really took place, even though they clearly did not – and this reflects the ways in which the film plays upon the distinctions between truth and illusion.

Most critical analyses of the film have tended to see it in terms of overlapping sets of binary oppositions. At the very start of the film, there are contrasting shots of two monolithic structures – Appleyard College, an imposing block of a building, and the Rock itself. The College is a highly disciplined, orderly environment, while the Rock is set in an untamed, natural wilderness. In the College, clocks are regularly heard ticking; but once they are on the Rock, the staff and students find that their watches have strangely stopped at twelve o'clock. As in other Peter Weir films, nature is represented as strange and potentially dangerous: there are references to snakes and shots of lizards; and once the girls have eaten their picnic, there is a shot of the Valentine's cake crawling with ants. It's not hard to detect a basic structural

opposition here between nature and culture: civilization and rationality on the one hand, mystery and a kind of *primaeval* chaos on the other.

Sexuality is key to this, and it is predictably signified in the use of costume. The College is a world in which sexuality and the body are firmly repressed – as represented in the corsets that the girls are seen tightening in one of the opening shots. Once they start to approach the Rock, they are allowed to take off their white gloves; and as they climb, they remove their tight black boots and stockings, and their white dresses become soiled. The police fear that the girls may have been ‘molested’, although the doctors who examine the survivors assure them that they remain ‘intact’. Nevertheless, it is not clear why Irma’s corset is missing (or indeed why this fact is covered up from the police), or why Miss McCraw had apparently removed her dress. Towards the end of the film, Irma re-appears wearing a red dress and looking noticeably older: the other girls initially refuse to speak to her, but then turn on her and physically attack her, demanding explanations.

These sets of oppositions can be aligned with others, which invite a more political interpretation. The College is essentially a British, colonial institution (union jacks and images of Queen Victoria are prominently displayed): only the ‘below-stairs’ or junior staff are Australian. Michael Fitzhubert is also British and upper-class, and is set against his Australian valet, Albert; although the two eventually form a team. Sara, the student who is punished by Mrs. Appleyard, is Australian: it emerges that she is an orphan, and that Albert is her long-lost brother. In these and other respects, the film can be aligned with other colonial narratives, in which upper-class British settlers are shown attempting to impose order and control over an ancient, inchoate landscape, and over the ‘natives’ (albeit in this case, the white descendants of original migrants). Mrs. Appleyard’s decline into alcoholism, her neurotic punishment of Sara, and the bedraggling of her tightly-wound coiffure, seem to represent the ultimate collapse of this version of British civilization. At the end, she is left drunkenly recalling her ‘dependable’ holidays in Bournemouth – ‘nothing changed, ever’. (Setting the events in 1900, in the last year of Queen Victoria’s reign, would seem to reinforce this sense of the exhaustion of an old era.)

Meanwhile, the film has also been read in psychoanalytic terms. Critics routinely refer to the ‘phallic’ nature of the Rock, although one might just as well interpret its caves and crevasses in other ways. Even so, it is not hard to generate a basic Freudian interpretation of the narrative, as a struggle between Id and Superego: civilization is seen to be threatened (and ultimately vanquished) by the forces of darkness and the ‘uncanny’, by a fear of the native Other and of repressed desire. As the party approaches the Rock, Miss McCraw talks in foreboding ways about its volcanic formation – ‘viscous lava’ was forced up from ‘deep down below’ – and this rumbling of the unconscious is rather literally rendered in the electronic sounds that are associated with the Rock throughout.

In terms of the oppositions I have outlined, girlhood is aligned with culture: it is seen as a period of fragile beauty that has to be carefully cultivated. In the opening sequences, the camera lingers over the paraphernalia of femininity (which, as we’ll see, is also a notable characteristic of *The Virgin Suicides*): this is a claustrophobic world of flowers, ribbons, frilly clothing, and ornate knick-knacks. The girls brush their hair, beautify themselves and strap each other into corsets. They giggle over

whispered secrets as they examine their Valentine's cards (presumably from each other), but this is a chaste and idealized version of love. Images of the girls are frequently framed by mirrors and picture frames, presenting them as objects for contemplation. On their picnic, the girls dress in white lace; and as they travel on their carriage through the dusty local town, there is an evident contrast between them and the dirt of the Australian bush. Mademoiselle de Portiers compares Miranda, the idealized love object, to a 'Botticelli angel'; and in Michael's love-lorn reveries, she is frequently equated with shots of swans. As in several of the other films I'm considering, adolescent femininity is contrasted with adult womanhood: Mrs. Appleyard praises the maths teacher Miss McCraw for her 'masculine intelligence', and both are strict disciplinarians.

In a withering critique, Bruno Starrs argues that the film's superficial 'artistic' gloss is merely a disguise for misogyny. He claims that the film objectifies the girls' bodies, allowing a kind of voyeuristic male fantasy that is no better than that of popular Australian 'sex romps' of the same period. As I've implied, the film might be accused of fetishising a particular version of adolescent girlhood. Weir was apparently keen to achieve a pre-Raphaelite visual style – and as with those artists, his images of girls display a rather queasy, dream-like combination of spirituality and sexuality. Meanwhile, there are also similarities between the gauzy, soft-focus photography (especially in the slow-motion images of Miranda) and the soft porn of the photographer David Hamilton, whom Weir has also mentioned as an influence – although Weir's film is significantly more unsettling, hinting at unpleasant realities below the dreamy pastel surface.

Male desire is certainly a central theme: the three girls disappear well before the half-way point, and much of the second half of the film focuses on Michael's search for them. However, Michael's love for Miranda is provoked by catching a brief glimpse of her crossing a stream as she starts to climb the Rock: the apparent purity of his desire (and his British restraint) is contrasted with Albert's much more lustful (Australian) response. Although he initiates the search, Michael spends much of the intervening time mooning about and gazing at swans: he is oddly languid and passive, and there doesn't appear to be a great deal of viscous lava bubbling underneath.

However, the film is also about *female* desire, on the part of Mademoiselle de Portiers and especially of Sara. Sara's love for Miranda is clear from the outset – and Miranda, with some foreboding, even advises her that she will need to find another love when she is gone. Sara is forbidden to accompany the others, and when Miranda does not return, she lies in bed surrounded by mementoes of Miranda, and even rummages through her clothes. Sara resists Mrs. Appleyard's authority, refusing to learn a (notably English) poem she requires, and tries instead to read her own ode to St. Valentine. Mrs. Appleyard continues to single her out for punishment, almost as a vindictive expression of her own repressed and frustrated desires; Sara refuses to meet her gaze, and goes on to refuse food. In addition to being Australian and working-class (she has been abandoned by her mother and left in an orphanage, where she is abused), Sara is notably darker-haired than many of the other girls. In the scene in which Irma is attacked by the others, we discover that Sara has been literally strapped up by her teacher, apparently in an attempt to cure her of her 'terrible stooping'; although the image of her strapped to the wall with leather belts would not be entirely out of place in the Marquis de Sade. In all these respects, Sara

is a significant cause of 'gender trouble', of a kind that recurs in several of the other films I'll be discussing.

### ***Heavenly Creatures***

*Heavenly Creatures*, directed by Peter Jackson and scripted with his partner Frances Walsh, is based on the real events leading up to a murder that occurred in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1954. The film follows the developing relationship between the killers, who are two teenage girls, Pauline Rieper and Juliet Hulme. Pauline comes from a respectable but dull lower-middle-class family; Juliet is the cultured British-born daughter of the new rector of the university. The girls meet at Christchurch Girls High School when Juliet joins Pauline's class, and quickly discover they have many interests in common. Both have experienced a long period of childhood illness, and both share a passion for imaginative stories. The girls form a self-contained couple, as they gush over favourite movie stars and swoon to the songs of Mario Lanza. They create a fictional paradise called the Fourth World, which their imaginations allow them (and only a few other people) to enter; and through writing and model-making, they compose an elaborate saga about a fictional kingdom called Borovnia, in which they act out the relationships between a cast of aristocratic characters. The girls become convinced of their superiority to others: 'how sad it is for other people,' Pauline says, 'that they cannot appreciate our genius'.

However, things take a turn for the worse when Juliet is confined to hospital with tuberculosis. The girls write to each other in the guise of the royal couple of Borovnia; and when Juliet is released, their attachment grows even more intense, causing their parents to worry that things are becoming 'unhealthy', and to send them to a psychiatrist. Meanwhile, Juliet's father loses his job, and subsequently discovers that his wife is having an affair. The parents agree to separate and plan to leave New Zealand, depositing Juliet with an aunt in South Africa. The girls are distraught, and fantasize about running away to Hollywood; but when Pauline's mother refuses to allow her to accompany Juliet, they hatch a plan to kill her. They are allowed a few last weeks together, during which they have intense nights of sexual passion. The girls eventually take Pauline's mother on a walk in a local park, and beat her to death with a brick wrapped inside a stocking. The closing titles describe how the girls are quickly arrested, and then tried and convicted of murder. After a period of imprisonment, they are released but forbidden ever to meet again.

Unlike *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Heavenly Creatures* is based on a real-life case – one that would be very well known at least to viewers in New Zealand. (The case is generally known as the Parker-Hulme case, on the grounds that Pauline was prosecuted under her mother's maiden name of Parker.) Some aspects of the story remain disputed: Juliet Hulme (now living in Scotland as a successful crime writer, under the name of Anne Perry) has denied that there was ever a sexual relationship between the girls; and others have suggested the girls were not in fact forbidden from ever meeting again. However, the bare facts of the case are well established, and a caption early in the film (after the opening sequences, but before the credits) insists on its authenticity: the film is based on Pauline's diaries, and 'all diary entries are in Pauline's own words'. Even for viewers whose knowledge is confined to the



pre-publicity, there is little doubt as to *what* is going to happen, and hence relatively little suspense: the central questions (as with *Picnic at Hanging Rock*) are to do with *how* and *why* it happens.

On one level, there is actually no great mystery here either. Pauline is shown to be embarrassed and resentful of aspects of her family background (her mother runs a boarding house, while her father is a fishmonger), and this is accentuated by the contrast with the much more affluent and glamorous world of Juliet's family. When her mother opposes her plan to escape with Juliet – and when Pauline discovers that she will need her parents' consent if she wants to obtain a passport – the motivation for the murder becomes clear. Nevertheless, the enigma is to do with how the girls' mental state, and the relationship between them, is to be explained.

Unlike most of the other films I'm discussing, *Heavenly Creatures* claims to offer us direct access to the girls' inner mental states. Crucially, it does this not just through the voice-over taken from Pauline's diaries, but also by allowing us to see and enter into the illusion of the girls' 'Fourth World' and the fictional medieval kingdom of Borovnia. The film takes us inside the girls' subjective experiences and fantasies – or, as Brian McDonnell argues, it 'recruits their imaginations' – in order that they can appear to tell their own story. It does so largely without condescending or apologizing, and indeed without judging; and it is striking how it manages to do this, while still sustaining a degree of sympathy for their victim, who is by no means seen to be deserving of her fate. Pauline's mother becomes much more punitive when she discovers that her daughter has been having sex with one of the lodgers – an experience that, it must be said, Pauline does not enjoy, and from which she escapes into another Borovnian fantasy. Yet even just before she is finally beaten to a pulp, the mother is far from an unsympathetic figure.

In terms of this emphasis on fantasy, the film can be seen as an important transitional work in Peter Jackson's career. There are elements of the horrific 'splatter movies' he made before this film – works such as *Bad Taste* (1987) and *Braindead* (1992). For instance, we see the girls' violent fantasies, when they imagine that their Borovnian child, Prince Diello, dispatches an intrusive priest who comes to bother Juliet in the hospital, and impales the psychologist who suspects Pauline of 'homosexuality'. However, there are also elements of the elaborate and fantastical special effects of his later films, most obviously the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* trilogies (2001-3 and 2012-14). The girls' imaginative worlds are clearly marked as fictional – the Borovnians are human-sized versions of the grey plasticene models the girls are seen busily moulding – and yet, as they enter these worlds, the girls themselves remain three-dimensional and 'real'.

The enigma, then, is what motivates the girls to cross this boundary into fantasy. The initiative here appears to be Juliet's. In the early stages of their relationship, they share passionate enthusiasms for Mario Lanza, and for a selection of male Hollywood stars whom they name 'the Saints', as well as for the masculine world of *Biggles* stories. Despite her apparent confidence, Juliet appears to have been scarred by her parents' abandonment of her during her childhood illness; and it is her evident distress when they announce their intention to leave her for several weeks so they can make a trip to England that leads her to reveal a vision of the Fourth World, which she invites Pauline to share. For Pauline herself, the fantasy world is also figured as an escape, albeit perhaps more from her mundane family life, and from her

position as somewhat of a misfit in school. The fantasy provides them with an escape, but also a sense of power and superiority to others.

While the film maintains a clear distinction between reality and fantasy, there is one critical detail that appears to cross it: in one of their visits to Borovnia, the girls pick up a gemstone that has come detached from a ring; and it is this gemstone, dropped on the ground in the park, that they use to distract Pauline's mother's attention before they kill her. In the final few minutes, as the girls run screaming up the hill in the aftermath of the murder, we also see a black-and-white sequence (glimpsed right at the start of the film) in which Pauline and Juliet are shown leaving on a ship, together with Juliet's parents. However, this sequence merges into another one, in which Pauline is tearfully watching Juliet depart without her. At this point, it is as if the girls have lost control of the outcome of their fantasy: murder is the only way in which they can reclaim their sense of agency.

This issue of *explanation* has been key to the critical debate around the film. Alison Laurie has written a great deal about the real Parker-Hulme case, including a book published before the release of Jackson's film. She argues that *Heavenly Creatures* perpetuates a view, advanced by the defence lawyers at the trial, of the murder as a '*folie a deux*' – in other words, as a manifestation of insanity. Laurie argues that the film sensationalises the girls, showing them as hysterical and mad, and also that it objectifies them from an implicitly 'heterosexist' perspective – and in this respect, she suggests, it stands in a long cinematic tradition of 'lethal lesbians'. On the basis of her historical analysis of the case, she argues that the girls were much more introverted, and much less wild or frenzied, than the film depicts them to be, and she disputes the idea that they were involved in extensive fantasies or delusions.

Contrary to Laurie's argument, I would argue that Jackson almost parodies the idea that the girls were insane. In one scene shortly after the girls have made love, Pauline's voice-over announces almost gleefully that she has decided that they are 'raving mad'. This is accompanied by a fantasy scene set in Borovnia, where the word 'MAD' is lowered on a large banner from a castle tower (this is subsequently repeated with another banner reading 'SIN').

However, Laurie's argument is not just about historical accuracy, or about any diagnosis of mental illness, but also about the film's sexual politics. Again, there are alternative views of this. Unlike Laurie, James Bennett accepts that the film has to be an entertainment rather than a wholly correct factual account. Yet he also argues that it questions dominant representations of the 1950s as a period of social stability, and that it challenges the role of psychiatry and medicine as tools to deal with youthful 'deviance'. This sense of the wider historical context is apparent from the very opening of the film, which presents a fabricated 1950s 'Look At Life'-style documentary about the placid and orderly city of Christchurch, before cutting to shots of the two blood-spattered girls screaming as they run through the park undergrowth to report the murder. The key scenes in Bennett's account are those in which Pauline is interviewed by a child psychiatrist – and he relates these scenes to a wider moral panic about juvenile delinquency, which seems to have spread from the United States to New Zealand at the time. A government report, published in 1954, reflected a wider anxiety about female sexuality, and especially about 'teenage licentiousness'. This climate is clearly reflected in the grotesque portrayal of the psychiatrist, not least in a large close up of his mouth (with chipped teeth) slowly

intoning the dread word 'homosexuality'. He reassures the parents that, while this is a 'mental disorder' that can 'strike at any time', it is likely that 'medical science' will soon be able to solve the problem.

Equally, it's debatable whether the label 'homosexual' (or 'lesbian') fully explains what is happening in the girls' relationship. As I've noted, Anne Perry (a.k.a. Juliet Hulme) has disputed the fact that the girls had a sexual relationship; and it seems that there is little direct evidence of this. However, critics such as Andrew Scahill have presented a 'queer' reading of the film, in which the girls' desires are seen to challenge and disrupt official discourses, not only of sexuality and girlhood, but also of family, authority and criminality. While it could be argued that Juliet leads their entry into the fantasy world, it is Pauline who appears more subversive (and of course, largely instigates the murder): it is she, I would argue, who represents the major source of 'gender trouble' here. Rather like Sara in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Pauline has dark hair, and is often shown scowling and pouting: she is presented as working-class, or lower-middle-class. Like Sara, she directly resists the authority of her parents and teachers (although she idolizes Juliet's father), while Juliet appears merely to rise above it, with a kind of upper-class, airy English superiority. The girls' relationship is thus not only about desire, but also about identification – or at least Pauline's identification with Juliet, which takes her beyond the apparent limitations of her class background (although this is not to suggest that the film necessarily celebrates this crossing of class boundaries, since Juliet's family is clearly even more dysfunctional).

There is a gradual progression in the narrative in this respect; and at each stage along the way, the boundary between fantasy and reality becomes steadily more blurred. The girls' desires are initially expressed through a shared fandom, led by Juliet – although it should be noted that this is entirely directed at male stars. They are carried over into the slightly more fluid world of their Borovnian fantasy – although here too, male and female roles remain fairly clearly demarcated, and it is the 'super-male' character of Diello who mainly enacts the girls' violent resistance to authority. However, in the final stage, it would seem that identification becomes fused with mutual desire; and notably, it is then that the girls ritually burn their Mario Lanza records.

At this point, they do indeed appear to have sex, although the boundary between fantasy and reality in these scenes is quite unclear. After watching *The Third Man* in the cinema, the girls are 'pursued' by a demonic black-and-white image of Orson Welles – an actor whom Pauline describes as 'hideous', yet also clearly finds fascinating. In the voice-over, Pauline describes how the girls went on to play out the various ways in which their favoured male 'Saints' would make love. Pauline mutates into Welles as she lies on top of Juliet, while both girls also mutate both into Borovnian plasticene figures and other black-and-white male film stars. This is by no means a matter of the girls coming to recognize who (or what) they 'really are': on the contrary, it is a sequence in which the boundaries between male and female, lesbian and heterosexual, intimate friendship and sex, and reality and fantasy, all become extremely fluid.

As Corinn Columpar suggests, this is rather more than a narrative of 'coming out' as lesbian. In some respects, placing this label on the girls' relationship somehow reduces it to a matter of physical desire. In their fantasies, both girls appear to play

both male and female roles: Pauline is more consistently marked as male, and Juliet as female (not least in the scene where she 'gives birth' to their imaginary son Diello), but the names they give themselves are inconsistently gendered. Pauline, for example, is 'Yvonne' to her parents, 'Paul' or 'Charles' to Juliet, while for much of the latter part of the film, she is referred to as 'Gina'. As this implies, the girls shift between multiple identities, and between identification and desire, in ways that would seem to move beyond fixed sexual identities; and here again, it seems that the film positively refuses any straightforward attempt at explanation.

### ***The Virgin Suicides***

*The Virgin Suicides* was Sofia Coppola's debut feature film. Based on a critically acclaimed novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, it tells the story of five teenage sisters living in a middle-class suburb outside Detroit in the late 1970s. Like the novel, the film is narrated retrospectively by a group of adolescent boys in the neighbourhood, who are now grown up but have remained fascinated by the girls.

The sisters live with their highly protective Catholic parents: their father is a maths teacher at their high school, while their mother is very much the authority figure at home. The film begins with the attempted suicide of the youngest girl, Cecilia. She survives, and a psychologist advises her parents to allow her to meet boys her own age. They hold a chaperoned party with the local boys, and the girls cover up Cecilia's scars with bracelets; but Cecilia excuses herself and proceeds to jump out of her bedroom window, impaling herself on iron railings in the garden below. In the wake of this, the parents become even more protective of their four remaining daughters.

However, the second youngest sister, Lux, begins a romance with the school heart-throb, Trip Fontaine; and Trip persuades her father to allow him to take Lux to the upcoming Homecoming Dance, as well as providing dates for the other sisters. After leaving the dance, Trip and Lux have sex on the football field, although Trip subsequently abandons her, and she does not return home until the following morning. In response to Lux's breaking of the curfew, the girls are taken out of school and confined to the house. However, they manage to contact the boys across the street by using light signals and sharing songs over the phone. Lux starts to have anonymous sexual encounters on the roof of the house late at night, while the boys spy on her. The girls begin to leave messages for the boys, and they hatch a plan to escape one night. However, when they arrive to take them away, the boys discover that the girls have all killed themselves in an apparent suicide pact. The parents leave the area, and the community gradually returns to normal.

Like all the films I'm discussing, *The Virgin Suicides* centres on an unexplained mystery. Once again, there is no real doubt about *what* is going to happen – this much is clear from the title, and from the retrospective narration, which refers at an early stage to the girls' 'short lives'. Rather, the mystery is to do with *how* and particularly *why* they kill themselves. Right at the start of the film, Cecilia is shown recovering in hospital after her suicide attempt. The doctor asks: 'what are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets.' Cecilia replies: 'obviously, doctor, you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl.' Her suicide is 'explained' as being

something to do with the state of being a teenage girl; but on the face of it, it's hard to see what is quite so bad about her life.

To be sure, the girls' freedom is tightly restricted, but suicide would seem to be a very extreme way of escape. The parents crack down on Lux's romance with Trip Fontaine; but Lux herself is initially fairly dismissive of him, and after they have sex, he inexplicably abandons her and the two do not meet again. There's little sense that her suicide is a reaction to a broken heart; and even if it is, it's not clear why it would extend to the other sisters. Other explanations abound. After Cecilia's suicide attempt, Danny de Vito is brought in to play a cameo role as a ludicrous child psychologist; and when she eventually succeeds, there is a flurry of misguided commentary on the part of neighbours and media commentators, and among the boys themselves, as well as a ham-fisted intervention by the school, with booklets listing 'tell-tale signs'. Explanations to do with bad parenting, or the pressures on youth people in general, are offered, but little credibility is attached to any of them.

Another possible explanation – if it can be called that – is to do with the wider social and environmental context. The opening voice-over paints a picture of the suburb on the brink of decline, with the impending collapse of the local auto industry. The familiar suburban idyll is already troubled by the distant wail of an ambulance siren. In an early scene, a sign is fixed to the tree outside the girls' house, indicating that it is scheduled for removal; and the outbreak (presumably of Dutch elm disease) gradually spreads down the street. Cecilia in particular is identified with the tree (she plants her hand print in the cement where a branch has been removed); and in a later scene, the remaining four surround it in an effort to prevent it being cut down. In the closing sequences, life in the suburb is returning to normal, although a plague of algae following a chemical spillage is spreading noxious fumes throughout the neighbourhood. In its dystopian image of American suburbia, the film has much in common with other contemporaneous films such as *The Ice Storm* (1997) and *American Beauty* (1999); and the girls' suicide might be read as a symbolic manifestation of a kind of underlying sickness, or of creeping environmental degradation. Nevertheless, within the terms of the narrative, this hardly functions as an explanation either.

Meanwhile, as they themselves acknowledge, the boys struggle to understand what is happening, and ultimately fail. They collect and pore over the discarded paraphernalia of the girls' lives; they observe them through telescopes and binoculars; they read through their diaries, which they have rescued from the trash. The direct communication between the girls and the boys is limited and awkward; and in the final act of the film, it is largely mediated through brief notes, religious mementoes, and the playing of bland pop hits over the telephone. During their confinement to the house, the girls order high-end fashion catalogues and travel brochures; and the boys go on to fantasise about enjoying holidays with them (including a now-resuscitated Cecilia) in exotic lands, captured in a montage of imaginary holiday snaps. Yet as the boys read the girls' diaries, the depth of their incomprehension becomes clear:

*... we started to learn about their lives, coming to hold collective memories of times we hadn't experienced. We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing what colours went*

*together. We knew that the girls were really women in disguise, that they understood love and even death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them. We knew that they knew everything about us, and that we couldn't fathom them at all.*

As this implies, the mystery is essentially to do with girlhood itself. And despite the boys' occasionally disparaging remarks, this isn't just a matter of 'knowing what colours went together' – indeed, it's notable that this voice-over is accompanied by a montage of soft-focus images which seem to parody conventional femininity.

Like the novel, the film is narrated from a male point of view; and it could be argued that it plays out a rather familiar tale of mysterious femininity – a version of Freud's question 'what does a woman want?', perhaps. However, the boys are unreliable narrators, or at least uncomprehending ones. In fact, the male perspective in the film is by no means exclusive: we are shown and told many things about the girls that the boys could not possibly have known. Furthermore, the girls are always several steps ahead of them. When they meet face-to-face to go to the Homecoming Dance, the girls are much less self-conscious, and they seem to know more about the corrupt and hypocritical goings-on in the neighbourhood, despite the restrictions that are placed upon their lives. At the end, the girls effectively sucker the boys into discovering their suicides. With the exception of Trip Fontaine, the boys are all shown as immature and awkward, much less confident than the men they imagine themselves to be. Even Trip's cocksure, cool demeanour – his rolling strut, and the red velvet suit he wears to the Dance – is somewhat parodied; and he appears being interviewed several years afterwards, as a much less attractive adult in what turns out to be a mental hospital. Despite their voyeuristic obsession, the boys seem much more frightened of the girls, especially of the sexually assertive Lux, than vice-versa.

Ultimately, this 'girl question' remains deliberately unanswered. Unlike *Heavenly Creatures*, the film gives us relatively little insight into the girls' inner mental states. Indeed, its representation of girlhood could be described as disturbingly superficial: it hints at what might be going on beneath the surface, but it consistently denies us access to it. This is not intended as a criticism, although Coppola's work has frequently been dismissed in these terms. Not least because of her family background, and her other work in fashion photography, she is often regarded as a privileged 'daddy's girl': critics have condemned her films as lightweight, pretty and trivial, the work of a mere fashionista or a 'Hollywood princess'.

Here, and in her subsequent films, Coppola does undeniably embrace the ephemera of girlhood: the camera takes us inside the girls' bedrooms, lingering over their clothing, jewellery and cosmetics. The cinematography seems to emphasise the girls' blonde-haired, pale-skinned luminosity: this is a world of pink and white, of glitter and sparkle, of gauzy soft-focus and slow-motion. As critics have noted, there are several similarities here, both with painting (once again, especially the work of the pre-Raphaelites) and with advertising imagery – yet here these images seem curiously false and hollow, even inscrutable, and there is a continuing sense of unease about what might be hidden underneath. For example, after Cecilia's suicide attempt, the parents invite a local boy round for dinner. When he goes to the bathroom, he explores the cupboards, finding not just cosmetics but a large quantity of tampon boxes: humiliated by Lux, he promptly runs from the house.

Nevertheless, this domestic, feminine world is also presented as a gilded cage, a kind of prison. Cecilia dies by throwing herself onto spiked railings, an obvious symbol of the girls' confinement. The girls are eventually detained in the house in a state of 'maximum security isolation', although others attempt to invade it, or intrude upon it: TV reporters turn up on their doorstep, neighbours look in from across the street, and the boys observe them with telescopes and binoculars. But the house too remains blank: in one sequence, it is filmed using time-lapse photography, unchanging as the leaves fall and the seasons pass. Underneath or behind the façade lies something ominous, even deathly.

As this implies, girlhood is not simply equated with innocence, or indeed with incompetence (as is largely the case with the boys). The girls are not especially fragile or vulnerable, and they have a shared solidarity that is evident, for example, when they return to school after Cecilia's death. Lux in particular is represented as self-assured, and in some respects dangerously sexual: she is the primary source of 'gender trouble' here. The first shots of her include a direct echo of Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*, and she also makes a knowing wink to the camera. While Lux initially dismisses Trip's clumsy advances, she goes on to take the initiative, secretly coming out of the house to kiss him while he sits in the car outside. Strikingly, as in several of the other films I'm discussing here, this active girlhood sexuality is constrained and punished, not so much by men but by adult women. The girls' father is well-meaning but largely ineffectual, even if he does manage to persuade his wife to allow the girls to attend the Homecoming Dance. It is the mother, with her grim expression and the cross hanging round her neck, who places restrictions on the girls' freedom. When they go the Dance, she dresses them in ill-fitting 'sacks'; she forces Lux to burn her collection of rock records; and it is she whom the girls accuse of 'suffocating' them. In some ways, the girls' suicide might be seen as a final, desperate assertion of their autonomy.

Like the other films I'm considering, *The Virgin Suicides* is a variant on the familiar adolescent 'rite of passage' film – but one in which the passage is blocked and impassable. There are elements of parody here that also seem to undermine this. For example, ideas about teen sexuality are indirectly ridiculed: when Trip and Lux sit together watching a film at school, the topic is about hurricanes; and when Trip comes to visit with her parents in attendance, they watch a TV documentary about wild animals. Likewise, the montage of TV clips that follows Cecilia's suicide includes a range of trite observations about contemporary teenagers ('adolescence today is much more fraught by pressures and complexities than in years passed...'); the montage sequence that accompanies the boys' commentary on their own lack of comprehension (quoted above) echoes the style of 1970s shampoo advertising, as well as nostalgic home movies; and there is an ironic contrast between the cheesy records the teenagers play over the phone (Gilbert O'Sullivan, Todd Rundgren) and the misery of the girls' confinement. These and several other scenes draw attention to the superficial ways in which adolescent girlhood is typically represented; but by default, they also point to the much more complex and difficult reality that lies beneath.

## **The Falling**

Released in 2015, Carol Morley's film *The Falling* is set in England in the late 1960s. The action takes place in and around a private girls' school; its imposing neo-Gothic buildings are set in leafy grounds around a large lake. Sixteen-year-olds Lydia and Abbie are intense best friends. Abbie has begun experimenting with sex, and their friendship seems to be threatened when she discovers she is pregnant. The girls discuss abortion, and Abbie then has sex with Lydia's older brother Kenneth, possibly in the hope of getting rid of the baby. She then begins to suffer from fainting spells. After both girls are kept behind in detention one day, Abbie passes out; we later learn that she has died. Lydia begins suffering from similar fainting spells, and it soon becomes an epidemic, with numerous girls and a young art teacher in the school passing out, apparently spontaneously. The headteacher and deputy head (Miss Alvaro and Miss Mantel) attempt to ignore what is happening. However, more and more girls start having fits, involving fainting spells, twitches and winks, symptoms much like those exhibited by Abbie before she died. The chaos reaches a climax during a school assembly. Numerous girls are carried away to hospital, fainting and hyperventilating. The school is shut down, and the girls are quizzed by a psychiatrist.

After some time, the symptoms slowly fade away, although a hardcore group, led by Lydia, is the last to return to school. Lydia becomes more and more resistant towards the teachers, and is eventually expelled; and she is also increasingly consumed with anger towards her mother Eileen, who is agoraphobic. Still seemingly haunted by thoughts of Abbie, Lydia starts to have sex with her brother; when her mother discovers them, she runs Kenneth out of the house. Eileen goes on to reveal that Lydia and Kenneth are half-siblings, and it is implied that Lydia is the result of rape. Lydia rushes out of the house, pursued by Eileen. She jumps or falls from a large tree into the lake outside the school, but her mother appears to save her from drowning.

*The Falling* is loosely based on real events. Morley has described in several interviews and newspaper articles how she became interested in 'mass hysteria' (or 'mass psychogenic illness'). This became the topic of her short film *The Madness of the Dance* (2006) – a rather strange musical treatment of the topic, in which a 'professor' narrates a history of such phenomena, and specific cases are acted out, culminating in a bizarre song-and-dance finale. As the film explains, most reported cases involve females; most appear to be triggered by some kind of stress response; although sometimes there are also questions about environmental contamination.

In the course of her research, Morley apparently visited Professor Simon Wessely of the Royal Bethlem and Maudsley Hospitals in London; and the plot of *The Falling* has several parallels with a real-life case reported in one of the articles he showed her. 'Hysterical epidemic in a classroom', published in *Psychological Medicine* in 1973, describes a case in which an outbreak of fainting attacks followed the pregnancy and death of a girl at a school in South London. The article suggests that a strong sexual dimension was in play here; and that the girls had been engaging in 'a great deal of talk of sex, free love, philosophy, and death'. As in *The Falling*, ethnic minority girls appeared to be exempt from the illness; and the 'leader' of the group played a crucial role. Interestingly, the girl who died in this case is named Anne, and the 'leader' is



called Louise (as compared with Abbie and Lydia); and Louise also apparently had a difficult relationship with her single mother.

Like the other films I'm discussing, *The Falling* is preoccupied with the relationship between reality and fiction (or fantasy). It's never entirely clear whether the girls are pretending, or somehow inducing the fainting spells, or just fainting uncontrollably. There may be a kind of 'empathic contagion' here. Lydia is to some extent copying Abbie's behaviour; and the other girls appear to emulate Lydia. Miss Alvaro clearly believes that Lydia is faking: at one point, when she passes out in her office, Miss Alvaro pricks her with a pin to wake her up. The fainting fits also seem to represent a kind of challenge to adult authority: they occur at several points (both in school and in Lydia's case, at home) where the girls' credibility is questioned by adults. After large numbers of girls are taken to hospital, several recover fairly quickly; but the others begin to compete with each other as to whether they are in the more or less 'advanced stages' of the condition, and they later accuse each other of being 'fake'.

Like the other films, *The Falling* also sets up a search for an explanation that it ultimately refuses to provide. Several red herrings are introduced, perhaps with a touch of irony. Lydia's brother Kenneth, for example, talks about ley lines and other occult possibilities, as well as referring to Jung; the girls frequently retreat to the school bathrooms, where they pick away at (and eventually tear apart) a wall panel that seems to be made of toxic asbestos; and there is even a mention of radioactivity in a report on Eileen's TV. Especially at the moments where the girls are about to faint, the film includes extremely rapid montages, combining images of past and present, flashing between the natural surroundings and images of sex and violence that are too rapid to process or interpret.

As in *Heavenly Creatures*, the girls speculate about whether they are simply 'mad'; but the attempts of adult experts to explain events are ridiculed and resisted. The climactic outbreak of fainting takes place in a school assembly where a guest from the Women's Circle has been brought in to give a talk on 'accidents in the home'. In hospital, the girls are interrogated by a (notably unseen) psychiatrist. Many of them refuse to respond, while others are vague or cannot articulate their feelings. Lydia, however, is much more forthright: 'nobody wants to know the truth,' she claims, 'why is everyone ignoring us?' The psychologist grants that the condition may be real for the girls (albeit not for him), but his diagnosis of 'hysterical contagion' – announced by Miss Alvaro – fails to resolve matters.

On one level, the film is about Lydia's search for identity: as she says at one point, 'nobody knows who I am... what I'm really like... what I think about doing.' Yet some critics seem to have found the ending especially unsatisfying in this respect. Having been discovered having sex with Kenneth, Lydia asks her mother, 'what's wrong with me, who am I?' The revelation that she is (probably) the result of rape – and that this also explains her mother's many years of agoraphobia – is perhaps a rather too convenient answer. Even so, Lydia now seems to believe that she knows 'the truth' about her identity, and that she has an explanation of what she has been going through. She runs out of the house: there is a full moon, and she climbs the large symbolic tree that overshadows the lake. She proclaims that she is at last 'free', 'real' and fully 'conscious' – although it is not clear whether she then jumps into the lake, or simply slips and falls by accident. Eileen, seemingly haunted by images of the

violence she herself has suffered, emerges from the house and rescues her daughter from drowning.

On the face of it, this ending is highly melodramatic; although once again, it's not clear how far it is intended to be believable. In the final act of the film, Lydia is systematically isolated – and isolates herself – from the other girls; her growing aggression towards her mother, and the shocking scene of her having sex with Kenneth (whom she believes is her brother) show her crossing all sorts of lines. Her final attempt to confront the authority of the school fails: she urges the other girls to 'kill the system', but they do not join her, and she is drowned out by a collective rendition of the hymn 'To Be A Pilgrim' (there are distinct echoes of Lindsay Anderson's *If...* here). Our 'identification' with Lydia – already in question because of the continuing doubt about the reality of the fainting fits – is weakening by this point. Even if *she* believes she has arrived at some kind of truthful explanation, it's not necessarily clear that the film supports this, or that the viewer has to believe it. The mystery remains unresolved.

In this respect, the film has some striking parallels with *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. It cultivates a similar air of mystery and foreboding through its almost surreal setting: the neo-Gothic school buildings, the lake and the large tree, and the autumnal dying nature. The sound design is particularly notable in this respect – the hooting of owls, the rasp of the headteacher's cigarette, and the sounds of breathing are all accentuated. However, there are several more direct echoes of Weir's film. Both begin with a similar quotation – in this instance, from Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality', with its longing for 'the glory and the freshness of a dream' that has been lost ('the things which I have seen I now can see no more'). At one point, in the girls' art lesson, it's discovered that everybody's watches have stopped; and the scene in which the class goes out to sketch the lake is a pre-Raphaelite tableau similar to that of the picnic on the Rock. The figure of Abigail bears a striking physical similarity to Miranda (although her name also echoes the leading character of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* – which the film also resembles in many respects); and the two repressed spinsters who run the school also bear comparison with those of Appleyard College.

Nevertheless, *The Falling* seems to filter similar concerns through a more 'punkish' sensibility. Setting the film in the late 1960s allows for much more explicit discussion of sex, including references to orgasm, abortion, menstruation and incest. Lydia (notably played by Maisie Williams, best known for *Game of Thrones*) has short dark hair, and wields a subversive power, both by directly challenging adult authority, and through facial tics that hint at an almost supernatural, demonic control over the other girls. Lydia is the charismatic source of 'gender trouble' here; but the girls as a whole are much more experienced than the adults around them seem to assume, and much more resistant than they would wish. There is a kind of solidarity among the group, both spoken and unspoken – the girls smile faintly to each other as the fainting fits occur, as though they recognize something that cannot be spoken aloud. On the other hand, there are also some significant power struggles within the group: Lydia is fairly brutal towards Susan, who attempts to take Abbie's place in her friendship. In all these respects, these are not the dreamy, innocent girls of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

Indeed, the connections between adolescent sexuality, illness and death recur throughout the film – and here the more relevant comparison would be with *The Virgin Suicides*. These connections appear even in seemingly incidental details. Kenneth and Abbie refer to orgasm as ‘a small death’ (*la petite morte*), a line that Lydia subsequently echoes in a whisper as she has sex with Kenneth. The girls finger and puncture a cracked egg in their science lesson (where there is a poster of the phases of the moon on the wall); they discuss how to induce abortion with the aid of gin and a knitting needle, or by having sex; Lydia deliberately drops a tray of red hair dye (menstrual blood?) on her mother’s kitchen floor. The fainting fits themselves involve sensuous movement, and seem to invoke a kind of ecstatic delirium, rather than pain.

Here again, it seems that adult women are the primary source of repression (aside from Kenneth, there are no men in the film). This is apparent right from the start of the film, when Abbie is disciplined for wearing her skirt too short (and Miss Mantel also spots a love bite on her neck); Lydia later rolls her own skirt up in defiance. The art teacher, who has also suffered from the fainting episodes, is dismissed when it turns out that she is pregnant. On one level, Miss Alvaro and Miss Mantel both conform to the embittered spinster stereotype – and in the latter’s case, there is some implication that she has been abandoned or ill-treated by men in the past. In a revealing reflection on this, Miss Alvaro complains: ‘this generation... they think they’re so misunderstood. If they had any idea what it’s like to be a middle-aged woman, they’d know what misunderstood meant!’ Both women then collapse in laughter. However, Lydia’s mother Eileen is also seemingly frozen or paralysed by her past trauma at the hands of Lydia’s father: she is unable to go out of the house, and runs her hairdressing business from her kitchen. Like Miss Alvaro, she smokes constantly; and her heavily made-up face is like a mask. For all its melodrama, the ending seems to provide some kind of resolution for her, not least in that she leaves the house for the first time in years.

There has been very little in-depth critical discussion of *The Falling*, although it’s notable that the contemporary reviews were extremely polarized. Some critics praised its originality, its dreamlike atmosphere and its ambiguity: Mark Kermode in *The Guardian*, for example, called it ‘transcendent, indefinable, magical’. However, others found the film ludicrous, unrealistic and laboured. Reviews on sites like IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes are similarly very divided. In some ways, this divergence of opinion seems to reflect the troubling nature of the film itself: it contains an uneasy mix of horror and absurd comedy, and (like the other films I am discussing) it ultimately refuses explanation.

### **The Fits**

In several respects, *The Fits* is a very different kind of film from the others I have considered here. It is the first film directed by Anna Rose Holmer, and was funded with a very low budget (\$150,000) from the Venice Biennale College-Cinema Initiative (part of the Venice Film Festival). The film is set in the Lincoln Community Centre in Cincinnati, Ohio, and features a teenage girls’ dance group that is based there, known as the Q Kidz Dance Team: the Q Kidz coach, Marquicia Jones-Wood, was a co-producer on the film. All the actors are amateurs, and the film is just 70

minutes in length: there is little dialogue, and the only locations are in and around the community centre. The entire cast of the film is African-American, although the director herself is white.

The plot centres on eleven-year-old Toni. At the start of the film, she trains with her brother Jermaine in the boxing gym. However, she starts to take notice of the girls' dance team, the Lionesses, who practice in the adjoining hall: she seems to be assessing whether to join, and eventually tries out for a place. Toni and the other 'crabs' who audition are fairly uncoordinated to begin with, but Toni continues to practice the routines on her own. She also befriends two other girls, Beezy and Maia. During practice, one of the team captains appears to have a seizure: she collapses and is hospitalized. The other captain takes over; but later she too has a similar fit. Toni continues to work hard practicing the dance routine. She and Beezy play in the empty building and try on their new uniforms. Like the other girls, they speculate about the seizures, and wonder whether they are caused by some sort of 'boyfriend disease'.

The supervisor of the dance team says she suspects there may be contamination in the water supply, and the girls are told to drink only from the water cooler in the boxing gym. However, the seizure episodes continue. Maia tells Toni that she wants to know how it feels to have the fits; and later, at practice, she has an episode. Beezy is called in to meet with the doctor and Toni watches through the window as she too begins to seize. Toni skips practice and goes to stand in the empty swimming pool. As she walks back towards the gym, she begins to float in the air. The team watches in shock as she enters the room, floating and flailing her arms about, with her eyes closed. The film cuts between this and shots of Toni and the dance team in uniform performing. Finally, Toni falls to the ground, opens her eyes and faintly smiles.

Like Carol Morley, Anne Rose Holmer was inspired by stories about 'mass hysteria'; and the film is partly informed by a real case, which occurred in a high school in a town called Le Roy in New York State. As with *The Falling* and the other films I'm discussing, there is a search for explanation here, both within the community and in the media. As in the Le Roy case, environmental factors (polluted water) are considered and eventually ruled out. The adults – centre supervisors and medical staff who are brought in – seem unable to do anything, and are puzzled that the illness is only affecting the girls and not the boys who use the centre. There is an ongoing debate among the girls about whether the fits are genuine or fake, or perhaps self-induced. As in *The Falling*, the younger girls compete over who is going to experience them first: Toni's friend Maia says that she wants to know how it feels, and fits shortly afterwards.

One possibility is that the fits are a response to stress (which appears to be a factor in several reported cases): the girls are coming up for a major dance competition, and it is notably the team captains who are the first to be affected. The dance itself is aggressive and highly rhythmical, but it also entails an extraordinary level of control and self-discipline. There is a striking contrast between the precise, rhythmic repetition of the training routines and the individual irregularity and expressive flow of the girls' movements when they are fitting, especially in Toni's final scene.

Nevertheless, no clear explanation is forthcoming. The aura of mystery and uncertainty is accentuated (once again) through the striking sound design and the use of music: while they may be very different from the 'Gothic' effects of hooting owls or underground seismic rumbling in the other films, the echoing sounds of the cavernous gyms and the spare, atonal music have similarly unsettling effects. Toni briefly discusses the causes of the outbreak with her friends, and overhears the older girls speculating about it, but the film as a whole is much less reliant on an elaborate script than *The Falling*, for example. Toni is very much defined as an observer: we repeatedly see her looking into rooms, or framed in windows. She stares intently, as though taking everything in, while struggling to figure it out. Yet unlike in *Heavenly Creatures*, we are given little indication of her inner thoughts and feelings, or her interpretation of what she sees: we are left to infer from her silence and her blank stare. As we'll see, the ending of the film is especially difficult to interpret in this respect: it clearly moves beyond realism, as Toni is shown walking on air and levitating in front of the assembled team, yet it refuses any straightforward explanation.

Without labouring the pun, the fits are to some extent about 'fitting in'. Initially, Toni is shown to be an outsider, or at least a solitary figure. She is the only girl in the boys' world of the boxing gym. She supports her brother in his part-time job at the centre, mopping the floors and lugging large bottles of water into the gym, but initially she has little interaction with the other girls. She says relatively little, and rarely smiles or shows much facial expression. She observes the older girls from a distance, and only gradually makes friends; she works alone trying to master the routines, and slowly becomes integrated in the team.

However, there are several indications that the fits are also related to the girls' transition from childhood, and their emergent sexuality. In this respect, the film can be seen to contain elements of the 'coming of age' story that recurs in teen movies, not least in dance films (from *Dirty Dancing* and *Footloose* through to the more recent *Step Up* series). Right from the start of the film, Toni is shown closely observing the interactions between the boys in the boxing gym and the older girls on the dance team. At one point, she changes her clothes in a lavatory cubicle as she overhears two of the older girls putting on their make-up and talking about the various boys they are involved with. As I've noted, Toni and Beezy speculate about whether the fits are the result of some kind of 'boyfriend problem'; although the vagueness of this suggests that they don't entirely understand what might be at stake.

Toni has a child's body: when she is measured up for her new team costume, the captain comments that she is 'as straight as a nail' – although one of the boys later comments that she is 'growing up fast'. In a series of scenes, she gradually takes on various signs of conventional femininity: she applies nail varnish and a tattoo-style transfer to her arm, and pierces her own ears with a needle in order to insert earrings. However, she later peels off the transfer and the nail varnish, and removes the earrings, claiming that her ears had become infected. As this implies, Toni is ambivalent about the transition to adult sexuality. Likewise, she says she is scared about the possibility that she will be affected by the fits, although she also seems to believe it is inevitable. She argues that her friend Maia 'wanted it to happen to her', and there is a sense that she wants it too.

Notably, Toni is the last in her friendship group to have the fits – the others who have gone before are dismissive of her (‘what do you know about it?’) – but when she finally does, her fit is significantly more spectacular than theirs. Shots of her fit are inter-cut with shots of the whole team performing, showing Toni smiling confidently in her sparkling costume: she has become fully integrated with the group. In having her fit, Toni appears to have achieved something – she has made a transition. Yet her final smile to camera is hard to read: is she smiling from satisfaction, or from having successfully pulled off a trick, or is this a kind of knowing smile to the viewer, acknowledging that her walking on air is some kind of fantasy?

This conclusion could be interpreted in several ways. Toni’s movements suggest that, far from being painful, the fit is a kind of ecstatic, out-of-body experience – that it offers a kind of transcendence. As she begins to walk on air, we hear the only song in the film, ‘Aurora’ by Kiah Victoria, which contains the telling lyric, ‘must we choose to be slaves to gravity?’ Immediately beforehand, Toni has been standing in the empty swimming pool outside the community centre, staring up at the birds flying overhead in the open sky. In terms of the conventional coming-of-age story, it could be claimed that she has now ‘become a woman’ – although there is nothing especially sexual about her movements, either in the fitting or in the athletic dance routine itself. Her integration within the team could be read as a positive accomplishment, or merely as a matter of conforming to a particular conventional definition of feminine sexuality. In fitting, and in fitting in, Toni seems to have become in some way ‘empowered’ – although quite what that means remains unclear.

In the critical discussion of the film, much has been made of the fact that the cast is exclusively African-American. This is somewhat unusual – although over the past couple of decades there have been growing numbers of films focusing on black youth, and several notable examples with black children in central roles (*Moonlight* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, for example). The dance forms featured in the film – drill and step – are often used by black dance teams, but by no means exclusively so: it’s hard to see them as specifically ‘black’ styles. There is no explicit reference to issues of race – let alone racism or ethnic inequality – in the film; despite its documentary feel, we see nothing of the characters’ lives outside the community centre, and there is only passing reference to their families and schools. The young people in the film are not pathologised as being ‘at risk’, or indeed as ‘risky’ to others: there are occasional indications that the surrounding environment is not entirely safe, but in general they appear to be thriving in the institutional setting of the community centre. This may be a heretical argument, but in my view this is a film about female adolescence in general, not specifically about *black* female adolescence.

The setting and mise-en-scene of *The Fits* could hardly be more different from the other films I have discussed: there are no dreamy pre-Raphaelite tableaux here, or any self-conscious literary or artistic references. The film’s unsettling air of mystery contrasts with its decidedly un-mysterious setting, and its documentary feel. Yet despite its originality, its representation of adolescent girlhood shares a good deal with the other films – and especially in its ultimate refusal of any easy or simple explanation.

## Conclusion

The films I've considered in this essay come from, and represent, very different social, historical and cultural contexts. They were made in very different circumstances, from the official state-funded revival of the Australian film industry to the margins of Hollywood and the smaller scale independent and art-house sectors in Britain, New Zealand and the United States. They were made over a period of forty years, but their retrospective historical span is even broader than this. It's a long way from the Australian bush of 1900 to the Illinois suburbs of the 1970s; or from colonial New Zealand in the 1950s to the contemporary African-American inner city of Cincinnati. The films are also self-evidently very different in terms of genre and style: they include elements of costume drama, horror, comedy, art film and documentary realism.

However, they all provide different takes on the central question of adolescent girlhood. In doing so, they dwell on 'Gothic' themes of sexuality and adult repression, and ultimately on sickness, contagion and death. In different ways, and to different degrees, they all blur the boundaries between reality and illusion. Several of them are based on real-life cases, or misleadingly claim to be; but in all of them, there is a continuing debate about what is real and what is not, and there is always a sense that something lies beyond or beneath the reality we see. In each of the films, there is a search for explanation that is ultimately not fulfilled: different possibilities are entertained, expert authorities offer their opinions, but ultimately none will suffice. Not only in the overt narrative, but also through the cinematography and sound design, the films all represent adolescent girlhood as an unresolved mystery, which is not just inexplicable (especially to adults, and to men) but also profoundly unsettling and uncanny.

These are not straightforward 'coming of age' films, in which children become adults, and girls become women. The characters' transitions to adulthood are unstable and precarious, and in most cases they are ultimately blocked or prevented. Adolescent girlhood – and the experience of developing gender identity – is a constant source of disruption, not just for the girls themselves but also for adults. These girls challenge authority: they are troubled, often for obscure reasons, but they are also troubling for those around them. They do not comfortably mature into sensible, conforming adult women: indeed, adult womanhood is frequently seen in these films as an undesirable state of frustration and repression (while adult masculinity is largely marginalized or belittled). Even adult sexual activity is not figured as desirable or pleasurable: indeed, in many cases it is regarded as disgusting or deviant.

As such, 'coming of age' in these films is not necessarily welcomed as a moment of empowerment and liberation – it is much more ambivalent and dangerous than that. The girls do not assume or settle into a comfortable gender identity: on the contrary, identity remains fluid and unstable, and often unclear to the girls themselves. In all these ways, these films represent a challenge to the (predominantly male) rite-of-passage narratives that are so familiar in teen film: they provide a troubling glimpse into the underside of our received ideas about adolescence, and indeed about the nature of adulthood as well.

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