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# Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* and Zuzak's *The Book Thief*: Impossible Narration in Millennial Fiction

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Eugenides' The Virgin Suicides and Zuzak's The Book Thief: Impossible Narration in  
Millennial Fiction

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for HIGH HONORS  
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Narrative theory, despite its emphasis on narration and narrators, is still in the process of systematically examining the impressive range of unusual postmodern strategies of narration that complicate the story and reading experience. These strategies are particularly abundant in contemporary fiction, conceived for a reader that is “actively engaged and self-conscious about their role”<sup>1</sup> within literature as much as they are engaged and self-conscious in a hyper connected twenty-first century world. The nature and conditions of life in the twenty first century (and the final decade of the twentieth) uniquely force people into a hyper-awareness of the world and their place in the world. These conditions have come about from developments in the Internet and global networking, marketing, and information gathering. The power of these developments is still yet to be fully understood, as demonstrated by the new role social media sites are playing in global justice and news—as in the case of the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt in 2010 or the Wikileaks controversy.

Whether in keeping the world connected in news, defining online markets and individual history gathering, or forging ahead in the exploration of the universe, technology is expanding the depths of our individual framing; this meaning technology shapes our perspective and construction of life, as does narration in a text (particularly meta-fictional texts). Contemporary and millennial narration addresses the issues of identity and knowledge that the hyper-connected twenty-first century has begun to produce because of the omniscience of the Internet, composed of millions of people’s thoughts, work, and interactions. It enables all people today to transcend physical and mental boundaries, and naturally influences literary techniques and perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Wells, Lynn. *Allegories of Telling: Self-referential Narrative in Contemporary British Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003. Pp. 3-4.

These influences on identity in the twenty-first century are inherently meta-fictional, meta-fiction being the theoretical school that focuses on the playful and problematic aspects of writing a text. Both *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Book Thief* clearly engage in this; they are indicative of contemporary narrative trends preoccupied with the act of viewing and understanding others through the eyes of outsiders, outsiders with varying types of “impossible voices” or narrative perspectives outside the possibility of normal reality (i.e. not limited by time, space, human life). The period of time in which readers and writers are living is one of enormous change and uncertainty—the rise of technology and the Internet has altered awareness of the notion of “consciousness,” for example. Developing out of the modernist and post-modernist anxieties and re-evaluations of daily life, millennial meta-fiction continues a more thorough sense that reality and history are provisional: in Patricia Waugh’s words, not a world of “eternal verities...but a set of constructions, artifices, [and] impermanent structures.”<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, more millennial novelists are rejecting forms and techniques that correspond to traditional ideas of an ordered reality; instead, writers de-construct these forms by breaking chronological sequence, fragmenting “rational connections between what characters ‘do’ and what they ‘are,’”<sup>3</sup> and generally drawing attention to the “relationship between social reality and fictional form,”<sup>4</sup> both equally artificial. Millennial fiction and meta fiction moves beyond twentieth century modernism and postmodernism towards a more “metamodern” approach to life and writing, a term coined by Vermeulen and van den Akker in their essay “Utopia, Sort, Of: A Case Study in Metamodernity.”

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<sup>2</sup> Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984. pg. 7

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 7

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 11

Metamodern texts, named after the Greek word “metaxy” or “in-betweeness,”<sup>5</sup> oscillate between postmodern irony (i.e. the distrust and deconstructive of grand narratives) and modern enthusiasm and shift to an “as-if” thinking of history and reality.<sup>6</sup> *The Book Thief* and *The Virgin Suicides* clearly demonstrate this play in conceptualizing history, both set in a pre-millennial, pre-Internet past but noticeably metamodern and contemporary in thought. This results from an engagement with history through collectivizing, liminal spaces that have become more familiar to post-Internet readers. This is not to say that there is a revisionist engagement with the past that denies truths of twentieth century life, but rather a meta fictional re-understanding of memory and historical fact.

A unique aspect of millennial fiction is the evolution of the narrator and its construction of narrative, often meta-fictional in some way. The main interest of both novels analysed in this paper is their “unnatural” narrator(s), who not only alter the lens in which the stories are read but consciously point out their constructions of the narrative. To these narrators, whether the first-person plural voice perched between decades and individual consciousness or the uncanny voice of Death, what is foregrounded in their story is the idea of *writing* as “the most fundamentally problematic aspect of the text.”<sup>7</sup> This means the narrators, both consciously and unconsciously, admit the limitations of their narration and how they frame the reader’s full understanding. This is an inherent characteristic of all writing, problematic only in the sense that it relates to reality; there is no simple dichotomy between reality and fiction. What narrators like those in *The Book Thief* and *The Virgin Suicides* really achieve when admitting their own framing and manipulation of a story is that they draw attention to the fact that “life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends

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<sup>5</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker. “Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism,” *Studia Neophilologica*, 2014. DOI: 10.1080/00393274.2014.981964. pg. 11

<sup>6</sup> Vermuelen & van der Akker, “Utopia, Sort Of.” pg. 11

<sup>7</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction* , pg. 22

and another begins.”<sup>8</sup> Meta-fiction powerfully detaches the reader from the security of labels like “novel,” “fiction,” and “resolution” that have defined literature for centuries. In detaching from these constructs and labels, literature becomes freer to explore contexts and “discover new communicative possibilities”<sup>9</sup> for language, just as technology is allowing for such possibilities in reality.

Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction* throws light upon the tools of language and narration, the intertextual relationship of novels to other novels but also to reality. The self-awareness of metafiction and millennial texts means story, like reality, is continually reappraised. The process of reading, as well as thinking about contemporary life, is no longer ordered but “a web of interrelating, multiple realities.”<sup>10</sup> Art and fiction in the millennial era is as a result, less hierarchized as the co-existence of media online and intertextuality in fiction dulls distinctions between “high art” and mass entertainment; again, such narrative techniques re-conceptualize limitations in literature and life.

Brian Richardson’s text *Unnatural Voices* explores how fictional technique (in particular, since Defoe) has become increasingly unreliable and anti-realist, moving into “extreme” and “unnatural” narrators which he defines as any narratorial form “transgress[ing] fundamental linguistic and rhetorical categories.”<sup>11</sup> In Richardson’s argument, contemporary narration plays with the “creation, fragmentation, and reconstitution of narrative voices.”<sup>12</sup> Some examples of this in recent publication include narration by corpses (Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*), aliens (Michael Faber’s *Under the Skin*) and Eugenides’ multi-person narration in *The Virgin Suicides*. The first person plural narrator in *The Virgin Suicides*, while distinctive, is not a new development in narratology

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<sup>8</sup> Waugh, *Metafiction*, pg. 29

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. 36

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg. 52

<sup>11</sup> Richardson, Brian. *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006. Pg. ix

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg. ix

but rather one increasingly fitting for contemporary, globalized readers. Notable examples of authors and genres making use of the first person plural narrative form include William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad, and magic realist or post-colonial texts. These authors and genres use this form of narration primarily to express identity as a collective experience, composed of shared consciousness. Richardson quotes Dawn Fulton to illustrate this with writer Edoard Glissant: “the idea of Martinican identity cannot be thought in the singular but only in the plural, and only in a manner that works with ‘relation’ of connections and conflicts between and among individuals.”<sup>13</sup>

Besides aptly expressing identity as a collective construct and experience, the first person plural form also raises and crosses implicit binaries in identity; this form explores identity through the constructs that define and limit us, like in the case of Eugenides’ novel, “boy vs. girl,” “love vs. objectification,” and “young vs. old.” *The Virgin Suicides*, like many works in this mode, is insistently intertextual, stating “no individual owns a story.”<sup>14</sup> In exploring these binaries and constructions of life, contemporary fiction remains “in the interstices—the spaces between national cultures, genders, and histories.”<sup>15</sup>

Amidst the canon of “millennial” fiction, *The Virgin Suicides*, by Jeffrey Eugenides, is a particularly haunting and confusing novel. Primarily concerned with the lives and deaths of the Lisbon sisters, the text deals with the reading and interpretation of boys’ memories as they try to understand their lives and the Lisbons’ suicides. Their struggle to piece together their limited and subjective knowledge, to understand the “truth” of the girls, is really a reflection of the readers’ own struggle to truly “read” and interpret a text. This is a hallmark characteristic of contemporary fiction, engaging a self-conscious

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<sup>13</sup> Fulton, Dawn. “Romans des Nous”: *The First Person Plural and Collective Identity in Martinique Literature*. pp. 1105

<sup>14</sup> Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*. Pg. 55

<sup>15</sup> Morrison, Jago. *Contemporary Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2003. pg. 7

reader to interpret a text alongside its characters in settings as impenetrable and ambiguous as reality, increasingly complicated in contemporary fiction of the past twenty years, or ‘millennial’ fiction.

How exactly does Eugenides capture this quality of contemporary fiction and connect the reader to the story through the boys’ collective (what Debra Shostak calls “impossible”<sup>16</sup>) voice, and more importantly what exactly does it mean to pluralize a narrative voice? According to Richardson, the first person plural form of narration is “fluid...accommodating different sized groups and can either include or exclude the reader.”<sup>17</sup> The most important consideration when reading a text with first person narration is in regards to who constitutes the “we;” virtually no narratives of this kind reveal its membership outright. The reader comes to understand that the “we” of Eugenides’s text is primarily a group of boys (and their later adult selves) because of the “boyish” information and impressions given to and by the narrators; “boyish” information meaning stories and details that reveal a lack of understanding towards real women and girls and mythicize the Lisbons.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, despite the primary members of the narrative group being the boys, its composition shifts occasionally in the novel to include memories of boys not normally in the group (i.e. Trip Fontaine), faint traces of the Lisbons,<sup>19</sup> and the readers themselves.

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<sup>16</sup> Shostak, Debra. "A story we could live with": Narrative Voice, the Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 55, Number 4, Winter 2009. pg. 808

<sup>17</sup> Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*. pg.14

<sup>18</sup> "...we were surprised to learn that there were no douches anywhere because we had thought girls douched every night like brushing their teeth." Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. pg.7

<sup>19</sup> This is arguable, as the reader is never informed of the girls feeling a shared consciousness with the boys, yet moments like pg. 164 lead the reader to wonder about the omniscient power of first person plural narrative to know others as the “we” expands, particularly as they become better friends with the girls in their isolation: “We drank tea with them in a water pavilion, above blazing goldfish. We did whatever we wanted to, and Cecilia hadn’t killed herself.” See also pg. 147 “we suffered a mental dislocation which only grew worse through the course of the remaining deaths.” Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*.



The collective voice in *The Virgin Suicides* offers a “rich resource to probe cultural conditions [and] psychological affects”<sup>20</sup> with which the collective body of the novel’s readers may participate. Published in the 1990s, its narrators are reflecting upon their childhoods in the 70s, a time shared by adult readers of the 90s; this powerfully enables the reader to impose his or her own memories of the period into the text (whether consciously or not). The narration controls what the reader sees and understands in the text, but as the collective narrator itself knows very little about its memories and subjects of fascination, space is open for the reader to compare their own memories of adolescence and experience of remembering. This is what it means to have a narrative that “at one and the same time fill[s] and create[s] gaps.”<sup>21</sup> The collective narrator embodies the nature of storytelling as “communal, transactional, and highly relative,”<sup>22</sup> not just literally in the storytelling of this novel but also in the understanding that the readers’ own memories and stories of the era will blend into the reading. In a strange way, a first person plural narrator is both more *objective* as consensus among many imagined narrators (human society tends to trust the judgment of groups over individuals), and simultaneously more *subjective* as a kind of “group mind” or “herd mentality” that loses individual judgement; the conscious or unconscious mixing of personal memories into the text also complicates its simultaneous objective-subjective nature.

Despite this paradox, the collective narration is the key to understanding both the whole novel and the existence of haunting blank spaces in the text. Why exactly does Eugenides choose such unusual narration and how does this affect the reader besides opening up space for personal interpretation? The single but composite voice, because of its unusual position both within and outside of the events under scrutiny, “...offers the

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<sup>20</sup> Shostak, "A Story We Could Live With." pg. 808

<sup>21</sup> Herman, David. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. pg. 44

<sup>22</sup> Shostak, ""A Story We Could Live With." pg. 809

chance to see those events according to conflicting emplotments (tragedy, romance, or even comedy), conflicting representational modes (history or myth, realism or magical realism), and conflicting theoretical models of desire (psychoanalysis or Bataille's eros).<sup>23</sup> These conflicting thematic, representational, and philosophical ideas mirror the conflicts within the boys who piece together evidence<sup>24</sup> and theories about the girls but cannot get any closer to understanding them; their journey to understand the Lisbons transcends one form and model.

Although the boys and their adult versions view and assess their memories of the Lisbons through some particular frames (through adolescent erotic idealization, for example<sup>25</sup>), because they are boundless in time and space, there is no one fixed perspective. The story can be read as a tragedy in the girls' deaths but also as a comical re-evaluation of naïve high school beliefs—the absurd metaphor of one of the girls' used tampons “like a modern painting or something”<sup>26</sup> highlighting this point. The story is occasionally magical realist (i.e. in elaborate, religious descriptions of Cecilia as a “drugged virgin”<sup>27</sup>) but also a realistic representation of the male gaze and memory. The group narrator, oddly dehumanized in its pluralized and delocalized voice, is not only an amalgamation of individual characters but also an amalgamation of perspectives. Because of this, there is space for personal interpretation but the text is also packed with meanings

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<sup>23</sup> Shostak, Debra. "A Story We Could Live With," pg.810

<sup>24</sup> The sources of “evidence” throughout the novel are numerous and extremely interesting, offered as physical “proof” of their memories, “you may read it yourself”(pg. 91) yet never actually given for the readers to see, kept hidden as if sacred artefacts rather than factual clues: “Please don’t touch. We’re going to put the picture back in its envelope now.”(pg.114). Occasionally, these pieces of evidence even counteract the factuality the boys attempt to create, i.e. the open shutters “everyone agree[s]” (pg 85) were shut or act as sentimental items like the picture of the girls being read as hopeful for life despite any proof: “that at least, is how we see it.” (pg. 114). These moments question the reality of all of the events and memories of the novel.

<sup>25</sup> Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*. Pg. 39

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 4

<sup>26</sup> Herman, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. pg. 8

<sup>27</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. pg. 4

waiting to be seen and read; leaving space for interpretation does not mean there is no meaning or message already embedded in the text.

It is rather the opposite case in *The Virgin Suicides*, which presents an overload of meanings and perspectives from which the reader can only feasibly pick and choose to read and interpret. Some critics argue that literature and philosophy in the late twentieth century experienced a “postmodern loss of faith in the possibility of achieving truth or knowledge,”<sup>28</sup> and certainly there is ambiguity all through the reading of the novel; a perfect example of this argument is when the boys describe and analyse the smell that emanates from the Lisbon house. Constantly self-correcting their interpretations of the smell and shifting from figural to material comparisons, “the smell was partly bad breath, cheese, milk, tongue film, but also the singed smell of drilled teeth,”<sup>29</sup> the boys careen among competing images, attempting to capture the elusive truth, or at least part of the truth of the girls. The way in which these two paragraphs about the smell bounce from meaning to meaning ultimately suggests, “the reading of meaning from and into artefacts and events may fail to explain anything at all.”<sup>30</sup> We as readers feel we are missing something by the end of the novel, kept from some clue or perspective just like the boys: “In the end we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptiness mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn’t name. All wisdom ends in paradox...”<sup>31</sup> The absence—or perhaps more appropriately the elusion—of truth in this narrative is one of the many ways the novel reconstitutes an essential purpose of literature. If literature and art is meant to show its audience some facet of life’s truth (a purpose impossible to prove, but rather one innately

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<sup>28</sup> Herman, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* pg. 22

<sup>29</sup> Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*. pg. 165

<sup>30</sup> Shostak, "A Story We Could Live With." pg. 812

<sup>31</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. Pg. 241

felt), this novel's truth of life is that there is no certain truth, except perhaps emotional truth.<sup>32</sup>

However, just as much as the novel presents the impossibility of fully knowing others and the evasion of truth, its very structure in first person plural also implies a collective consciousness and knowledge of other minds. The implications of a collective consciousness within the novel are both philosophically and ideologically limited because it seems to exclude non-white, male mind-sets--this is only true at a first glance, however. The collective consciousness does subvert the hegemonic system of values in middle-class, suburban, white America in the way the first person plural narrative shares authorship and consciousness both between the boys and the readers (which could be of any number of backgrounds) but also with the girls themselves, who in Cecilia's diary are "a single entity...difficult to identify."<sup>33</sup> The moment the boys read and analyse Cecilia's diary is a meta-fictional experience of their own first person plural narration to the reader because of the "we" the girls become through Cecilia's diary and the boys' imagination. It is impossible to know just how many people comprise the "we" narrator, a challenging aspect of this narrative style that results in its reading both as singular and plural. In contemporary fiction "one narration is collapsed into another, and one consciousness bleeds into another,"<sup>34</sup> and the reading of Cecilia's diary is an example of how first person plural breaks down the possible limits of the individual's consciousness. Just as this form of narrative is simultaneously the singular pronoun "we" and also an unquantifiable plural group, so also the first person plural is simultaneously homodiegetic and heterodiegetic,<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Whether or not the boys ever come to know the girls is questionable, but it does not stop them from loving them: "We loved them, and they do not hear us calling, still do not hear us calling." Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, Pg. 39

<sup>33</sup> This also happens when the boys describe joining consciousness: "we felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy, and how you ended up knowing which colours went together" Ibid, Pg. 40

<sup>34</sup> Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*. pg. 12

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pg. 42

enmeshed in the world it narrates but overstepping the natural limits as if omniscient. In moments like these the group “we” attempts to expand and include the Lisbon girls, even if only the ghostly traces of the girls in diaries or the “communal conversation”<sup>36</sup> the boys create with the girls.

In order to understand the complexities of the narrator’s voice, “point-of-view” and all its possible forms must be examined to further dissect the effects of first person plural narration. There are three commonly agreed types of point-of-view: literal (through someone’s perception), figurative (through someone’s conceptual ideology), and transferred (through someone’s interest vantage).<sup>37</sup> The boys in *The Virgin Suicides* offer multiple characters’ point-of-views (i.e. Mr. Lisbon, Trip Fontaine, Paul Baldino), but it is difficult to distinguish between literal, figurative, and transferred point-of-views, as if they are all influencing each other. Take, for example, the scene in which the boys attend the Lisbons’ party; in a moment of literal point-of-view they boys admit, “instead of five replicas with the same blonde hair and puffy cheeks we saw that they were distinct beings, their personalities beginning to transform their faces and reroute their expressions.”<sup>38</sup> Yet even as they seem to be letting their sensory perceptions guide the point-of-view in this passage there is a moment of transferred point of view when describing Bonnie’s “neck which would one day hang from the end of a rope.”<sup>39</sup> This temporal leap in the story reminds the reader that although the boys claim to see the girls “as distinct beings,” they cannot fully disassociate the girls from their haunting deaths that lead the boys to re-investigate as adults. Yet again the point-of-view switches when describing Lux as “the only one who accorded with our image of the Lisbon girls...radiat[ing] health and

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<sup>36</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. pg. 63

<sup>37</sup> Chatman, Seymour Benjamin. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978. pg 151 ...”point of view does not mean expression it only means the perspective in terms of which the expression is made.”

<sup>38</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. pg. 23

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 23

mischievous;<sup>40</sup> here the narrators admit they have an ideological image of the girls, an image that is always present whether accorded to or not. In this one passage the reader can see why it is so difficult to fully know the girls and the situation as the text constantly negotiates varying point-of-views. It is seemingly impossible to get a grasp upon the Lisbons and a true understanding of their world without the fundamental biases that come through the narrators' fallible perceptions, masculine (some critics would say misogynistic) ideology, and erotic and morbid interest vantage.

In film there is less space for creative point-of-view strategies as the camera directs attention in a way textual narrative does not; this is, however, appropriate when considering how the vantage in the novel is also directed by the boys' vantage. Because cinema is inherently depictive rather than descriptive, there are more creative barriers to be navigated in regards to point-of-view and narrative, barriers Sofia Coppola's cinematic interpretation of the novel overcomes through music. Using non-diegetic music to mark the tonal shifts in the story and complement the single voice narrator in the film, the soundtrack by the artist AIR perfectly captures a sense of nostalgia and emphasizes the girls as impressions rather than realities to the boys. The soundtrack is powerful because it claims equal attention to the image track in the viewer's sensory perception of the film, working together seamlessly to intensify the emotional interpretation of the film.

Coppola's adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* and the soundtrack highlight the ephemeral, unknowable nature of the girls and their effects upon the boys that the novel asserts. Tracks like "Dark Messages" contain sounds associated with entering dream sequences, reminding the viewer that the presented Lisbon girls are as much dream as memory. The common retro synth sounds that permeate the soundtrack powerfully work to create the sense of time and place in the film, yet because they are not actually popular

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<sup>40</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, pg. 24

songs from the period like the songs associated with Trip Fontaine, they do not root the girls in reality as does Heart's "Magic Man" track for Trip. This yet again emphasizes how the girls are trapped within the childhood memories of the boys (and therefore in the 70s) but remain somehow still elusive. The comparison of Trip's music to the girls' exemplifies just how much narrative the soundtrack creates within the film, almost as if the boys themselves have chosen the tracks, the sound of a needle on a record for "Magic Man," conveying "a sense of [the] collective narrator constructing this scene."<sup>41</sup> The obvious starts of Heart's songs are examples of the film's point-of-view shifts as in "Crazy on You," played to emphasize Trip's desire for Lux known to the boys through their interviews with Trip as adults. The lyrical, popular, and diegetic music is used for characters and situations the boys *can* know and understand, while Air's music is consistently reserved for the Lisbons and their elusiveness. Additionally, just as the text leaves spaces for readers to interpret the story with their own memories of the period, so too does the diegetic music in the film allow viewers to recognize their own pasts and create their own connections of memory.

Something unique to the film is the camera's point of view shots on the girls, particularly Lux. Although not shot through her vision, the camera focuses on her face and expression, the closest Coppola can get to giving the girls a space to express themselves without fundamentally changing the story. In moments like the point of view shot in the back of the station wagon pulling into the cemetery for Cecilia's funeral<sup>42</sup>, the viewer is put in the girls' position, a temporary break from the boys' all-encompassing narration and point of view. Lux is given the most attention from the camera, mostly because her story is the most individualized of the girls in her sexual exploits and tryst with Trip, but also

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<sup>41</sup> MacCabe, Colin. *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. pg. 123

because she is the epitome of what the girls collectively symbolize to the boys.<sup>43</sup> The boys seem to view Lux as the ultimate woman, playful and sexual and unattainable, but the film enables the perceptive viewer to see something else—a simple teenage girl. Shots like the one before Lux jumps in Trip’s car to furiously kiss him<sup>44</sup> rather depict a nervous girl that seems unsure of how to respond to the sexual pressure Trip (himself already a highly sexual figure) applies to her. He stands with her at the front door, expectantly, unable to see past the “stone cold fox” to the vulnerable girl. Similarly, Lux looks visibly uncomfortable as Trip convinces her to take a walk with him after the dance instead of going home on time; these added scenes supplant spaces in the text that are left unclear, and work as evidence of the way in which the Lisbon girls are trapped and pressured by others in their life, whether to be pure by their parents or sexualized by the boys.

Lux chooses to respond to Trip’s expectations accordingly and continues to have sex with various men, assuming the image of the sexual goddess men have always attributed to her. Nevertheless, the film makes a point to focus on Lux’s face after these scenes to highlight the emptiness and unhappiness she feels as such a figure. In the scene after Lux loses her virginity to Trip on the football field, the camera focuses on her as she lies in the early dawn light slowly opening her eyes, her skin pale and lifeless. She does not seem tethered to the world in the eerie light of this scene, as if it is the moment of her spiritual death, the camera pans out the viewer sees how alone she is in the wide, empty field. In the taxi ride home her face is partially obscured by the reflection of the mirror, but the viewer can see Lux fighting tears as she puts her homecoming crown between her lips, the symbol of her status as the ideal girl. On the rooftop of her home, after she makes love to one of her innumerable men, there is a close-up on Lux smoking, looking tired and

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<sup>43</sup> From the beginning, as the girls are being described by the boys at the Lisbon party, she is singled out as “the only one who accorded with our image of the Lisbon girls...radiat[ing] health and mischief.” Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. Pg. 24



empty, contemplating some mystery to which neither the boys nor the viewer is ever privy; while these scenes may not tell us the girls' thoughts and feelings, they do reveal an emotional side of the girls less expressible in the text and through the boys' lack of perception. While the soundtrack highlights the girls as mysterious beings, the point of view shifts onto Lux and the girls in their private moments intimate that they are normal teenagers that the boys could understand if they could ever move past their infatuations.

The narrator in the film is not a group voice but rather the adult voice of one of the boys, "emphasizing the film's fantasy/memory focus through a voiceover that is effectively distanced from the images we see on screen."<sup>45</sup> This is different from the reading experience, where, theoretically, we as readers can always imagine "hearing" all the boys in the narrator voice and forget the blurred line between past and present male narrators. Watching the film, it is impossible to ignore this line and the voiceover is obviously distant and intrusive into the youthful world idealized in the film. The track "Suicide Underground" especially emphasizes this intrusion, featuring pieces of narration with the narrator's voice deepened even further into a gothic, monstrous voice similar to those altered to protect identities in criminal investigations. Decisions like these affect how the narrator is consciously viewed, the boys becoming less like innocent admirers and more like adult men fighting to re-enter their lost world of adolescence to possess the Lisbon women in their memory. The breakdown of the collective narrator into individual boys on screen and the close up shots of Lux reveal the limitation of film as a medium as largely depictive rather than imaginative. The viewer cannot easily imagine a collective narrator and a fluid group of unknown boys if he or she has seen their faces (and are given distinctive names and faces in the film, i.e. Tim Weiner "The Brain). As a result, many of

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<sup>45</sup> MacCabe, Colin. *True to the Spirit*. Pg. 126

the scenes prevent the viewer from playing with the identity and extent of the boys' "we" or the girls' "we" as they are able to in the text.

A classic example is the scene in the novel when the boys read Cecilia's diary, unable to distinguish between Cecilia and the other girls, eventually trying to melt into the consciousness of the girls; in the film it is not possible to imaginatively interpret the number that "we" encompasses because the viewer physically sees a quantitative number of boys reading the diary, and it is difficult to imagine the two groups merging when they are physically represented as separate, the boys reading the diary in one frame and the girls dancing in a distant field in the next frame. In general, the mixing of consciousness and memories between the boys and girls is less clear in the film—perhaps to highlight the ultimate failure of the boys to understand the girls. Where the depictive nature of cinema fails the story, however, music fills in to re-install ambiguity and connectivity, particularly in the shared moments between the boys and girls (i.e. homecoming dance, when they play records to each other over the phone). These are moments when the girls seem more "real" and attainable, therefore the music is more based in reality through actual tracks of the period, like "The Air That I Breathe" by The Hollies. These scenes in the movie work like the scenes in the text where the boys imagine what it is like to *be* the girls; they are glimpses of shared consciousness between the "we" of the boys and the "we" of the sisters. They are only glimpses, however, as even when the boys seem close to the Lisbons they suddenly misinterpret them. This is clearer in the novel, particularly when the girls' final musical choice on the phone leads the narrator to think "they might love us back,"<sup>46</sup> an interpretation built on their own longings, just like their reflections on the photograph of the girls. Often it seems impossible the boys will ever understand the girls and Lux when the girls' private scenes of emotional vulnerability are closely contrasted with scenes of

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<sup>46</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. pg. 192

obvious male gaze. Nevertheless, there are subtle moments where the film maintains the novel's narrative of overlapping consciousness and connectivity; for example, in a scene in which the boys notice Lux flirting with another student outside their classroom, their professor Mr Lisbon discusses the mathematical laws of intersection and union.

In the novel there is a Christina Rossetti poem handed out amongst the school children following Cecilia's suicide entitled "Rest," a striking literary allusion and affective moment amidst the other ludicrous grieving rituals in the school. The purpose of this interjected poem is to draw attention to the nature of the "Day of Grieving" as the boys' attempts to grieve all the girls not only in that one moment, but throughout their lives. The final line of "Rest" is the most poignant: "she hath no questions, she hath no replies;"<sup>47</sup> the Lisbon girls are never truly known or understood in the novel because they are not given the power of language, rather they are supplanted with language by the boys. In alluding to Rossetti, Eugenides creates a connection to the themes of oppression and alienation, "diffus[ing] and universaliz[ing]"<sup>48</sup> the Lisbons' experience into the larger realm of historical female experience and particularly that of the Victorian experience.

Many of Rossetti's poems grapple with the ways her unequal society limited and controlled the female image, such as "After Death" and "In an Artists' Studio." In "After Death," the female figure of desire is given the voice, relatively radical in contrast to the male, pre-Raphaelite depiction and dissection of the female (dissection in the sense that women in poems like Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" remain a motionless object of male desire, as if on a dissecting table). The lifeless female in "After Death," however, reclaims a measure of power by eluding the male lover that would define her. The poem ends, "He did not love me living; but once dead he pitied me; and very

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<sup>47</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, pg. 100

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 100

sweet it is;”<sup>49</sup> the female voice here understands the shallow depths of her male lover’s affection, based on the image of her rather than the true interior, and in her death she retains her power over his love without ever truly giving herself to him, just as the Lisbons do to the boys in *The Virgin Suicides*. In such constrained environments, death can be read as the only true path towards freedom for the female constantly framed by others.

Rossetti’s poem “In an Artists’ Studio” is a critique of the figurative painting and framing of women by the male artist that makes all women identical:

One face looks out from all his canvasses,  
 One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans  
 A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,  
 A saint, an angel;—every canvass means  
 The same one meaning, neither more nor less.<sup>50</sup>

The countless occasions of the Lisbons being described by the boys as identical<sup>51</sup> or of one collective entity simplify and limit the girls just as the male artist does in Rossetti’s poem. The female is figuratively drained of life and complexities so that the male can continue his fantasies, the boys unknowingly ideologically trapping Lux, Mary, Therese, and Bonnie just as their family physically traps them. The film flat out admits the male gaze in scenes like the one in which a boy hits on Therese by saying, “You’re so beautiful...I could paint you sometime,” to which she laughs at the ridiculously unromantic gesture. The boys at one point claim to feel “the imprisonment of being a girl,”<sup>52</sup> but they never seem to understand that they create the girls’ ideological prison that limits their development. Even after the girls’ suicides they feel they are “custodians of the girls’ lives”<sup>53</sup> and that the girls (or, as the boys say, “our sphere of influence”<sup>54</sup>) are being

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<sup>49</sup> Rossetti, Christina Georgina, and R. W. Crump. *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*. A Variorum ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979. “After Death,” pg. 38

<sup>50</sup> Rossetti and Crump. *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*. Pg. 264

<sup>51</sup> i.e. “like a congregation of angels...five identical beings” Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. pg. 23

<sup>52</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. pg. 40

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pg. 219

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pg. 220

misunderstood, as if only they truly know the girls. The framing of women presented in Rossetti's poems and their presence in *The Virgin Suicides* highlights the way in which the girls are framed by the boys' narrative, narrative itself framing and controlling how the reader understands any story. However, the self-conscious inclusion of Rossetti in the text seems to be Eugenides admitting his inability as an artist to create the female without somehow framing her within ideological constructs—therein lays the significance of the title and the concept of “virginity.” There is no definitive proof that any of the girls were actually virgins, and certainly the boys and reader is aware that Lux is far from virginal. It is not the literal abstinence from sex that seems to constitute the Lisbons' “virginity,” but rather the ideology that they are “untouched” and beyond the reach of the physical world and the boys. The concept of virginity implies the promise of future sexual activity and procreation, yet when this is juxtaposed against suicide the image becomes that of life and procreation cut short. This positioning between the world of the living and the world of the dead is both a primary reason for the boys' obsession with the girls and the main source of power for the girls. The girls' figurative virginity (their isolation and connection to a mysterious world) is as much created by the boys as their parents, killing them more than their actual suicides, as their deaths were their ultimate self-assertion.

Christina Rossetti's “Winter, My Secret” presents a parallel situation in which the artist drains his model's life by conceptualizing her and demanding to know her inner secrets:

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:  
 Perhaps some day, who knows?  
 But not today; it froze, and blows, and snows,  
 And you're too curious: fie!  
 You want to hear it? well: Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Rossetti, Christina Georgina, and R. W. Crump. *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*. pg. 47

The woman here denies her artist any answers playfully, yet behind this playfulness is an intriguing study in the manipulation of power. She denies knowledge both to the artist and the reader, placing the importance in the poem on what is not said, and how the speaker skilfully withholds power and control. Perhaps only because the Lisbon girls avoid understanding and definition are they able to achieve some level of agency in the novel, like the woman in this poem. In the novel, Bonnie tells her date “We just want to live. If anyone would let us;”<sup>56</sup> the diction choice of “anyone,” the indefinite pronoun, is important here, as it creates ambiguity as to who to attribute the blame of the girls’ deaths. The collective narrator, with all its framing and idealization of the girls, limits them just as much as do their parents and their society at large. Having the narrators take blame is complicated, particularly for the role of the narrator and the responsibility the narrator owes its story, neither of which are definite.

What responsibility, then, does Death have in telling a story? Ironically, death is the impetus for storytelling in both novels—ironic because death usually implies the ending of a story rather than the beginning. Death is traditionally the end of stories, and certainly the end of each individual human story. Yet, interestingly, Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* begins with Death—not only meeting Death as narrator but seeing Death’s work upon Liesel’s younger brother who dies at the outset of the text. Death admits he is so fascinated with Liesel, the “book thief.” Indeed, *The Book Thief* goes a step further by presenting Death as the narrator as well as first scene. Death is a challenging narrator because it cannot be conceptualized as limited in the same sense as human minds and consciousness, which are by nature limited. It is more accurate to compare death’s consciousness in *The Book Thief* to that of the first person plural in *The Virgin Suicides*, transposing beyond the constraints of individual consciousness—yet even this comparison

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<sup>56</sup> Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*. Pg. 128

falls short. Death speaks human language because it has to communicate as narrator, but the reader must not associate the ability to communicate in human language as a sign of death's humanity. Death is *not* human, and cannot be thought of as bound to the same perception and conception of the world or even life.

While Richardson's discussion of the first person plural is useful for analysis of *The Virgin Suicides*, Katherine Hayles' notion of the 'posthuman' is key in understanding the nature and implications of narration in *The Book Thief*. Hayles explains the meaning of the title of her book, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, as "signalling the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice."<sup>57</sup> Contemporary and millennial fiction that explores "post-human" and extreme narration seeks to move beyond "embodied knowledge" to forms that allow "the complexities of human awareness [to] unfold in very different ways."<sup>58</sup> Such is the case with *The Book Thief*, which tells of humanity and human life through the voice of the non-human. Yet while Death is not itself human, neither is it alien or foreign but rather an integral part of humanity; in fact, mortality and the truth that our human life is limited is a defining characteristic of human life and culture. So, when discussing Death as a narrator, the idea of foreign or unnatural perception is less helpful and accurate than that of post-human perception. Death, both as a concept and a narrator, is the ultimate conflict against the human need for control and choice—as of yet there is no choice to avoid death; there is a relationship to uncertainty and death in the post-human narratorial form.

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<sup>57</sup> Hayles, Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999. pg. 286

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 135

One of the most fundamental differences between a traditional, mimetic (meaning “copying” human subjectivity) narrator and a non-mimetic narrator like Death is the physical embodiment. Although many more traditional choices of narrator have stepped beyond normal limits, they are usually all fundamentally bound to earthly, sensory information as “human” subjects. Death has no such limit. Some of the most striking aspects of *The Book Thief* are the synesthetic descriptions laced throughout the narration. However it is not the synaesthesia which is so original or radical (such a technique has history back to the end of the nineteenth century with poets like Arthur Rimbaud), but rather the way Death creates unexpected and even impossible connections for a normal person to sense themselves. Yet these moments are so successful because even if initially odd they ultimately build a greater experience of a scene. This is done by cross-sensory metaphors that each bring to light different aspects of the thing perceived. An example of this practice in *The Book Thief* can be found almost immediately, where Death begins to introduce itself as the time when “you” the reader will ultimately meet: “You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I’ll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell of my footsteps.”<sup>59</sup> The metaphors and descriptions Death gives the readers are simultaneously imaginable and unimaginable; the reader can conceptualize the feeling of a weighed down “caked” body and even the sound of a scream or the visual of a dribble. Yet, the reader cannot naturally connect the *sight* of something dribbling and the *sound* of a scream as Death presents. Of this small passage, however, the one description most impossible to conceptualize is the “sound of the smell of [Death’s] footsteps.” Such a description demands three individual conceptualizations that have no basis in human experience or reality—thus, interestingly, the synesthetic moments throughout Death’s narration

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<sup>59</sup> Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. pg. 4



simultaneously extend human perception and imagination as well as remind the reader of their limitations of knowledge.

Despite the limits such a literary device can highlight, synaesthesia is also a large part of how the narrative creates connections between human reader and non-human narrator. Understanding Death perceives the world in a sensory way—even if at a different level—humanizes the figure so that reader and narrator may come to some common understanding. Indeed, the excessive amount of synesthetic descriptions often is used to convince the reader Death is trustworthy and sympathetic to human lives; chapter 1 is a prime example of this pleading-- “please believe me”<sup>60</sup> Death begs the reader to believe its story and its concern for humans, yet Death never can escape its fundamental untrustworthiness. Not only is Death, as a fact, unknowable to humans other than on the physical level (meaning the manifestation of Death upon living creatures), it is also the force that ultimately takes our individual agency, our choice, our life—often without warning. Such a force is inherently distrusted.

While the synaesthesia seems so extreme and untrustworthy when Death uses it, Liesel’s unique sensory view of the world seems more believable and attributable to her youth, such as in the scene where she meets Frau Holtzapfel’s son. In Liesel’s mind, Michael’s eyes “look painful and loud,”<sup>61</sup> and his mutilated arm bleeding “cherries of blood sprouting”<sup>62</sup> where the hand should have been; these descriptions are unusual, like those Death makes, but they are also visceral and effective in informing the reader of Michael’s tortured character before his story is revealed. The shared synaesthesia between Liesel and Death is relevant to understanding the point-of-view structures of the novel. Death narrates the story of *The Book Thief* as it understands it through Liesel’s own written

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<sup>60</sup> Zuzak, *The Book Thief*. pg. 350

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, pg. 465

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pg. 465

story, made when she was a girl living in Munich. Perhaps Death does have senses through which it relates to the world, but perhaps it is rather than Death comes to understand synaesthesia and sensory life through Liesel's own perception,<sup>63</sup> imaginatively applying it to its own stories and experiences. Death supplements and exists within Liesel's story, just as all the other stories (i.e. Rudy's, Arthur's, Ilsa's, etc.) exist within hers, a "story within a story"<sup>64</sup> structure; Of course, the observant reader notices that Liesel's stories supplement Death's story just as much. Understanding the layered, complex narrative structure of the text, it becomes clear how point-of-view is also layered and complex. For example, Max's story "The Standover Man," given as a present to Liesel, contains four separate point-of-views from which to consider the text. At the most basic level, it contains the reader's literal, visual perspective of the drawings Max has made that interrupt the normal text. Secondly, the nature of the story reveals Max's literal and figurative perception of being watched—literally watched by his Father and Liesel, and figuratively by Nazism, the Fuhrer, and even Death. When Liesel reads the story, she comes to understand it through her transferred point of view in the "quiet smiled secret"<sup>65</sup> of their growing love for each other; this POV also mixes into an imaginary, personified point-of-view of the Standover Man sitting "numb and gratified"<sup>66</sup> Words watching words etc. ideology view. Finally this scene contains the implied perspective of Death, a perspective better understood after completing the novel, reading its last words "I am haunted by humans."<sup>67</sup> Death is the universal standover man for humanity, but, powerfully, the book implies humans the same for Death—a point of view both transferred as it admits Death's interest in Liesel's story (her story haunts) and figurative, as it offers an original ideology of life and Death.

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<sup>63</sup> i.e. seeing Max's hair "like feathers," a worldview Hans wishes he had. Zuzak, *The Book Thief*. pg. 216 & pg. 455

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, pg. 71

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, pg. 238

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, pg. 238

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, pg. 550

The interchange and co-existence of multiple perspectives evident in this passage can be found throughout the novel, almost always including a dynamic between Liesel and Death—it is, after all, her story he is re-telling. Nevertheless, there are a few instances of point-of-view shifts outside of Liesel’s knowledge and story, interesting precisely in their tangency to the main plotline, deliberate choices by the author that embellish the main story. One such case is the death of Frau Hotzapfel’s son, Robert, in war-torn Russia. This moment takes on the perspective of another soldier in its retelling, but mostly it reveals Death’s point of view on the process of death as deeply personal and emotional for the narrator. Like someone suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Death’s thoughts of the Holtzapfel kitchen are altered by its memories of violent, winter Russia, the kitchen kettle, table, and the people all “wearing patches of snow.”<sup>68</sup> Moments like this and when Death imagines Rudy seeing Liesel kiss him (“In the darkness of my dark-beating heart, I know. He’d have loved it”<sup>69</sup>) are significant because they humanize Death and re-constitute Death’s role. If Death has a heart, then Death is not a wholly trustworthy narrator because it is emotional—yet strangely, its emotion also makes Death *more* knowable and trustworthy to its mortal readers. This is the struggle present in every instance that Death asks the reader to believe its story, and whether or not it the reader loses or gains trust in Death, it achieves a new perspective on Death and by extension humanity.

Again, the question rises as to why Death is so humanized in *The Book Thief*. The almost-human impression of Death offered in parts of the book is contrasted against non-human impressions, like when Death explains “the human heart is a line, whereas my own is a circle.”<sup>70</sup> Death is truly uncanny,<sup>71</sup> able to be a philosophical, universal foil—the true

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<sup>68</sup> Zuzak, *The Book Thief*. pg. 471

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, pg. 242

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, pg. 491

“stand over man.” Death acts as a universal foil in the way that it highlights aspects of all the characters, not only Liesel, that makes them human. Such characteristics include Rudy’s love for Liesel and Han’s acknowledgment of the human dignity of Jews, but also less positive aspects like cruelty or the shame that plagues Max and leads to Michael’s suicide; their shame results from their instinctual desire to live despite the deaths of their loved ones, a truly complex emotion that testifies to the inexplicable blending of logic and emotion within the human mind. These contradictory emotions and characteristics plague the narrator Death, who wonders “how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and beautiful;”<sup>72</sup> the narrator reveals this to the reader throughout the text as it contrasts against its fallible subjects and comments on the nature of humanity. So why then does Zusak and his Death narrator work so hard to convince the reader of his sincerity and his voice? And why choose such an inherently mysterious and untrusted force to narrate the story? These are fundamental questions about the narrative that make the novel such an interesting contribution to contemporary fiction.

In addition to acting as a foil, Death’s unusual narrative structuring of the story also emphasizes the nonlinear nature of lived human experience. It is arguable that *The Book Thief* ever has a true ending, the difference between ending and resolution crucial when looking at more complex narratives with multiple stories nested within the larger plotline. In their own ways each of these mini stories—that of Rudy, Liesel, Arthur Berg, and so forth—all have a kind of resolution in their triumphs, failures, and ultimate deaths. However, as the narrator often alludes (like the one in which it says “humans have the

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<sup>71</sup> In the sense Nicolas Royle gives in his book, the uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality... at some level the feeling of the uncanny may be bound up with the most extreme nostalgia or 'homesickness', in other words a compulsion to return to an inorganic state, a desire (perhaps unconscious) to die, a death drive.” Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny*. New York: Routledge, 2003. pg. 2

<sup>72</sup> Zusak, *The Book Thief*. pg. 550

good sense to die”<sup>73</sup>) there is no ending to Death’s story, *The Book Thief* just one of the canon of stories it experiences. As previously mentioned, although Death is not human it is an essential part of humanity, and its figurative personal story belongs to the human story as a whole just as much as Liesel’s. The narrator reminds the reader of this fact throughout the novel: “You want to know what I truly look like? Find yourself a mirror...”<sup>74</sup> and when he describes those killed in concentration camps “they were French, they were Jews, and they were you.”<sup>75</sup> In moments like these Death addresses the reader through the second person “you,” a conscious literary technique that engages the reader as if stepping outside of the story.

A good novel should always engage the reader, but this text does something uniquely contemporary in the way it engages readers, out rightly blending the line between characters and readers, literary and real; this is comparable to the way in which the third person plural narration of *The Virgin Suicides* includes the readers into a collective “we.” This blurring of reader and character, living and non-living therefore affects the ending of the novel—that is to say, prevents the ending. This occurs because it reminds us there is no ending for the narrator Death, just like how there is no ending to the book’s readership (and lives through readers). Moreover, there is no real “ending” in the traditional narrative sense because of how Death chooses to structure the story. Long before the plot reveals it, like in the case of Rudy, Death tells of characters’ deaths. In a striking commentary on its own narrative choices, Death admits:

“I’m spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it. I have given you two events in advance, because I don’t have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me. It chores me. I know what happens and so do you. It’s the machinations that wheel us there that

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<sup>73</sup> Zusak, *The Book Thief*, pg. 350

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 307

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 350

aggravate, perplex, interest, and astound me. There are many things to think of. There is much story.”<sup>76</sup>

Death is not interested in the familiar patterns of storytelling, but rather in the details, the often-overlooked plot points of a text. Structurally there is the shell of a story, the patterns of setup, climax, resolution, but these are empty without the moments that build to them. There is a fragmentation of the hierarchy of moments in a story when Death refuses a linear, structured narration. Life, itself a long, personalized story, is also not experienced in linear terms although often thought as such; Death’s comment “I know what happens and so do you” referring to the knowledge that our life’s ending is death. The narrator here leads the reader to re-consider why stories are thought of as linear, when really they are more circular, like Death’s heart, whirring through stories within stories. To the narrator (and all the characters), words or the “machinations” are the most vital part of the story. This may appear obvious and simplistic, but in reality *The Book Thief* is imbued by a meta-literary relationship to words far from simple.

The importance and purpose of words within the narrative is layered within the nested stories of the larger plotline, just as is point of view. Firstly, words and books are universally important in sharing perspectives and/or capturing historical moments—what *The Book Thief* does by presenting typically unheard perspectives of Nazi Germany. Within a story, however, words must be carefully chosen, and diction, as much as any literary device, determines the powerful text from the mediocre. Death consciously highlights this is moments where it breaks from the text and defines words<sup>77</sup>; this not only shows the self-consciousness of author and narrator in making a story, but also alludes to Liesel’s learning to read and obsession with words and writing. Another layer of importance attached to words is in the way it changes experienced reality in the text.

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<sup>76</sup> Zuzak, *The Book Thief*. pg. 243

<sup>77</sup> Examples: “A definition not found in the dictionary: not leaving,” or “Watschen = a good hiding” Ibid, pp. 37, 75

Notable examples of this power of words include Liesel's verbal attack on the Mayor's wife, where "blood leaked from her nose and licked at her lips...all from the words."<sup>78</sup>

Just as words can attack and destroy in *The Book Thief*,<sup>79</sup> they can also heal and provide life, as when Liesel reads to a sickly Max, "as if the words alone could nourish him."<sup>80</sup> Words also take on lives of their own in the text, Liesel seeing "the mechanics"<sup>81</sup> Death mentions as movements of the words on the wall, or when Max "open[s] her palm, giv[ing] her the words" as if they are physical things.<sup>82</sup> The moments in which words shape reality in the text is comparable to how words affect the Lisbons' realities in *The Virgin Suicides*. The boys' descriptors of the girl as otherworldly prevent them from living ordinary lives, trapped into conceptualizations of perfection, as discussed when examining the Rossetti poem in the text. Perhaps the most important and unique method in which *The Book Thief* employs words, however, is directly connected to the choice of Death as narrator. As aforementioned, Death is a difficult narrator to fully trust, both on an instinctual level as well as on the basis of Death's oddly emotional narration. Death is the natural antithesis of living things, taking life and agency, but Death cannot affect written word. Words are given life figuratively in the book but they are also the literal guardians of life, lasting after the characters' deaths and, meta-fictionally, after the author and readers' deaths. Even Death "lives" through the words of its narration in a way it could not otherwise—or at least not in a way intelligible to human readers. Even though Death, both in the text and in reality, may take life from the maker of words, Death cannot take the life out of words. This gives a new perspective on why Death is narrator, begging the reader to

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<sup>78</sup> Zuzak, *The Book Thief*. pg. 263

<sup>79</sup> Historical background intends the reader to understand how Nazism became so powerful through verbal propaganda. Max's sketches of Hitler also allude to this, like the one of "not Fuhrer—the conductor!"

Ibid, pg. 279

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, pg. 328

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, pg. 381

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, pg. 256

believe it; it is an authorial choice that is life affirming and assertive of the power of words over death.

The cinematic adaptation of the novel, directed by Brian Percival and written by Michael Petroni, is already at a disadvantage because it is a visual rather than verbal format. A deep focus of the novel, as just discussed, is the power of words and the emphasis of words as encoded life. The film as a depictive style of art cannot represent the imaginative qualities of written language as fully as literature—this has been discussed in relation to Coppola's cinematic adaptation as well. What the successful film does is not literally translate the novel to screen, but rather interpret its content through the tools unique to film, namely the layering of audio with visual tracks like the use of non-diegetic music in Coppola's film. *The Book Thief* film also layers audio and visual tracks to complement the unique narrative style in the novel, although not as successfully as does Coppola's. Some of the most striking examples of non-diegetic sound in the film are those spoken by Death. For being the primary narrator of the novel, Death does not speak much in the film, but when it does it signals a moment of dramatic importance; for example, at the declaration of war young children (including Rudy) run victoriously down the street, and the footage is played in slow motion as Death says "I have met so many young men over the years who have thought they are running at their enemy when the truth was, they were running to me."

This is a meta-cinematic moment fitting to the meta-fictional qualities of the novel. By withholding Death's voice for the majority of the film, when the viewer does hear its narration they are struck by the realization that they have forgotten Death's role as narrator; this technique mimics the way life is lived, people often forgetting death is around every corner. Other than the striking moments of narrative interruption, diegetic speech features heavily in the film to emphasize the focus on words in the text. During



Max's illness, a montage of Liesel's reading is paired with Max's delirious point of view, her words keeping him tethered to humanity in the film as in the novel. Liesel also reads aloud in the bomb shelter during air raids, but from a story in her mind rather than a physical text. The story she tells in the shelter is her resurrection of her brother, but it is also her story of Max's confinement to the shadows and even a story about Death and the thin divide separating it from life. The film also emphasizes the power of language by retaining German in certain scenes without translation or subtitle. This obviously enhances a certain realism of the story, set in Germany, but it also is done in scenes where a translation is not necessary or where the literal meaning of words is secondary to their effects. These scenes include the slow pan-out of the Hitler youth choir, all innocence and song until giant Nazi banners are revealed and the visuals change to the violence of Kristallnacht. The other notable scene featuring German is that of the town book burning, where both the speech before the bonfire and the song during the burning are in German. Both of the two scenes described involve mobs, using violence (but more importantly *words*) to destroy the parts of German life not in accordance to Nazism. Much like the broken glass and bodies littering the streets after Kristallnacht, the pages of burnt stories float around the solitary Liesel after the book burning, like lost souls.

One striking change in the film from the novel is to the collection of books Liesel acquires through gift and theft. The book Liesel reads to Max during his illness in the novel is *The Dream Carrier*, its title significant to the sharing of nightmares and dreams between Liesel and Max. It is important not only because it contains the words Liesel uses to give life back to Max, but also because it connects Liesel, Max, and Werner, Liesel's deceased brother; in the film Liesel makes this connection more obvious by placing a portrait of Werner on Max's chest. Death is involved in the triangulated relationship both because Werner is dead and Max is at risk of death, and also because it is the force that

carries away the dreams and untold stories within souls. In the film, however, *The Dream Carrier* (a novel invented for the purpose of the larger plot) is replaced by a book from outside the reality of the novel, *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells. The title alludes to the invisible people and connections in Liesel's life and in the text much like *The Dream Carrier* does, and draws attention to the invisible presence of Death which is more easily forgotten in the film's narration.

The "reality" of *The Invisible Man* versus *The Dream Catcher* is perhaps the most notable difference between the novels and their function in the story. The presence of a "real" text within *The Book Thief* highlights the fictiveness of the other books in the novel, but it simultaneously accents the absurdity of differentiating levels of fiction; *The Invisible Man*, although a real text, is still nevertheless a fictional novel being read within another fictional novel. Liesel's reality and the readers' reality is bridged by the presence of Well's text, showing how tenuous definitions of "reality" are. The layering of novels within *The Book Thief*, each different genres and types of books, also deconstructs hierarchies of fictions; the dictionary, for example, is not a fictional text in content but in the context of the larger fictional novel. There is a re-construction and de-framing of the idea of "fiction" here at play in the film and novel that perfectly coordinates with the narration and process of storytelling.

The film is concerned with the process of Liesel coming to know words and the importance of storytelling, her spoken story in the bomb shelter and writing in her journal both key moments. The focus on Liesel is understandable, she is the protagonist and the film only has so much screen time to dedicate to other characters. Nevertheless, it is this limitation of the film, both time and depiction, that prevents the film from fully engaging with the complexity of the novel's layered narratives. The narration is purposefully complex, with Death's narration tucked within Liesel's original telling of the story, her

own perspective and narration just one of the countless that make her life. Narration and narrative in this novel, as in much contemporary fiction, draws attention to the frames of a story and the frames of reality through meta-fiction.

Edouard Glissant, a famous literary critic who wrote many texts in first person plural to capture a collective post-colonial mentality, once commented on the purpose and goal of unnatural narration: “The author must become demystified, certainly, because he must be integrated into a common resolve. The collective “we” becomes the site of a generative system, and the true subject.”<sup>83</sup> In the west, literature for the past hundred and fifty years<sup>84</sup> has focused on the power of the individual, but more and more contemporary fiction is choosing to step away from such an emphasis, “an age that eschews fixed essences.”<sup>85</sup> In a century that has ushered in innumerable technologies to connect the world through shared global platforms, the “true subject” of concern is perhaps the collective, the shared human experience, rather than the individual. Additionally, this move away from individuality towards a more collective, imaginative experience also re-aligns notions of individual power toward an idea of individual powerlessness against larger, collective forces.

Ultimately, what does this mean for contemporary, millennial readers? Not only does millennial narration structure itself in *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Book Thief* according to the shifting conception of consciousness and reality that has developed from the digital age, it also moves closer to implicit questions about death. Such questions include literal death, which is the ultimate barrier for human knowledge and of central

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<sup>83</sup> Glissant, Edouard and J. Michael Dash. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989. pg. 149

<sup>84</sup> The concept of the individual has been present in Western literature from the birth of the novel in the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the psychological novels of Conrad and Twain that delve into the psyche of the individual. Only with postmodernism is there the beginning of a questioning of the individual and the concept of individuality that is explored more in contemporary fiction, like in Eugenides’ book.

<sup>85</sup> Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*. pg. 56

concern to the plots and meaning of both texts. The questions also include, however, the death of a certain historical tradition of narration and liberation from past models of understanding. Whether for the Lisbon girls who escape understanding and a life limited by the constructions of others, or the liberation of the voice of death in narration, or in the liberation of narration generally as depictive and limited to embodied human knowledge, millennial narration seeks freedom of expression that is liminal and neither post-modern nor modernist.

Technology has enabled us to defy death in some ways, the presence of online content lingering long after the physical creators have passed in reality, like virtual ghosts. Anything ever posted or created online also lingers somewhere amidst the chaos of the internet, never able to be fully removed. There is a kind of permanence to the digital age that has not existed before, and this had changed the way we are able to approach and discuss death, as much as life. Literature has picked up on this change in conception of consciousness (and the end of consciousness in death) and moved towards less tangible representations of narrators that mirror virtual reality and the collective that exists online. Ultimately, all this leads to an imagination of the past and present through a perspective that recognizes boundaries and seeks to move beyond them through impossible and unfamiliar forms of narration, having the print world parallel the virtual.

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