

# Review: Anna Backman Rogers, *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure*

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**Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure**

**By Anna Backman Rogers**

**Berghahn Books, 2019**

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The pretty cinematic image has often been dismissed from rigorous film studies discourse and scholarship for its apparent frivolity and shallowness. In *Sofia Coppola: The Politics of Visual Pleasure* (2019), Anna Backman Rogers disrupts this reductive consensus by demonstrating that the pretty image possesses the radical potential as an aesthetic feminist form and language, which is worthy of significant academic consideration and study. To argue this, Rogers bases her research on Rosalind Galt's trailblazing 2011 study *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*, that refutes the misogynistic idea that the pretty or decorative image is false, shallow, feminine, and apolitical, and argues for its multifarious signification and value due to its ability to provoke from its surface. Focusing solely on the films of Sofia Coppola, a female film director whose work has often been disregarded by film critics and scholars alike for her idiosyncratic, feminine cinematic aesthetic, Rogers demonstrates how the pretty image is strongly political and feminist, and in turn, how Coppola, as a director, is a contemporary "feminist auteure" and creator who wields this particular formal language with astute dexterity. With *Sofia Coppola*, Rogers shows that the decorative image is, especially in the case of Coppola's films, not an incidental expression, but rather a finely composed one, that subverts and reorganises the patriarchal taxonomy and subjectivity of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

The opening section of the book, "Imaging Absence as Abjection and Imaging the Female Gothic as Rage", comprises two chapters. The first, focuses on *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), a film vaunted by film critics for its dream-like imagery, soundtrack, and dark humour; namely, its superficial qualities. In this chapter, Rogers disturbs this seemingly simple appreciation of the film's artefacts by arguing that in spite of its oneiric aesthetic, it is suffused with an inarticulable horror with regard to the violence of male desire vis-à-vis the (adolescent)

female body. Rogers, here, reads the imagery of the Lisbon sisters as a site of abjection, that at once embodies a resistance to patriarchal norms but also comes to typify its affects. Discussing *The Virgin Suicide's* mise-en-scene and cinematography, Rogers pinpoints the unspoken violence in what is omitted or stilled in the film. It is these devices that Rogers advances that enables a voyeurism and fetishism that reductively redefines the girls' narratives into an object of phantasy against their own stories. The second chapter in this section discusses *The Beguiled* (2017), the film in which the author considers Coppola to have made her feminist intentions most manifest in. Rogers excavates how Coppola utilises the conventions of the Southern gothic and female gothic subgenres to rework the system of social power that has been defined by patriarchy and which privileges male supremacy. Here, Rogers looks at how the film's time, space, and power dynamics privilege the female gaze whilst opening up masculinity to a position of vulnerability; a complete subversion of the hegemonic gender conventions associated with the gothic genre and mainstream Hollywood cinema. In this way, Rogers suggests that Coppola announces how women lack absolutely nothing and are in fact violently potent, capable, and whole; a suggestion that comes into antithesis with Freud's phallogocentric theory that women are defined by their lack (in contrast to their male counterparts.)

The second section of the book, "Empty Subjectivities and Masculinity as Void", also comprises of two chapters. The first one discusses *Lost in Translation* (2003), specifically how the film handles the fragility, liminality, tension, and experiences of existential crises. Here, Rogers compares the symbolic function of the characters of Charlotte and Bob, vis-à-vis notions of identity, *nothingness*, and being. Rogers finds that *Lost in Translation* reworks ideas of alienation and loneliness from a feminist perspective, as the film suggests that the negative capability that shrouds both characters is expressed as a liberation born from the acceptance that life and meaning can be found in a void, *in nothingness*. The second chapter looks at male subjectivity and masculinity in crisis in *Somewhere* (2010), through the lens of the main

character, Johnny Marco. In this chapter, Rogers discusses how, traditionally, Hollywood cinema has used masculinity in crisis as a device with which to reaffirm its mythical version of masculinity and phallic power via its amendment. The author advances that Marco's non-existent mode of being and crisis bleeds into the film's use of time and space, and effectively counters and infects the structure of patriarchal fictions.

The third section of the book, "The Female Body as Patriarchal Currency and the Commodification of Female Identity", encompasses two chapters, as well. The first centres on *Marie Antoinette* (2006), a film that has been criticised by critics and scholars for its visual extravagance and lack of political interrogation of the historical period it is describing. Apropos, Rogers spins these diminutive comments, by arguing that the film's emphasis on material culture is where its politic statements lie. Rogers advances that the film's obsession with surfaces, objects, and materiality is used as a critique on the commodification and objectification of the female body caught within a web of transactions of a patriarchal economy. The author advances that the film's imager, destabilise gendered notions of the cinematic gaze and confront postfeminist values. In this section's final chapter, Rogers looks at *The Bling Ring* (2013). Like in the previous chapter, Rogers here too is concerned with issues of materiality, superficiality, and subjectivity, manifest through the dazzling spectacle of contemporary celebrity, fashion, and pop culture in the film. In this chapter, however, Rogers considers the implication of this images vis-à-vis concepts of capitalist consumerism, social networking, and feminism.

Anna Backman Rogers' *Sofia Coppola* sheds light onto the intelligent and subversive workings of Sofia Coppola's cinematic vision, that has long been dismissed and overlooked by film scholars and critics alike. At the same time, and in the same vein as Rosalind Galt, Roger's book offers gravity and seriousness to the academic study of the pretty filmic image. Each chapter's subject is rigorously researched and analysed, whilst offering a meticulous theoretical

approach, crafted by a constellation of appropriate theories and philosophical ideas. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in reading about Sofia Coppola and her filmic canon, as well those concerned with questioning, researching, and finding the symbolic function and potential of the aesthetically pretty cinematic image.