

Review of Alessandra Seggi's *Youth and Suicide in American Cinema: Context, Causes, and Consequences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

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Despite the abundance of scholarly literature on the representation of suicide in various entertainment forms, few books exist on the subject. In the arena of film analysis, two books that immediately come to mind are Steven Stack and Barbara Bowman's (2011) *Suicide Movies: Social Patterns 1900-2009*, a magisterial study that plumbs 1,158 feature-length films for causes or motives for suicide and Claire Sisco King's (2012) *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma and the Cinema*, which examines the cultural and ideological work done by films on heroic suicides. Whereas the former aimed for breadth, the latter aimed for depth. Though they remain relevant, the two titles are somewhat dated, so I was pleasantly surprised to receive Alessandra Seggi's recent book, which combines breadth and depth and zeroes in on one of our most vulnerable populations: our youth.

From the outset, Seggi underscores the book's timeliness by highlighting the national and global prevalence of suicide – including its increasing trend among American youth – and the role of film in navigating dominant cultural narratives on suicide's causes, contexts, and consequences. Traditionally, because of its mass appeal (read: low culture status), the teen film has largely

been treated with disdain by the academic community. But as Seggi implores readers: “Films about suicide give us the opportunity to consider what it must be like to feel suicidal, what events and conditions might trigger it, and what friends and family must go through in the wake of a suicide” (p. 7).

Suicide – and youth suicide, in particular – is a *wicked problem* (Rittel & Webber, 1973) that has no single point of origination, resists technological solutions, and is itself symptomatic of larger social problems. Thus, Seggi adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on sociology (her home discipline), suicidology, anthropology, media and cultural studies, and media literacy. Her multidisciplinary is evident in her invocation of Durkheim's typology of suicide (altruistic, anomic, egotistic, and fatalistic), Shneidman's *psychache* and psychological autopsy, and Mills' linkage of private troubles with public concerns.

The author is extremely thorough when it comes to providing context. For instance, she devotes two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) to tracing the emergence of adolescence as a category of special interest to media industries, whose attempts to reach younger audiences, in concert with larger structural forces, triggered changes in film form and content. These include the incorporation of topics traditionally censored in cinema (such as suicide), and the rise of the teen film, whose myriad subgenres (e.g., teen horror, teen melodrama, and the school film) sought to capture diverse teenage experiences. But as Seggi astutely notes, with the rise of the teen film came alarmist concerns about film's negative influence on youth mental health, which persist today and have become associated with contemporary distribution and consumption practices (e.g., binge watching and solitary viewing). In another chapter (Chapter 4), Seggi provides a thorough review of the literature on cluster, contagion, and imitation suicides. She addresses the different methods used to study the effects of media representations (real as well as fictional) on actual suicidal behavior. She also points out the limitations of the effects tradition, which views audience members as passive recipients of media messages and focuses on negative representations at the exclusion of positive ones (e.g., media that discourage suicide and depict overcoming suicidality).

Methodologically, the author uses quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine a purposive sample of 186 films, drawn from a total of 2126 domestic feature-length films from 1919 to 2019. Her sample includes films in which youth suicide is the avowed focus, as well films in which suicide is a mere plot point, because even a “throwaway reference” (p. 19) to suicide, argues Seggi, can tell us much about the social context. Her sample is diverse with respect to thematic concerns and causal attributions for suicide. In her analysis, she addresses internal as well as external causes (e.g., trauma, so-called “mental illness,” too little or too much social integration, and too little

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or too much social regulation [Chapter 7]), and the myriad ripple effects of attempted and completed suicides on individuals and communities (Chapter 8). For each cause or effect, Seggi provides examples from her extensive sample. Some examples are quick references, whereas others are more detailed forays. The author's writing shines best when she takes a deep dive into select media texts, and I was especially thrilled with two particular chapters in which she does that.

In one such chapter (Chapter 9), Seggi examines the life-affirming and anti-suicide message of a single text: *Archie's Final Project* (dir. David Lee Miller, 2009). *AFP* is a romance comedy that is "made by teenagers for teenagers" (p. 221). On the surface, the film is a "typical teenage romance" (p. 226) populated exclusively by white, heterosexual, and financially well-off characters, but as Seggi reveals through her deft analysis, *AFP* digs much deeper. She notes, for example, that *AFP*'s unconventional cinematic form – a hodgepodge of live action, documentary, and animated footage that "mixes more formats than any other film" (p. 223) – reflects the media saturation and overload experienced by today's youth, who are simultaneously "disconnected [and] over-connected" (p. 235). She also notes the film's disavowal of tropes that position young people against older generations, showing that effective suicide prevention and intervention require concerted efforts in which multiple generations are united. Readers will appreciate the author's attention to the relationship between film form and content, which is enriched by excerpts from her conversations with members of the production team.

The subsequent chapter (Chapter 10) shifts the focus to Season 1 of the Netflix original series, *13 Reasons Why* (2017). Based on the young adult novel of the same title by Jay Asher (originally published in 2008), *13RW* unpacks the mystery of a young girl's suicide, who left behind thirteen audio recordings addressed to thirteen different people who are presumably responsible for her death. The show's first season is, in essence, a 13-hour suicide note that publicly shames the culprits. When I first saw the series (and read the YA novel years prior to that), I found its exploration of suicide's social causes to be a breath of fresh air in light of the increasing pathologization of suicide in our society. *13RW* explores myriad forms of interpersonal violence – bullying, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, rape, slut shaming, and victim blaming – that could very well push teens to the edge. Nevertheless, I concur with Seggi that *13RW* flagrantly disregards media guidelines on safe reporting of suicide in its graphic depiction of the female lead's death. Seggi also adds that *13RW* fails to address alternatives to suicide, reiterates potentially dangerous clichés (e.g., suicide as weakness and adolescent spaces as sites of excess), and renders characters flat, sorting female characters into "sluts" or "nice girls" and male characters into "jocks" or "brains" (p. 248).

Admittedly, I was initially puzzled by the author's inclusion of *13RW*, a television series on a streaming platform, in a manuscript about feature-length films. However, it soon became apparent that *13RW* was meant to serve as a counterpoint to *AFP*. Whereas *AFP* illustrates the power of intergenerational communication and alliance in staving off suicide, *13RW* depicts a "dearth of meaningful relationships between [suicidal] youth and the adults in their lives" (p. 247). And whereas *AFP* features characters who speak up and speak out, *13RW* is a study of the lethality of silence in the absence of an *enlightened witness* – to borrow the late Alice Miller's (2001) words, whom Seggi also invokes.

Seggi strikes a balance between in-depth exploration and broader surveys of thematic concerns. As the book approaches its end, the particular gives way to the general. One chapter (Chapter 11), for example, presents ten dialectical tensions that recur across

the films in the sample. These include relational tensions experienced by the suicide bereaved (e.g., staying silent vs. speaking out, affirming life vs. falling into despair, and revealing vs. hiding a loved one's cause of death), as well as *representational* tensions, such as the adoption of a male perspective on female suicidality and the preponderance of heterosexual suicides in cinema, despite the fact that LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk. Then, in the penultimate and final chapters (Chapters 12 and 13), Seggi addresses the incommunicability – among youth, between youth and other groups, and between youth and social institutions – that drives suicides in film and in real life, and relates it to the larger social milieu in which young people dwell. After all, Seggi poignantly writes, "suicide as expression of violence against the self is often embedded in a broader context of violence" (p. 291): bullying, school shootings, racial violence, violence against women and sexual minorities, war and terrorism, and compulsory heterosexuality's toxicity.

Though not the book's primary focus, Seggi also furnishes guidelines on safe messaging that are grounded in the literature (Chapter 4), and what she calls a proactive, media literacy strategy aimed specifically at young viewers (Chapter 5) which resurfaces at the end of Chapter 10 in the form of a Viewing Guide. The guide consists of 50 questions on *13RW*, asking young audience members to reflect on their viewing experience and the show's depiction of suicide, and to share their thoughts on how they would represent the plot and its characters differently if they were seated on the director's chair. As someone who teaches courses on dying, death and grief, into which I incorporate multi-week units on suicide, I believe that the guide has pedagogical utility and can be tailored to a variety of media artifacts.

My criticisms of the book are few. In terms of organization, for a book of this length and density, I would have appreciated a roadmap of the entire book in the introductory chapter and at the beginning of each chapter, a brief preview of its contents. I would have also appreciated a full bibliography at the end of the book, as opposed to shorter bibliographies at the end of each chapter, which is standard for edited anthologies, but not for single-author monographs such as this. The book engages with an impressive volume of literature, and having a complete listing of references in one place would allow readers to more easily find sources that are interesting or relevant to them.

As I noted earlier, the author is nothing but generous in providing context and in explicating her theoretical, methodological, and conceptual frameworks, which are sure to be helpful to readers who are unfamiliar with the literature on suicide and its representational history. But for more seasoned scholars of suicidology, the abundance of background information might detract from the anticipation of diving into the author's distinctive findings, which again, are many. I frequently found myself leaping ahead to the analysis chapters, then going back to appreciate the groundwork laid in previous chapters. Lastly, as a critical suicidologist, I would have liked to see deeper engagement with the critical suicidology literature – addressing, for instance, how the biopsychiatric model itself contributes to ongoing material and symbolic violence against marginalized others, including suicidal others – a phenomenon Baril (2020) aptly calls *suicidism*.

These minor quibbles aside, Seggi's book is a vital contribution to the literature that goes beyond the pathologizing and individualizing tendencies that are so prevalent in mainstream suicidology research. Youth suicide, after all, is a "symptom of wider, more insidious social issues" (p. 302), and Seggi's multifaceted and thoughtfully considered approach will be of value to those who study, practice, or dwell within those spaces that most would dare not tread.

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