YOUTH AND SUICIDE IN AMERICAN CINEMA:

CONTEXT, CAUSES, AND CONSEQUENCES

Paolo Stellino

(Ifilnova)

Alessandra Seggi. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. xxiii+341 p. ISBN: 978-3-031-08685-4.

According to the World Health Organization, globally, more than 700,000 people die by suicide every year. (p. 1)[1] Suicide is among the leading causes of death worldwide, being the third leading cause of death in females aged 15-19 years, and the fourth in males of the same age group.[2] The reduction of suicide mortality is one of the priorities of the World Health Organization. Given the positive and/or negative impact that films may have on their audiences, it is surprising to see that, to date, relatively few studies have been devoted to the relationship between cinema and suicide. Within this context, the publication of Alessandra Seggi's *Youth and Suicide in American Cinema: Context, Causes, and Consequences* will certainly be welcomed, not only by professionals engaged in the study and prevention of suicide but also by film studies scholars interested in understanding how films represent and depict such a delicate topic.

The aim of Seggi's study is essentially twofold. On the one hand, the book presents the first systematic investigation of youth and suicide in American films from 1900 to 2019. This investigation is based on a sample of 186 films chosen from 2126 American (i.e. American-made or co-production between the US and other countries) films with youth and suicide. The sample selection was made according to precise criteria. Only fiction and feature-length (60 minutes in length minimum) films were considered. With few exceptions (chapter 10 is dedicated to the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*), all the films had a traditional theatrical release. Lastly, the films selected by Seggi are by, for, and

about youth, that is, "they cast young actors and actresses, and/or were directed by young people, and/or target young audiences, and/or focus on youth experiences" (p. 12). Unlike other studies, Seggi's considered not only films with actual suicides but also included films with one or more forms of suicidal behaviour (such as suicide ideation and suicide attempt).

The second, broader, and more ambitious aim of Seggi's study is the role that film plays and can or should ideally play within society. As Seggi points out, everyone's and, especially, youth's reality is increasingly hyper-mediated. Text messaging, internet surfing, spending time on social media, watching series, films, or YouTube videos, are all activities that are part of our daily reality. Teenagers are often exposed to violent, pornographic content and do not always have the means to understand, contextualise or question what they see. Given that heavy media exposure has been associated with possible negative effects, it is of fundamental importance that young audiences be empowered and given the appropriate tools to think about and question the media – all the more so if the content conveyed by the media concerns suicide issues. This is precisely Seggi's aim, namely to "offer a proactive approach for audiences to interpret film messages: a media literacy strategy to embrace as active social players, while watching these films" (pp. 3-4).

What is more, Seggi's proactive approach not only promotes a media literacy strategy but also encourages young audiences to become media producers for two main reasons. First, paradoxically, teen films (that is, films that are designed to appeal primarily to an adolescent audience) are still produced and made by those very adults who are often depicted as being either out of touch with teens or even opposed to them. In this sense, according to Seggi, "young people need to be involved in the discussion of issues pertaining to them, they bring their perspective to the table and raise the issues that *they* value" (p. 221). Second, whereas empowering young audiences with the skills necessary to become an active audience can bring change at the micro-level, "learning how to think as media producers and how to create media messages can enact radical meso- and macro-level changes, over time, in the existing mediascape" (p. 121).

The starting point of Seggi's investigation is the firm belief that film has two, main essential functions. On the one hand, films are a mirror of the culture and society in which they are created. On

the other hand, they have the power to convey specific messages and values to the masses, that is, films may be agents of cultural and social change (p. 7). This is why it is so important to understand how film represents and portrays youth and suicide. Unfortunately, as Seggi points out at length, American cinema's (particularly Hollywood's) treatment of suicide is disappointing, as it often conveys hard-to-die myths and stereotypes. Most youth films from Seggi's sample refer to at least two or three of the following five tropes: the focus is by default on White characters; the relationship between youth and adults is often tense; parties with varying degrees of excess are common; heterosexuality is the norm; the main character is often the new kid in town (pp. 17-18; the series *13 Reasons Why* contains all these tropes). This standardized and stereotyped treatment of suicide and suicidality often prevents an in-depth and open exploration of youth and suicide, even in those films in which these topics are central to the plot.

Seggi's concern with such a standardized and stereotyped treatment of suicide and suicidality has also to do with the negative impact that media suicides have or may have on real suicides. As she points out (p. 98), although the risk of copycat suicides linked to plays and novels that portray one or more suicides has long been known (Japanese Kabuki plays or Goethe's well-known 1774 novel *The Sorrow of Young Werther* are typical examples of this), the rigorous scientific study of how media suicides impact real suicides began only in the 1960s. However, an ultimate consensus is difficult to reach in this field, given that this type of research inevitably faces several limitations or problems such as the ecological fallacy.[3] Another important problem of this kind of studies is that they tend to consider audiences "mere passive recipients of media content, with no ability to make meaning" (p. 100). Despite these and other related problems, Seggi concludes that "there is enough evidence to support significant increases in suicide after a widely publicized suicide story" (pp. 104-105) and that "in any case, caution needs to be exercised when dramatized portrayals of suicide target young people" (p. 109).

The question of the impact of media suicides on real suicides is all the more interesting as it bears obvious similarities to the widely-debated recurrent issue of the alleged impact of media violence on youth's aggressive behaviour. Do violent films incite violence or do they rather act as

cathartic, purging the viewers' baser passions and instincts? The case of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* comes to mind. The film was accused of inspiring copycat rapes and other violent acts, leading Kubrick to eventually withdraw the film from distribution in the United Kingdom. However, the link between the film and those acts remains doubtful.[4] Still, one can legitimately raise doubts about the impact of an ever-increasing aestheticization of violence on young audiences. As Pauline Kael put it more than fifty years ago in her review of Kubrick's film: "At the movies, we are gradually being conditioned to accept violence as a sensual pleasure. The directors used to say they were showing us its real face and how ugly it was in order to sensitize us to its horrors. You don't have to be very keen to see that they are now in fact desensitizing us".[5]

Faced with similar concerns, in my opinion, Seggi choses the most reasonable and fruitful approach. As Seggi herself points out, her approach is neither prescriptive ("it does not suggest, dictate, or impose any pre-established message for media makers"; p. 121) nor protective ("it does not shield audiences from media messages"; *ibid*.), but proactive, that is, it aims at empowering young audiences, giving them the proper tools to increase their understanding of the complexity of suicidal behaviour and to hone their skills as media consumers. In other words, according to Seggi, the solution is neither to curb artistic freedom (although she reiterates the importance for media producers, makers, and professionals to follow the recommended guidelines; see pp. 112-115[6]) nor to protect young viewers from troublesome content to which they would most probably have access in any case by other means, but rather to promote media literacy.

Keeping the analogy between the representation of violence and that of suicide in the media, it is possible to say that Seggi's proactive approach recalls the questions that Michael Haneke raises at the end of his paper *Violence and the Media*. Like Seggi's, Haneke's main worry is to understand how one emancipates the viewer from being a victim of the medium and a spineless consumer of violent content. According to Haneke, "The question is not: 'What am I allowed to show?' but rather: 'What chance do I give the viewer to recognize what it is I am showing?' The question – limited to the topic of VIOLENCE – is not: 'How do I show violence?' but rather: 'How do I show the *viewer* his *own position* vis-à-vis violence and its portrayal.' *For this purpose,* one must find forms".[7] Although

Haneke is raising these issues as a film director, his concerns remind of Seggi's. A part of her study can indeed be interpreted as an answer to Haneke's challenge ("one must find forms"), an answer that consists in a media literacy strategy based on a number of critical questions that aim at engaging the audience, avoiding passive viewing. Such questions are presented in a four-part questionnaire that might be fruitfully used to stimulate reflection on the viewer's own cinematic experience (part 1), the portrayal of suicide in film (part 2), and the degree of accuracy and authenticity of this portrayal (part 3). The last part of the questionnaire (part 4) is particularly interesting, as it questions the viewers about how they would re-write the part of the film about suicide, were they commissioned to do so. This part of the questionnaire asks questions such as: "What would the suicidal character do instead of taking their life?", "What if you were to craft an anti-suicide message for young people like you?", and "What are some of the best aspects of being young? And what are some of the worst?", among others (p. 128).

In chapter 10, these questions are fruitfully applied to the series *13 Reasons Why*, which Seggi presents as "an important case study on how artistic freedom of expression, media guidelines, and best practices for reporting on suicide, media criticism, and mental health science can either blend or clash" (p. 239). Seggi develops an in-depth analysis of the Netflix series, showing how it contains common tropes, several forms of violence, mostly negative examples of relationality, and a somewhat romanticized idea of suicide. *13 Reasons Why* is contrasted with a 2009 independent film, *Archie's Final Project*, directed by David Lee Miller – a film to which chapter 9 is devoted. Seggi presents *Archie's Final Project* as a positive cinematographic example of how to deal with the topic of suicide: it conveys a life-affirming and anti-suicide message; it discusses teen experiences in an unconventional cinematic form; it focuses on human connections; and lastly but most importantly, teenagers were involved in the production of the film and the creative team consulted with many health professionals.

For space reasons, it is not possible to address all the topics touched upon by Seggi's rich and complex study in this review. A critical and in-depth examination of her analysis of the main themes addressed by the films contained in her sample would require a separate review, and this analysis is

only one part of her study, which also includes a detailed overview of how the depiction of youth evolved in the American film industry (Ch. 2) and how American youth films have dealt with adolescent experiences (Ch. 3), among other aspects. What her study shows is that, instead of making a positive contribution, many of these films rather tend to exacerbate youth's sense of disorientation, presenting youth experiences in a very polarized way. What is more, the same films portray a hyper-mediated youth that lives in a society pervaded by violence and often unable to deal with forms of suicidality or, in the event of a suicide, with the grieving process. According to Seggi, this shows that "suicide is not just a public health issue, but also a symptom of wider, more insidious social issues", and this is why it is all the more pressing "to further investigate the life challenges that youth feel they cannot face" (p. 302).

In conclusion, Seggi's *Youth and Suicide in American Cinema: Context, Causes, and Consequences* is an excellent study that is, at the same time, a highly informative and thorough exploration of the depiction of suicide and suicidality in American youth films as well as a well-researched study that investigates the socio-cultural and psychological causes and consequences of suicide. Although Seggi's analysis is often limited to the plot and content of the films from her sample and rarely includes a cinematic analysis of their formal features (Seggi herself concludes her book by clarifying that "additional analyses of the visual, verbal, auditory representations of suicidal behavior in film need to be conducted"; p. 305), her examination of how American youth films have portrayed suicide and forms of suicidality is very insightful. Furthermore, her theoretical analysis goes hand in hand with a lively concern for the pressing issue of suicide among young people. Her book proposes concrete strategies to limit and counteract the negative impact the media can have on young people, promoting in a very clever way media literacy. For all these reasons, Seggi's study represents an important contribution to the understanding of the complex relationship between youth, suicide, and its cinematic representation.[8]

[1] World Health Organization, *Suicide Worldwide in 2019. Global Health Estimates* (World Health Organization: 2021), 1.

[2] *Ibid*., 8.

[3] As Seggi puts it: "Usually, when investigating the potential impact of media portrayals of suicide on real suicides, the fact that data on suicides and changes in suicide rates are collected at the aggregate level does not allow researchers to gather any information about whether or not the people that took their lives had been exposed to the suicide media depiction under investigation" (p. 102).

[4] See Julian Petley, "Clockwork Crimes: Chronicle of a *Cause Célèbre*", *Index on Censorship* 24/6 (1995): 48-52.

[5] Pauline Kael, "*A Clockwork Orange*: Stanley Strangelove. Review in *The New Yorker*, January I, 1972", in *Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange*, Stuart Y. McDougal ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 134-139, 138.

[6] In one of her recommendations, Seggi argues that, to avoid identification by the viewer, "the characters who display some form of suicidal behavior should ideally not be portrayed as likable or sympathetic" (p. 112). I wonder whether this is the right strategy. Indeed, portraying the suicidal characters as dislikeable or unsympathetic may lead to convey unwanted stereotypes and clichés.

[7] Michael Haneke, "Violence and the Media", in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, Roy Grundmann ed. (Malden, Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 575-579, 579.

[8] This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Norma Transitória DL 57/2016/CP1453/CT0010 and the project UIDB/00183/2020.