

## MA Contemporary Dialogues: *Moving Image*

### Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

**4. Time, Memory and the Archive:** In what ways do contemporary artists and designers reimagine time, memory, and archival practice, whether through repetition, rupture, slowness, or nonlinear temporality? How do these temporal aesthetics intersect with cultural, technological, or historical concerns?



In what ways do Sofia Coppola and Justine Kurland construct an archive of girlhood influenced by memory and melancholy?

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## **Abstract**

This essay examines how Sofia Coppola and Justine Kurland construct affective counter-archives of girlhood through their respective mediums of film and photography. Drawing on theorists such as Ann Cvetkovich, Svetlana Boym, and Catherine Driscoll, the essay argues that girlhood cannot be preserved through traditional archival methods, which prioritise factual stability over emotional resonance. Instead, Coppola and Kurland archive girlhood through atmosphere, mood, and the fleeting qualities of becoming. Coppola's slow temporalities, silences, and interior melancholy capture the emotional afterlife of girlhood, revealing how its traces persist into early adulthood. In contrast, Kurland stages girlhood in motion; rebellious, collective, and perpetually slipping away, using photography to freeze moments already marked by disappearance.

Both artists resist dominant, sexualised portrayals of femininity and instead foreground girlhood as a complex, transitional state shaped by longing, uncertainty, and reflective nostalgia. Their archives remain intentionally incomplete, acknowledging that girlhood is an experience that can only be felt and reimagined rather than fully captured. While their work primarily reflects white, middle class girlhood, raising questions about the limits of nostalgic representation, Coppola and Kurland nonetheless expand the emotional and political possibilities of what can be preserved within the archive of feeling.

## **Introduction**

Girlhood is one of the most culturally saturated yet under-archived experiences. There are infinite interpretations of the transitional experience of girlhood that appear in film, photography, literature and popular culture; yet it remains largely absent from institutional archive practices due to it being transitional and affective. Melancholy, nostalgia and emotional residue shapes how girlhood is remembered, making it a form of memory that resists the traditional archival methods. This essay will explore how Sofia Coppola and Justine Kurland construct their own counter-archive of girlhood through their respective mediums of filmmaking and photography. Both Coppola and Kurland blend realism and fantasy to create spaces where girlhood is not being documented as fact but rather felt as atmosphere,

longing and becoming. Both works extend their versions of a feminist reimagining of what archive can be; pushing forward the value of emotional experience over historical documentation.

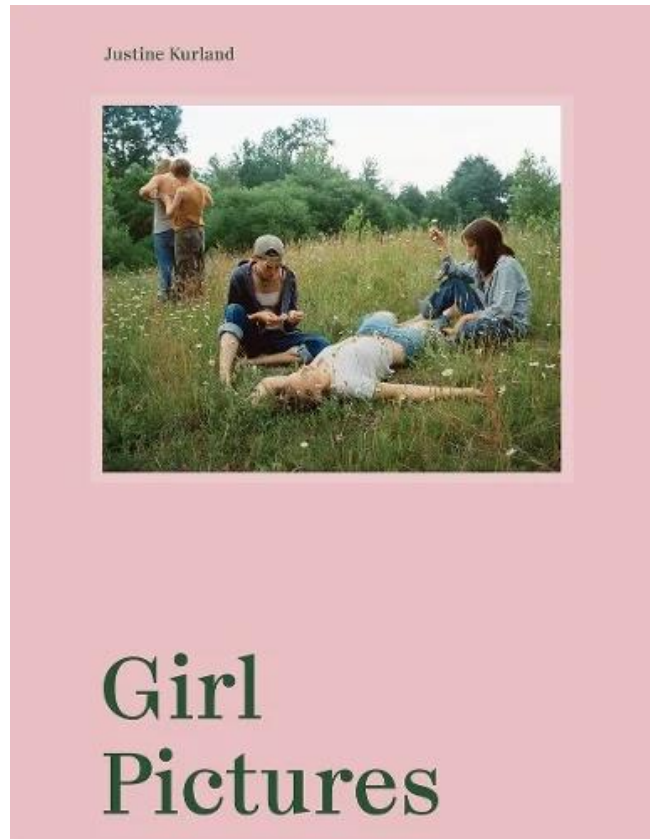
A quote from Kurland highlights into the why behind breaking boundaries of traditional archival practices as being so significant:

*“-in terms of our current political situation, with a President that brags about grabbing women by the pussy and the rollback of human rights - I pictured the girls as a standing army united in solidarity, outside the margins of home or institution, working together to build a community that foregrounded their experience as primary and irrefutable. These photographs were a call to action, then as now.”*  
*(AnOther, 2020)*

Archiving girlhood becomes a way to resist the forces that diminish or erase women’s experiences, preserving the emotional and communal aspects of girlhood that are often overlooked and left to become a distant memory. This essay will argue that Coppola and Kurland create melancholic, incomplete and reflective archives of girlhood. Slowness, stillness, disappearance and a refusal of narrative closure are all common elements within both artists that will be explored through their aesthetics and how these elements feed into the ‘affective archive’ method in order to preserve the emotional realities of girlhood in ways traditional archives cannot.



Coppola, S. (2023). Archive Sofia Coppola. MACK.



(Kurland and Bengal, 2020)

## Archiving Feelings: Melancholy, Memory, The Emotional Afterlife of Girlhood

Attempting to archive the girlhood experience through stable events, documents and other formal records is the first step in the wrong direction on understanding how to preserve such a universal and pivotal time in many women's lives. To archive girlhood meaningfully, the archivist must recognise that they are trying to capture an ever changing pocket of time. Traditional archival practices prioritise factual information, whereas girlhood is shaped by affect rather than data. Feelings, atmosphere, fleeting moments are fundamental to documenting through an affective mindset. As Cvetkovich states, *"The archive of feelings is an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions."* (Cvetkovich, 2003) Emotional experiences can therefore be functional as a form of cultural memory, something that can be universally documented and felt, treating it like a shared emotional identity. Cvetkovich's framework legitimises the practice of recording and analysing mood, atmosphere and visual tone as archival material. This shift away

from traditional archival methods, in order to accommodate experiences that are difficult to represent forms the term 'counter-archive,' *"The archive of feelings can be seen as a counter-archive, one that documents experiences that are difficult to represent within traditional historical frameworks."* (Cvetkovich, 2003)

This idea resonates strongly with the artists I have chosen to explore feminine counter-archives. Within their respective mediums, Coppola and Kurland are exploring the difficult task of archiving the emotional state of their characters and muses, often through still images, silences and little dialogue. Due to this, their work almost entirely relies on the visual experience to communicate their message and allow the viewer to feel the melancholic familiarity and nostalgia that girlhood inhabits rather than simply observe it.

One of the defining structures of remembering and embracing girlhood as a fleeting moment is through melancholy. Melancholy and nostalgia are intertwined in the girlhood state and lingers long after girls transition out of that stage in their lives. While girlhood is often stereotyped through bright colours, feminine friendships, and a sense of carefree lightness, its emotional reality is far more complex. So, where does melancholy and nostalgia come into play? During the time of girlhood, girls get to be a neutral entity, not yet significantly touched by gender biases or social hierarchies and expectations. The transition out of this neutrality can produce a sense of loneliness and spiritual homelessness. As Feuerhahn notes, *"Nostalgia signifies a kind of homelessness and estrangement in the interpersonal world"* (Feuerhahn, *Guelph and Ontario*, 2015) This spiritual displacement created by the awareness of girlhood's temporariness invites the anticipation of loss and melancholy through the door.

This melancholic attachment has no closure because girlhood itself offers none; it is a state of continuous becoming rather than being. As observed in this quote, *"Girls have often been present in archives only indirectly, appearing through institutions, family structures, or adult voices rather than through records of their own experiences."* (Scott, 1991) Once girls begin transitioning into womanhood, they lose the neutrality and visibility that girlhood briefly afforded them, and with it, the privilege of an archival voice. This absence reinforces the need for affective and counter-archival approaches that can preserve the emotional realities of girlhood where traditional archives fall short.

Coppola and Kurland's books, *'Archive'* and *'Girl Pictures'*, both serve as their own versions of this method of counter-archiving. Each artist uses her own voice to curate a documentation of the dreaminess, fragility, and emotional weight of girlhood, threading these qualities through every image, note, and pre-production fragment. It's evident in Coppola's book, archiving all her movies to date, that the beginning, middle and end of the filmmaking process prioritised making girls and women characters that would resonate with female audiences on a deeper level. Coppola states, "Across all my films, there's a common quality: there is always a world and a girl trying to navigate it." (Coppola, 2023) Similarly, Kurland's book, *'Girls Pictures'* doesn't restrict itself to a simple picture book format, but archives rich narratives of rebelling girls becoming a unity. Fuelled by staged photographs, short stories and melancholic retellings of the experience of gathering these young women, knowing and anticipating their disappearance as they live in front of you. *"The images in this book weigh me down with a sense of nostalgia-- It's the fact that the girls seem to be disappearing. Like catching a wild animal in a trap, it feels like by the time you look at each image of these girls you've already missed them."* (LensCulture, 2020) Both books demonstrate how affective archives can preserve the emotional afterlife of girlhood in ways beyond the norms of traditional archives.

### **Sofia Coppola: Liminal Temporality, Slowness, Silence and the Echo of Girlhood**

Coppola is known for her slow, visually aesthetic stories of young women, often using the gentle femininity as a veil for deeper melancholic themes of self-worth and loneliness. Her most recognisable exploration of girlhood appears in, *The Virgin Suicides*, where the Lisbon sisters cluster together under the suffocating weight of suburban expectations, longing for an escape. The contrast between their whimsical, floral aesthetics and their internal ache reflects a truth that only those who have lived girlhood can fully recognise. Famous dialogue from this movie says, *"What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets. -- Obviously, Doctor, you've never been a 13-year-old girl."* (The Virgin Suicides, 1999) This line encapsulates the moment when girlhood shifts from neutrality into a state of being seen, judged, and misunderstood.

Coppola reinforces this through the boys who observe the Lisbon sisters. They become unreliable archivists, romanticising the girls' suffering while failing to understand it. As Albira notes, "what the boys

miss and what Coppola captures is the quiet, claustrophobic ache of being a girl in a world that romanticizes your suffering and silence more than your voice” (Albira, 2025). The boys’ memories of the sisters are shaped by fantasy rather than truth, leaving behind an archive of projections rather than lived experience. This aligns with Scott’s observation that “girlhood is frequently understood as fleeting or transitional, which has contributed to its historical neglect within archival practices” (Scott, 1991). Once the Lisbon sisters are gone, nothing remains except the boys’ imagined narratives, a reminder of how easily girlhood disappears when not archived on its own terms.

*Lost in Translation*, however, is where Coppola’s exploration of girlhood’s emotional afterlife becomes most potent. Unlike *The Virgin Suicides*, which immerses the viewer in the transitional moment itself, *Lost in Translation* captures the echo of girlhood, the melancholic afterglow that lingers into early adulthood. Charlotte is no longer a girl, yet she carries the unfinished feelings of girlhood with her: uncertainty, longing, and a sense of being suspended between identities.



(*Lost in Translation*, 2003)

Coppola often worried *Lost in Translation* was too self-indulgent and was made to believe on numerous occasions that slow narratives exploring the silent waves of vulnerability within women, was unimportant,

as retold in this interview: "I remember someone telling me, 'Oh, you can't make movies without the male. The main character has to be a guy. Girls will go to stories about boys, but boys won't go to stories about girls. - *There wasn't this idea that an audience of girls matters.*" (Steff Yotka, 2025). *Lost in Translation* resists this belief. It offers female audiences an outlet, a genuine exploration of the uncertainty that follows a young girl into adulthood. Coppola visually portrays the loneliness and lack of direction within her character, Charlotte, as she frames her alone in liminal hotel spaces and or drifting through crowded city scenes where connection is out of reach.

The films blue and green tones, paired with the neon loneliness of Tokyo, bokeh twinkling outside her hotel window allow the audience to grasp the contemplative melancholy Charlotte is experiencing through dreamy visual choices. She feels abandoned by her husband who is wrapped up in the glamour of his career; whilst Charlotte is left mourning the simplicity of existing as a young girl without the pressure to find purpose, stability and connection. Coppola archives the echo of girlhood here in a unique way; she allows a woman to be lonely, sad and lost without having to be viewed as beautiful or sexy to gain the permission to feel those things in the presence of a man. "Movies were about men. If it wasn't men, it was boys, and if it wasn't boys, it was women directed by men in tragedy or hot pursuit. Few movies were made about girls." (Steff Yotka, 2025) This makes Coppola's position as a woman archiving the emotional afterlife of girlhood not only artistically significant, but politically necessary. She preserves the internal states that traditional archives overlook, ensuring that the emotional truth of girlhood survives even after the girl has transitioned into womanhood.

Despite Charlotte entering womanhood, her behaviour and the way she gravitates towards Bob reveal that traces of girlhood linger within her. Coppola shapes Charlotte as someone caught in a that state of becoming, where she flips between maturity and immaturity, connection and silences. "*There's something about being in a period of becoming that's so important to girlhood. You're not there yet, so you get to be in the middle. You're both a kid and an adult, in-between, figuring it out.*" (Steff Yotka, 2025) This quote captures Charlotte's uncertainty as she tries to determine what kind of woman she wants to be after girlhood and where she wants her life to go.

Coppola crafts Bob as an anchor; a temporary figure to fulfil the role of both a companion to replace the connection she is lacking from her husband, and as a paternal figure to provide guidance and stability. Bob is source of knowledge and human archive that she seeks to pick through and study from. However,

through Coppola's affective archive, it is clear that Charlotte will always carry traces of girlhood traits within her, even if they dull over time. Girlhood is not something she has left behind, but rather than echo within that influences her decisions, vulnerabilities and desires. This proves that girlhood will never be in a state of true completion but instead persists as an emotional afterlife. as supported by this Driscoll quote, *"Girlhood seems something I have experienced... even if it doesn't seem truly to have been completed."* (Driscoll, 2002, pp.47–78) Charlotte embodies this incompleteness, a woman shaped by the remnants of girlhood.



*(Lost in Translation, 2003)*

### **Justine Kurland: Counter Archive: Staged Freedom, Disappearance and the Melancholy of Becoming**

Where Coppola archives the echo of girlhood through interior melancholy, Justine Kurland captures girlhood in motion; running, climbing, hiding and disappearing. In her photographic practice, she stages a counter archive of teenage girls who refuse containment, slipping between childhood and adulthood with a rebellious energy that resists documentation. An extract from her book, *Girl Pictures*, opens with: "The

girls were rebelling. The girls were acting out. The girls had ran away from home. They were trying on a version of themselves that the world had thus far shown them was 'boy'." (Kurland and Bengal, 2020)

To photograph these girls is to already feel the loss of them. The moment the shutter clicks, the image becomes a record of something that has already slipped away; mirroring the way girlhood is constantly in a state of slipping away, evolving and disappearing. Bathes captures this tension and melancholy when he writes, "What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence... in front of the photograph of my mother as a child... She is going to die. I shudder... every photograph is this catastrophe." (Barthes, 1980) His observation reveals how melancholy haunts every photographic preservation, the image holds the moment but also announces its disappearance.

Kurland's counter archive operates within this system. She preserves these young women in scenes of rebellious freedom, but as the viewer, we know that the girls we're looking at are only the memory of what they once were. As this quote states, "All these girls are likely women now. A fact that's oddly heartbreaking-- They're "never coming back." Spending so much time looking at these images, I've noticed myself looking for the girls. Driving on the highway, I peer into the trees expectantly." (LensCulture, 2020). Kurland's photographs therefore become an archive of becoming and vanishing at once; a visual record of girlhoods fleeting, ungraspable presence.



Kurland, J. (2000). *Ship Wrecked. Girl Pictures.*

A main inspiration behind the atmosphere of the *Girl Pictures* collection comes from iconic teenager figures, such as *The Runaways*. As Kurland explains, “I channelled the raw, angry energy of girl bands into my photographs of teenagers.” (Kurland and Bengal, 2020) Kurland crafts a unique perspective in her rendition of counter archive for girlhood by staging an all female utopia of runaway girls, resisting not only adulthood but stereotypically feminine expectations of them as they transition into the late stages of girlhood. The girls in Kurland’s photographs feel almost primal, a matriarchal society hidden deep within the woods or just beyond the barrier of the American highway.

Kurland describes her project as rewriting the visual tropes that teenage girls are expected to inhabit, “I built on and corrected some of the tropes surrounding the representation of teenagers; these pictures were not solicitous renditions of hypersexualised children. (AnOther, 2020) This refusal of sexualisation is central to her counter archival method. By merging reality and fiction, she constructs incomplete narratives that allow the girls to inhabit pockets of imagined freedom. Photography becomes a tool for rewriting reality; a way of creating a fantasy within the archive, a direct contradiction to the factual rigidity of traditional archival practices.

Sontag captures this when she writes, “Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.” (Sontag, 1977) Kurland uses this nature of photography to her advantage; each image becomes a memory of an imagined world where girls can exist outside the constraints of gendered expectation. Her archive is therefore not only a record of what girlhood *is*, but a vision of what girlhood *could be* when freed from the narratives forced upon it.

The practice of gathering material for *Girl Pictures* involved Kurland driving across America, collecting groups of young women willing to participate in her vision of runaway teens and claim the landscape as their sanctuary away from the pressures of womanhood. Her images begin with this feeling of hope and freedom, as though the viewer is momentarily welcomed into the girls within the frame. “I focused on teenagers because of their perpetual state of becoming – a latency that resounds with the freedoms and simple joys of childhood.” (Kurland and Bengal, 2020) For Kurland, teenagers embody a simplicity untouched by adulthood, suspended in a corner of time where everything still feels possible. Her feminist

counter archive crates space for female audiences to feel the same sense of connection she experienced while making the work. She writes, “Behind the camera, I was somehow in front of it – one of them, a girl made strong by other girls.” (Kurland and Bengal, 2020) This strengthens the necessity behind having women curating affective archives of transitional states and how those who have lived through girlhood understand how nostalgia lingers within them.



Kurland, J. (1998). Forest. *Girl Pictures*.

Despite the freedom and feminine whimsy staged in these scenarios, a melancholic nostalgia is rooted within them. As Boym states, “Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia — in longing and loss — and also in the imperfect process of remembrance, rather than in search for one’s own home and origin.” (Boym, 2001) For viewers who were never part of this collective of girls or the utopia they create, there is a sense of displacement: these images offer no home, no closure, only the ache of witnessing a world that cannot be returned to. We feel their gentleness in the quiet grooming rituals among the trees, but also the force of their defiance as they allow themselves to be carried forward by time. As Kurland writes, “Deployed across the American Landscape, at a time when they need each other more than ever, ‘so what?’ they say. ‘we’re never coming back.’” (Kurland and Bengal, 2020) Kurland’s archive, then, becomes a record of girlhood’s

vanishing. A preservation of what is already slipping away, and a reminder that becoming is always shadowed by disappearance.

## Parallel Aesthetics and the Incomplete Archive in Coppola and Kurland

Both Sofia Coppola and Justine Kurland construct affective counter archives of girlhood, yet they do so through distinct aesthetic strategy that reveal the unfinished nature of girlhood as an emotional state. To compare them, they both lean into nostalgia as a reflective element not a restorative one as seen within Boym's theories, *"Reflective nostalgia dwells on time's irreversibility... fragmentary, imperfect, and inconclusive."* (Boym, 2001) Within this they both resist traditional archive closure. The differences within their interpretations of archiving girlhood are how Coppola mainly utilises themes of slowness, waiting and interiority to exhibit the melancholy remembrance of experiencing the afterglow of girlhood. The slow pacing mirrors the emotional drift of girlhoods afterlife. Whereas Kurland leans more into the disappearance, the rebellion and the community elements of girlhood as she focuses heavily on groups of girls rather than girl, singular. Here, she uses the stillness of photography to freeze time and moments as girlhood slips away. Both artists create archives that acknowledge girlhood as unfinished, *"Girlhood seems something I have experienced... even if it doesn't seem truly to have been completed."* (Driscoll, 2002, pp.47–78)

What's important about the similarities between their renditions of affective archive for young women is how they centre women unashamedly, reclaiming girlhood from the claws of the male gaze and portrays femininity as more than just beauty. *"Creating archives of girls' lives is not simply an act of preservation, but a political gesture that asserts their experiences as historically meaningful."* (Scott, 1991) In relation to this quote, Coppola and Kurland are letting their affective archives be political and take stand against archival narratives framing girls as passive or sexualised. Within the worlds Coppola and Kurland curate, the archive of girlhood gets to feel meaningful, complex and emotionally rich.

While powerful, both archives fall under the same critic. Both archives risk reinforcing a narrow image of girlhood as their nostalgia, melancholy and girlhood scenarios lack diversity and are shaped primarily through a white, privileged access point. This raises questions about whose girlhood can be archived and whose remains invisible. Sontag states, *"Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings*

and drawings are.” (Sontag, 1977) Therefore, the lack of representation of different types of girls within an exploration of girlhood, excludes a wide margin of young women not only from being represented within affective archive but also through the consumption of art.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Coppola and Kurland show that the archive of girlhood will always be partial; a collection of feelings, traces, and disappearances rather than a stable record. Their work demonstrates that girlhood cannot be fully captured or completed, because it is something felt, reimagined, and continually returned to through memory. Despite this incompleteness, the aesthetics they utilise within their affective archive projects expand what can be preserved, opening new emotional and political possibilities for how girlhood is understood. At the same time, their archives reveal their own limits, shaped largely by white, middle class experiences of girlhood. This highlights how nostalgia and remembrance are themselves conditioned by privilege, and how many other forms of girlhood remain unarchived or unheard. Despite this, both artists carve out space for girlhood to be taken seriously as an emotional and historical condition. As Kurland reflects, “What I’m doing is about freeing the women in these books, giving name and voice to all of the invisible forces around us” (The Museum of Modern Art, 2025). Their practices remind us that the archive of girlhood will never be complete, but through affect, atmosphere, and the preservation of fleeting emotional states, it can continue to grow in ways that honour its complexity.

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