

Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*: Not even cake?

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Marie Antoinette, written and directed by Sofia Coppola

Based on the information available about this film, its historical subject, and certain suspicions about the career of its writer and director Sofia Coppola, this reviewer expected to welcome *Marie Antoinette* with an outburst of plebeian hatred. Imagine the disappointment when the film not only failed to stimulate a vigorous Jacobin response, but proved to be relentlessly and irrepressibly boring. The lifelessness, the lack of humor and feeling in this film is so complete that, even with the best intentions of tearing it apart, one finds it difficult to say anything at all about it.

The normal, healthy reaction to Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* is identical to that of Louis XVI's first night in bed with his new wife, as depicted in the film: a feeling of utter indifference, disturbed by her unwanted proximity, and quickly resolved by turning away, pretending to be elsewhere. One hesitates to say this, but unfortunately no single word describes this film more accurately than frigid.

Had *Marie Antoinette* been a fun-filled romp about excess and consumption, it would have at least generated some energy. What could be the most charitable response to someone like Coppola who, in the face of contemporary conditions—the unparalleled levels of social inequality, the vicious subjugation of neo-colonial peoples, etc.—consciously chose to spend months of creative energy concentrating on such a notorious embodiment of privilege? Perhaps, we could say, this is an opening gambit or provocation toward a possibly unpleasant, and nonetheless worthwhile reflection on the guilt of pleasure in an age of decadence. Perhaps Coppola's point might have been not to *actually* fiddle while Rome burns, but to get the audience to reflect on the consequences of such an act.

When Jørgen Leth, egged on by Lars von Trier, filmed himself sitting down for a lavish dinner in a showcase in front of the wretched and starving masses of Bombay, many people in the audience might have been forced to repress a certain violent urge toward the filmmaker. Leaving aside the scarce artistic merits of such operation, forcing a reaction of this kind does however prove that the director has tapped into something powerful.

In the case of *Marie Antoinette* one certainly does come to look forward to the swift resolution of the guillotine; and for

many legitimate historical reasons that transcend the film. But the many political merits of the French revolution in this particular case pale in comparison to its capacity to deliver the audience, alas, a couple of hours too late, from unbearable tedium.

When forced to account for the existence of such a forgettable thing, one could posit that *Marie Antoinette* is the product of the unfortunate convergence of three cultural and intellectual currents.

Most importantly, this film is the expression of contemporary celebrity culture.

As such, it brings together two seemingly incompatible impulses. On one hand there is the celebration of the awesome pageantry of power and privilege. The lavish costumes, the ceaseless stream of candies and pastries and shoes, and in particular one scene of conspicuous consumption to the pop tune “I want candy” convey this clearly enough. And yet, as Coppola is keenly aware, stopping at that is inadvisable.

Celebrity culture depends just as much on being able to recognize that, appearances to the contrary, these people are just like us, as it does on titillating our voyeurism for the unattainable. And Coppola drives home this point with reckless abandon. This is established at the beginning of the movie, in the long road-trip to deliver the future queen to the French authorities. Marie and her entourage play cards. They pet the dog. They breathe on the glass window of the carriage, and then draw lines on it with their fingers. They cast languid glances in the distance. The camera noticeably, painfully lingers while nothing in particular goes on.

It is actually possible that in some recess of her mind Coppola sees her work as a sort of social study on boredom. Instead, it is simply boring. But this drives home the point just as well. The relentless repetition of the pattern—nothing happens against the background of the visually glamorous surroundings—establishes that in the final analysis these people are just like us.

All this is the stock-in-trade of someone who is well versed in the weekly complexities of *People* magazine. Coppola was born and raised in this peculiar milieu and thus seems to try twice as hard to naturalize and humanize it. She notes in her interviews that a great influence in her life was the constant,

casual presence of people like Andy Warhol in her house. Coppola has always known these people well, and by now has clearly joined their ranks.

The many scenes in which the queen is subject to an uncomfortable public exposure reflect the plight of Coppola herself as a celebrity of sorts. Like the subject of her movie, Coppola no doubt anguished over the difficult burden of expectations that come with being born in a certain lineage. Like Marie Antoinette, Coppola surely bears no moral responsibility for being left by fate in such a difficult situation. And on it goes. After two hours of this peculiar activity, being both subject and object of her own attentions, Coppola is not the least embarrassed. Her defense of her own social type may be subdued in tone, but it is unmistakable in content. In this sense, though this might seem like a strange comparison, *Marie Antoinette* is the passive-aggressive version of Mel Gibson's muscular, and equally ridiculous *Paparazzi*.

In addition to celebrity culture, the film is also the expression the sort of stupid, and fortunately rare feminism that seeks to rehabilitate even the most politically reprehensible figures on account of their gender, and to investigate the complexities of feminine interiority not along with, but as opposed to the great events of history. The link here is quite direct, because a good example of this trend is the revisionist biography of Marie Antoinette by "Lady" Antonia Fraser that Coppola consulted in making the film.

This fascination with feminine greatness and privilege, of course, is to the exclusion of ordinary people of both sexes. It is hardly a surprise that in the film the French masses only make a brief appearance in the role of pitchfork and torch-wielding demons. One does not demand of the artist either a precise and sensible social history, or a constant awareness that compassion is a scarce resource to be allotted carefully. But a modicum of decency is always in order. If this nonsense is allowed to continue, future generations will be subject to sensitive portrayals of the intriguing interiority and social shenanigans of Margaret Thatcher. And this may not be such a bad thing. As the *reductio ad absurdum* of identity politics, this sort of stuff plays an inadvertently useful function.

Finally, one is forced to mention another unpleasant and all-too familiar influence for the movie. Though Sofia Coppola did not go to graduate school, she has somehow absorbed all the compulsory lessons, as the protocols of postmodernism are clearly at work here.

The cool detachment that in *Lost in Translation* could have been mistaken for a veil meant to conceal profound, or at least human feelings, is revealed here instead to be Coppola's only conscious artistic program. The mere surface, if not the superficiality of art, its self-referential and self-sufficient quality are turned into a virtue. It is impossible not to notice just how studiously vacuous the film is, how the costumes, and the cakes, and the sweets, and the architecture of Versailles are no mere background to the story. They are the story.

Coppola also deals with history and culture in quintessentially postmodern fashion, flattening and packaging it as a readily available commodity. On this score one suspects that Warhol's regular visits are to blame. While Coppola did consult a historical biography in making the film, nothing in it suggests the slightest interest in actual historical conditions. From contemporary Japan to eighteenth century France, Coppola merrily paves over the historical and cultural complexities of the human experience to make room for the cinematic equivalent of an army of Campbell's soup cans, in battle formation.

All human sentiments in the film seem tailored to fit the emotional and intellectual parameters of the high school American experience. The teenagers who watch MTV's *Laguna Beach* will feel right at home in this setting, not just because they can relate to the plight of privilege, but because everything about the people of eighteenth century France, in this rendition, will be transparently accessible at their level. This of course is not Coppola's innovation. One recalls, for example, recent silly and yet significant pop-renditions of medieval Europe such as *A Knight's Tale*.

The postmodern approach to history and culture presents itself as only superficially banal, and at the same time even as some sort of populist gesture. After all, why should we expect the audience to strain themselves in strange and disorienting settings so far removed from their immediate experience? But in fact this approach is the product of a terrible arrogance, and even of a certain kind of creeping American nationalism. Though she no doubt abhors the vulgarities of jingoism and, like most of her friends and colleagues, must be full of "left" sentiments, Coppola nonetheless carries on as if the whole world is, and has always been American. In this sense, leaving aside certain complications that cannot be addressed here, the hostile reaction to the film by the French audience at the Cannes festival is neither surprising nor unfair.

All in all, *Marie Antoinette* is an empty and embarrassing film.

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