

# Farewell, My Queen: The last days of the ancien régime

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11 August 2012

*The following comment was originally posted on the WSWS as part of the coverage of the Berlin film festival in February 2012. The film is now playing in North America.*

*Directed by Benoît Jacquot, written by Jacquot and Gilles Taurand, based on a novel by Chantal Thomas*

As noted in our introductory article on the 2012 Berlin film festival, the event's director Dieter Kosslick stressed the political content in the program for the 62nd festival, which included "a lot of films about revolutions and new dawns".

A number of film reviewers were quick to draw a parallel between the Arab Spring revolutions that took place during the past year and the opening film of the Berlinale, *Farewell, My Queen* (*Les adieux à la reine*), by French director Benoît Jacquot. The main character in *Farewell, My Queen* is an attendant to the queen of France, Marie Antoinette. The action takes place in the Palace of Versailles at the start of the French Revolution in July 1789.

Actress Diane Kruger, who plays Antoinette, told the press in Berlin: "Any revolution, particularly this one [i.e., the French Revolution], is against an abuse of power and an abuse of money and that is still going on these days". While the most striking aspect of the Arab Spring revolutions was the entry of broad masses of the population into political life, the masses in Jacquot's film are off-camera, an ill-defined mob baying at the gates. The director chooses to dwell on the dilemma of Louis XVI's entourage, housed (or more accurately imprisoned) in Versailles.

The figure of Marie Antoinette was already dealt with in the lamentable film by Sophia Coppola (2006). Jacquot's film avoids the sugar-coated excesses of Coppola's thoroughly superficial and irritating movie, but displays its own weaknesses. *Farewell, My Queen*

explores the reactions of the various layers of the court as starving Parisians storm the Bastille and seize guns and ammunition. A list is circulating, drawn up by protesters, calling for the beheading of nearly 300 leading figures of the *ancien régime*.

Understandably, Antoinette's husband Louis has his hands full. The queen tries with increasing difficulty to carry on life as usual, browsing fashion magazines and speculating on the colour to be favoured in European courts for the coming season. We observe the shenanigans of the court and the idlings of the queen through the eyes of one of her ladies-in-waiting, Sidonie Laborde (Lea Seydoux), who is evidently attracted to the queen.

The film points out the massive gulf between social layers that existed inside the palace itself. The magnificent apartments and luxurious bed of the queen are contrasted with the bare, cupboard-like room in which Laborde seeks to fend off the attention of aggressive mosquitoes and get some sleep.

The signs of decay are unmistakable. Dead rats float by in the water during what should be a relaxing boat ride across the palace's Grand Canal. Time is running out for the assembled aristocracy. Armed workers and peasants are marching toward the palace. The game is up! A crazed rush to the exits begins, with princes, counts and privy counsellors vying with one another for a place in the next coach to leave Versailles for abroad and safety from the "mob".

The scenes of disarray amongst the aristocratic lackeys of Louis are convincingly done; at the same time, the portrayal of the depths of opportunism and egoism of the French ruling elite is thin gruel for a full-length feature film. We learn little of the motives impelling the "angry mob" moving towards the gates of the palace. The most annoying aspect of Jacquot's

film is his attempt to inject spice into the whole affair by implying that, neglected by her husband, Antoinette seeks solace in the arms of another woman—the courtier Gabrielle de Polignac. Together with the infatuation with the queen on the part of Laborde, we have what one critic refers to as an “all-female love triangle playing out in the confines of Versailles”.

One wonders what is going on in the head of the director. Does he really think that a feature film dealing with the French Revolution will not find enough viewers unless he includes a titillating element? The French Revolution is the classic example of a revolution motivated by massive national and international class antagonisms summed up in the social inequality prevailing in France at the end of the 18th century.

This remains the significance of the revolution for today. Jacquot evidently recoils from this conclusion and instead feels obliged to introduce a story line that undermines what could have been a powerful dramatic presentation of the death throes of the feudal regime.

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