

## Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*: A Fashionable History

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I'd like to start my talk by showing a clip from the beginning of Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette*, to give those of you who haven't seen it a taste of the film, and to act as a reminder for those of you who have seen it. The film was controversial because of its approach to history, which was deliberately anachronistic and iconoclastic. The film-makers combined contemporary modern images and sound with reconstructions of the eighteenth century, flouting the conventions of period costume films and giving Marie Antoinette's story a post-modern twist that was not appreciated by some critics. In one scene, for example, the camera pans across an array of exotic, colourful eighteenth-century women's shoes to reveal a pair of modern sneakers prominently displayed.



The soundtrack to this sequence is the song 'I Want Candy' by 1980s New Wave band Bow Wow Wow, whose lead singer Annabella was, like Marie Antoinette, a teenager. Bow Wow Wow was connected to another 1980s New Romantic band Adam and the Ants, and the music of the post-punks and New Romantics features prominently in the film, along with Easy Listening and classical tracks. Some found this strategy jarring, and others did not like Coppola's freehand, impressionistic approach to history, which they considered showed a disregard for the facts, while the emphasis on style and fashion was perceived as obscuring the historical background. But there were many who loved the film for its visual beauty and style, and its success in evoking the teenage Marie Antoinette's personal experience of the stifling formality and political machinations of the French court. For my purposes, Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* opens up questions about history and representation that I'd like to explore in this talk. For me, far from showing contempt for history, the film makes visible the processes of historical reconstruction in cinema, and in some cases challenges them.

The clip begins with the credits, which are vibrant pink and splashed onto the black screen accompanied by the song 'Natural's Not In It' by another 1980s British band, the Gang of Four, known for their left-wing politics. The film opens in conventional manner with a shot of an imposing building with the superimposed title 'Austria 1768' establishing place and time. However, the sense that we are watching a reconstruction from the perspective of the present, through a particular vision of the past is reinforced by the casting of singer Marianne Faithfull as Marie Antoinette's mother and actor/comedian Steve Coogan as Ambassador Mercy, Marie Antoinette's mentor. The film emphasises immediacy, the here and now, by using a realist, almost improvisational shooting style. At the same time, many of the images are very stylised, and both image and sound have symbolic dimensions.

[Clip from opening of film: 8 mins]

[Title Slide 1]

In this talk I want to explore a way of looking at historical fiction films through some of their source materials. I shall try to avoid the model of comparison that inspires many critiques of popular histories, where the film is evaluated against a source text, such as a novel, biography or historical account that is considered more reliable or authentic. Nor is my model one of adaptation – although there are some similarities between adaptation theories that stress the process of transformation of texts and my approach. Rather than the centre or end result of my analysis, I regard film as one element in a network of interacting texts that make up the historical process. I shall discuss Sofia Coppola's 2006 biopic of Marie Antoinette in the context of a range of discourses that interact dynamically in its representation of its subject.

Marie Antoinette is one of history's most iconic and extensively represented figures. Discourses about her abound in different media across the centuries and round the world, from memoirs and biographies, journals and diaries, letters, pamphlets, scandal sheets, newspapers and songs, while images of her proliferate in portraits, sculptures, fashion magazines and books, lampoons, pornography, fancy dress costumes, fashion design, popular music performances, films, online websites and discussion boards. This abundance of historical documentation produces a bewildering array of primary evidence, much of it imbued with gossip, prevarication and innuendo, so that the historian's task becomes one of decoding different forms of representation that demand different, often specialist reading skills. Although this could be said to be true of historical analysis in general, it is particularly relevant in the case of Marie Antoinette, because the elite world she inhabited in eighteenth-century France was so highly codified. Every detail of her life as dauphine and then queen to Louis XVI, from physical appearance, dress, domestic activities and décor, everyday rituals such as eating, bathing, getting up and going to bed, even sexual activity and childbirth, was enmeshed in an intricate web of manners and etiquette handed down through generations. These codes had political significance and were reinforced by legal and constitutional measures, as well as by social convention. Fashion, including dress, makeup and hairstyles, played a central role in maintaining social hierarchies, and had

developed into a complex and sophisticated sartorial language. This language and the associated languages of furniture and décor were celebrated in engravings and paintings of the period, which depicted an elaborate performance of privilege. The codified aesthetic extended to novels, journals, diaries and letters as well as fuelling gossip magazines, press reports and popular cartoons. This context of allusion and innuendo raises questions of interpretation, veracity and accessibility, since it is practically impossible to arrive at the truth of the matter. This elusive quality is partly responsible for the fascination that Marie Antoinette's life and iconography continue to exert over different media forms. Despite (or perhaps because of) the extensive documentation available to historians, she remains a contradictory and contested figure, the focus of sympathy, hostility and admiration.

I shall approach Coppola's film through its negotiation of the complex and opaque culture of masquerade and performance into which the fifteen-year-old Austrian princess was flung. I also want to look at the film's relationship to two biographies, which could be regarded as more conventional histories. The first, Antonia Fraser's *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* was published in 2001 to great acclaim. It was praised for its meticulous research and its sympathetic, human approach to its subject, and it provided the basis for Coppola's film. The second biography, Caroline Weber's *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution*, was published in 2006 just after the film was released, and focuses, like the film, on the role played by fashion in the rise and fall of Marie Antoinette. Weber's book received high praise for its originality and for its moving account of its heroine's tragic misfortunes. In comparison to these books, Coppola's film had a mixed reception, partly because of what was perceived as its 'chick-flick' celebration of consumer display and tendency to privilege style over content. While I agree that Coppola privileges style, I see this as appropriate to her subject, and, indeed, to mine. I want to explore how the visual language of fashion enabled Coppola to engage with the ways in which Marie Antoinette has been represented throughout history, and to throw light on questions of representation in historical research.

I begin with an image from Caroline Weber's book. [Slide 2] This is fashion designer John Galliano's Marie Antoinette dress, from his 2000 collection 'Masquerade and Bondage'. It is one of Galliano's less Gothic Marie Antoinette designs, one of which incorporates a blood-spattered hemline. I find this image extremely beautiful and poignant in its encapsulation of present and past, and in its use of fashion design to tell Marie Antoinette's story. It's rich in allusions to her life and her mythical status. The tall hairstyle with its extravagant feathers was her trademark. The dress itself evokes the polonaise style that is said to be one of Marie Antoinette's innovations. A celebration of the division of Poland, the skirt was shorter than was customary and shockingly revealed the wearer's ankles. Something in the model's face and body language suggests mockery, even youthful attitude, as well as vulnerability, while the blood-red ribbon around her neck (a common fashion accessory for women during the Revolution) intimates Marie Antoinette's destiny on the guillotine. [Slide 3] The skirt has two side panels: one depicts her frolicking in shepherdess outfit at her country retreat, the Petit Trianon, while the other shows her dressed in plain white smock on her way to the guillotine – although it's difficult to make out, I think this one must be the latter. This slide also demonstrates a use of anachronism, common in fashion design. The colour of the model's arms (it looks to me as though she's wearing fake tan) is in sharp contrast to her white powdered face and neck. White powder on the face and hair was widely used by the fashion elite during the eighteenth century. It contained flour, and the flour shortages in France that were one of the grievances of the poor contributed to the decline of this makeup style. [Slide 4] Another anachronism can be seen in the model's modern footwear. These anachronisms highlight the masquerade, and foreground the fact that this is a modern reinterpretation of Marie Antoinette. For me, this multilayered image literally embodies the process of accretion of images in historical representations.

Fashion at this level is theatrical, and is more like performance art. The Marie Antoinette dress aspires to make a statement, via the catwalk. That statement mobilises the allusive power of dress as a visual language, engaging with historical representation and foregrounding its codified nature. It is a complex

image, exotic, mysterious yet demanding attention and interpretation. It's unlikely to be considered a serious statement about history and representation, except by fashion historians, but it has the potential to be exactly that. This engagement with fashion as coded historical representation also inspired Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*.

The John Galliano design foregrounds the intimate connection between fashion and history, something that is particularly relevant to the context of France in the eighteenth century, and to Marie Antoinette's story. Indeed, Marie Antoinette's history can be told via her iconoclastic sartorial choices. [Slide 5] This eighteenth-century fashion etching shows her as a young queen at the height of her notoriety. She wears the fashionable shorter polonaise skirt and her trademark tall hairstyle known as the 'pouf', as well as sporting royal ermine and a sceptre. If this combination seems unconventional today, it was also perceived as such by her detractors at the time. [Slide 6] In this contemporary fashion illustration, she is shown wearing one of her more outrageous poufs, intended apparently as a patriotic celebration of a naval victory by the French over the British during the American War of Independence. (This elaborate concoction makes a brief appearance, in scaled-down form, in Coppola's film. It's on the screen for literally seconds – blink and you miss it.) It was common for clothing and accessories to allude to social and political events, but what is striking about this etching is the pouf's hyperbolic nature. Even allowing for the fact that the illustrator may have taken license with the original design, the statement is so excessive that I wonder, in light of the fact that Marie Antoinette was aware that she was perceived by many as an Austrian outsider, whether there is an element of parody in this exhibition of national pride. [Slide 7] This engraving shows the use of red, white and blue trimmings on fashionable headdresses of the time. As the Revolution gathered pace, the wearing of the tricolor, which was adopted by the revolutionaries as their signature style, in accessories such as cockades and ribbons was a way of demonstrating national pride as well as displaying sympathy with the republican cause and avoiding retribution. [Slide 8] Marie Antoinette's outsider status was confirmed for many by her habit of riding astride her horse masculine-style in male equestrian clothing. This custom was

perceived as 'Germanic' and fuelled stories of her lesbian activities. (This masculine style of dress does not feature in Coppola's film, neither does the queen's rumoured lesbianism, which is discounted by Antonia Fraser.) [Slide 9] This next illustration shows a design for a female revolutionary that borrows from Marie Antoinette's masculine outfit. Despite ridiculing the queen's fashion preferences, the revolutionaries appropriated her styles freely. A hairstyle she adopted called the 'harpy' was later turned against her in a vicious cartoon. Her head appeared on the mythical harpy's monstrous body whose claws tore the French Constitution to shreds.

[Slide 10] Partly in response to such hostile attacks, and partly for reasons to do with her age and status as a mother, Marie Antoinette chose a more simple style when she turned 30 years old. This fashion adapted elements of peasant and servant dress, such as the cap and the skirt that imitated an apron, and it was made from cotton muslin. The style was widely copied and caused a furore in the French textile industry, which was geared towards the production of luxury silks, satins and velvets. It seems she could not win. This was one of many occasions on which Marie Antoinette's sartorial choice was held responsible for ruining the French economy. [Slide 11] This painting shows her leaving prison to go to the guillotine. The costume symbolism and colour design are complex. Marie Antoinette is stripped of any glamour or finery, her hair is shorn and covered with a white cap. Her costume and the halo of light that surrounds her suggest her iconic status. White has many different connotations; it was the colour of the royal Bourbon household, for instance. It might also be seen as signifying her innocence, or status as a martyr. White is picked up across the painting in the uniforms of the soldiers and the outfits of the revolutionaries, where it appears with blue and red to form the tricolor. The colour design both links Marie Antoinette to the revolutionaries and separates her from them. A further link is visible in the neck ribbon worn by the female revolutionary on the left, which intimates Marie Antoinette's decapitation. [Slide 12] A less ambiguous representation of Marie Antoinette on her way to the scaffold was sketched by republican artist and propagandist Jacques Louis David, who depicted her without charisma, completely divested of royal status and authority

in the last moments of her life.

[Slide 13] Images such as these are part of the documentary evidence used by historians and film-makers to re-tell the story of Marie Antoinette's rise and fall. They are open to interpretation and their meaning changes according to context – they are no different from other kinds of historical evidence in this respect. Their slipperiness does not devalue their significance; rather it makes the process of sifting through and evaluating different materials more important. Both the biographies I want to consider used these images, though each arrives at a different conclusion. Antonia Fraser's book depicts Marie Antoinette as a powerless victim, forced into a hostile situation for which she was poorly prepared and over which she had little control. (Fraser uses the term 'sold into slavery' in the interview on the DVD version). Fraser anchors her victim narrative in meticulous research, supported by extensive footnotes and lists of source materials. Her voice as historian narrator is clearly marked, as she analyses and evaluates different materials. She is on the whole reluctant to speculate on matters that cannot be verified, and argues that Marie Antoinette's relationships with her close women friends were intimate rather than sexual. Nevertheless, she decides that 'on balance of probabilities', Marie Antoinette and Axel von Fersen did have a sexual liaison. This rumoured affair is an episode in the young queen's life that has been much debated and remains open to interpretation.

Fraser's biography was hailed as an exemplary work of historical revisionism that challenged the myths surrounding Marie Antoinette. Caroline Weber acknowledges her debt to Fraser's book, but Weber's focus on Marie Antoinette's use of the language of fashion to control her situation results in a portrait of an iconoclast whose manipulation of her image enabled her to achieve considerable power and influence. According to Weber, Marie Antoinette's sartorial choices indicated her sophisticated grasp of power politics at the court of Versailles, and of the ability of fashion to influence history. She continued to demonstrate this awareness to the very end, in the costume she wore to the scaffold. For Weber, Marie Antoinette's establishment of a distinctive style and identity through her clothes and accessories, though it could not save

her from her tragic fate, ensured that she remained a powerful iconic figure.

Weber's and Fraser's biographies share the same sources, and both declare their revisionist agendas. They both engage with other historical accounts, and Weber's book explicitly enters into dialogue with Fraser's. Both are clearly marked by their author's voice, but Weber's writing occasionally adopts a punchy language style that deliberately indicates her modern perspective. Historical films, of course, do not usually have footnotes. Coppola's film credits Fraser's authoritative account as its source, though like Weber's it focuses on fashion to tell Marie Antoinette's story. Coppola's well-known interest in fashion was a primary motivation for the film, as was Fraser's sympathetic, revisionist approach to its subject. Coppola attempted to revise the conventions of the historical biopic, renouncing epic sweep and formality to create an intimate, impressionistic portrait of the young Marie Antoinette and her world. The younger characters all use modern American vernacular, for example. As already mentioned, one of her more daring steps was to add a music soundtrack that mixed 1980s post-punk and new romantic with classical and easy listening tracks. [Slide 14] In the opening credits we saw a seductive image of Marie Antoinette in her boudoir accompanied by the Gang of Four's 'Natural's Not In It', a strident number that excoriates commodified leisure culture. Kirsten Dunst as Marie Antoinette turns to exchange a look with the audience, recalling the eighteenth-century painting convention in which members of an elite group are shown looking towards the viewer as if to invite them to share their world. [Slide 15] This slide shows two examples. Unlike the supposed voyeur of cinema, secreted in darkness, the eighteenth-century voyeur was acknowledged and visible – indeed, there was a special chair called the 'voyeuse' designed to allow the user to sit comfortably at the edge of a group and observe the proceedings.

The film's costume design by Milena Canonero and production design by K. K. Barrett use coded visual language and colour in various ways: [Slide 16] to recreate the period and distinguish character (here the soft pastels of Marie Antoinette and the Princesse de Lamballe contrast with the acid yellow of Judy Davis on the right as the Comtesse de Noailles, nicknamed Madame Etiquette

because of her strict adherence to court protocol); pastel colours are also used here and elsewhere to evoke Marie Antoinette's youthful perspective; [Slide 17] to emphasise the rigid formality of the court, as Louis and Marie Antoinette eat their meals observed by everyone; [Slide 18] to evoke the culture of masquerade; [Slide 19] to suggest decadence and excess; [Slide 20] and to symbolise emotional and psychological states of mind; [Slide 21] here Marie Antoinette's distress at hearing the news that her sister has given birth when she is still unable to conceive is visualised by the use of an intricate wallpaper design echoed in her dress that seems to engulf her. Ribbons around her neck and wrists intimate her present and future status as a prisoner. [Slide 22] This costume shows Marie Antoinette's body cut in half by a red belt, in an echo of the victim fashion current during the Reign of Terror. [Slide 23] Costumes such as these graphically symbolising the slash of the guillotine blade were worn to the incredibly popular 'victim balls' of the time.

The exquisite beauty of the privileged world inhabited by Coppola's Marie Antoinette masks unimaginable cruelty and suffering. This sense of beauty as a mask is underwritten by Coppola's strategy of holding at bay the end of her heroine's story, and finishing with an elegiac scene of the king and queen's departure from Versailles as the vengeful revolutionaries advance on the palace, marked by a thud on the soundtrack that anticipates the fall of the guillotine blade. One Message Board contributor complained: 'Coppola has left out the best bit'. But here Coppola remains true to the spirit of Fraser's book. In her introductory note, Fraser states: 'In writing this biography, I have tried not to allow the sombre tomb to make its presence felt too early ... I have attempted, at least so far as is humanly possible, to tell Marie Antoinette's dramatic story without anticipating its terrible ending'. Coppola also remains true to Fraser's view of Marie Antoinette as a victim, a caged bird, depicting her as a tragic heroine unaware of the social forces affecting her destiny. Her hedonistic consumer lifestyle is seen as a doomed reaction to the sexual and emotional frustration she experienced in her marriage and the regimented court of Versailles. Thus her use of fashion is not seen as a strategy of personal empowerment, as in Weber's analysis. In some respects, though, Coppola takes

liberties with Fraser's history, changing some of it to suit her own purposes.

These days, of course, the success of a film, particularly in the arthouse sector, does not necessarily depend on its theatrical exhibition, which is only one element in a web of other products and tie-ins. [Slide 24] Earlier this year Sony brought out the soundtrack album and the DVD of *Marie Antoinette*, both fetchingly designed in trademark pink, though rather disappointing in what they offered. The UK DVD tagline from *Empire* magazine called the film '... the ultimate chick flick, a love letter to cake, Moët [champagne], pyjama parties and rampant romps'. [Slide 25] Commercial tie-ins included the 2006 reissue of the Fraser biography, with a cover image from the film [Slide 26] and a glossy book published by Rizzoli that contained extracts from the script illustrated with production photographs, design sketches and film stills. The film's release in 2006 was accompanied by extensive coverage in fashion and style magazines such as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* [Slide 27]. The *Vogue* September 2006 special issue included essays about *Marie Antoinette* by Kennedy Fraser and Caroline Weber, plus a fashion feature by renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz at Versailles showing Kirsten Dunst and other members of the cast wearing costumes from the film [Slide 28], or displaying fashions by haute couture designers produced especially for *Vogue* [Slide 29]. My favourite is this pun on the 'ball gown' by Alexander McQueen. The trendy magazine *Dazed and Confused*, [Slide 30] devoted to music, art, fashion and cultural matters and directed at a style-conscious readership, produced a special tie-in November issue packaged in an envelope containing the Sofia Coppola Special and a free book featuring 'cool' brands (i.e. those that testify to their consumers' interest in style and taste).

This dizzying tour through the networks of representation with which Coppola's film interacts is a reminder that cinema today is not what it was. But then, I would suggest, neither is history, if it ever was. The many histories of *Marie Antoinette* suggest that not only can history be written through style, but that style is a crucial element in the re-writing of history. The material I've shown here implies that the content of history is precisely indistinguishable from its

representation. Sofia Coppola's strategy in *Marie Antoinette* of mixing images and sounds from different times and places and foregrounding her own perspective as film-maker creates a richly textured history that extends beyond the limits of the film itself to a wider network of representations. Coppola invites the viewer to think about how her film relates to and interacts with these representations, and in that respect she succeeds in making an important contribution to debates about history itself.

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