

# Sophia Coppola's Marie Antoinette and the Traces of History

People



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This paper probes in the historical events included in the Sophia Coppola's Marie Antoinette. At the offset, the movie presented the events that have transpired in French history with fresh eyes. The result is both interesting and engaging. It is interesting in the sense that the form (which is film) through which history was rendered provided entertainment to the viewers. At the same time, the movie is engaging as it was able to capture the historical events that, to me, challenged the viewers to analyze history deeper. In this paper, I will highlight the historical allusions in the movie that coincide in the last instance with the actual events that occurred in France more than two centuries ago.

I will show that, among others, the film articulated the extravagant life of Marie Antoinette, the French Revolution, the "human" side of the queen, and the period of Enlightenment. The fifth element that I will focus on is what the film unwittingly revealed in its precise attempt to conceal - that is the fact that Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI are not innocent victims. I will argue that the tenuous conflation of film and history proved a success (and failure) in the case of Marie Antoinette. .

### Musicas Social Critique

Of all its features, " Marie Antoinette" was an interesting cinematic experience because of the music. It is through music that the film was able to convey a historical account of Marie Antoinette's life. It is already commonplace that Marie Antoinette lived a life of luxury, and the film showed this from the beginning until the end. According to historical records, Marie Antoinette's lifestyle was too extravagant that the general populace

suffered (see Fraser 2001). This affluence of French royalty was showcased in the film with the help of music.

It was a joy to watch French royalty in their elaborate garb cavorting with their consorts and ladies-in-waiting to the sound of 80s post-punk. Perhaps to evoke the ironic *joie de vivre* of the 80s juxtaposed to the Dionysian lifestyle (as opposed to hedonism) of the French king and queen and her court, they danced to an adaptation of Siouxsie and the Banshees' "Hong Kong Garden" which was played by a string ensemble. The song then segued into the original post-punk version signifying a higher level of joy and abandon for everyone.

In one scene, The Cure's "Plainsong" was played during the couple's coronation - an important and extensive shot taken on the steps of the Versailles. I've always thought that the music of The Cure was cinematic but the band evoked visions of modern dystopia for me - of highways, electric poles and sad abandoned factories; instead of men wearing wigs and tights and women with exposed bosoms under dainty parasols during the last gasps of European feudalism. The forlorn but quintessential New Order song, "Ceremony" is played in another party scene to create a contrast to the revelry of the French royal upperclass. Jarring as these may have been, these clever bits of musical scoring not only comprise the best thing about the film but also serve as its ideological heart.

Of course, the average listener is not expected to recognize many of these songs. In fact, in most parts, what one hears are just instrumental excerpts from some obscure track of a particular musical genre from the 90s labeled <https://assignbuster.com/sophia-coppolas-marie-antoinette-and-the-traces-of-history/>

as “shoegaze” music. While this cultural referencing from the early 90s in film is unusual (only Araki has done this to much success in “The Doom Generation” which was made during the early 90s), it is also apt since these attempts highlight all the more the cinematic traits of the dated but enduring genre.

The contribution of Kevin Shields (who also did work for *Lost in Translation*) from the legendary shoegaze band My Bloody Valentine as well as the excellent selections from current Swedish band The Radio Dept. attest to the “hip” and “cred” consistency in Sofia Coppola's work as well as indicating her appreciation for the lost musical genre. Remember that in her first critically acclaimed oeuvre, “*The Virgin Suicides*,” she also featured in the soundtrack the French duo with high “cred” points – Air. However, this time around, I believe that the clever use of contemporary music serves a purpose beyond achieving the “coolness factor” that the director is known for. It foregrounds an interesting but controversial take on a pivotal moment in the history of western society.

### History in/through Cinema

Not only did the film powerfully show the frivolous existence of Marie Antoinette and the French Monarchy but also the manner by which this existence was put to an end by the French people. The French Revolution was only shown at the last scenes of the film yet it serves a potent reminder of how the oppressed classes of French society stood up and fought. If only for this, the film briefly yet powerfully captured the historical change that transpired during the French Revolution of 1793.

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It must be noted though that the death of Marie Antoinette and other French royalties indeed sparked hope, however brief a moment. I say this since the French monarchy was soon after replaced by the rule of the bourgeois (see Doyle 2001). This transition was no longer included in the film yet the fact remains that the vital force of the French Revolution served as a compelling conclusion in the life of Marie Antoinette.

Marie Antoinette and the Louis-Auguste were the King and Queen of France at the onset of the historic French Revolution. This event marked the political culmination of the unprecedented social and economic changes that began with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It represented the victory of an emerging economic order whose political form was represented by the French Republicans. At the prodding of the bourgeois liberals who pushed for the republican ideals of the right to suffrage and democratic leadership, the peasants stormed the Bastille and later the royal palace of Versailles effectively heralding the demise of the French monarchy.

The defeat of the royalists as manifested in the violent deaths of Queen Marie Antoinette and King Louis XVI by the guillotine and the subsequent rise of the French Republic meant new political and social arrangements that to some represent the defining shift from the "Dark Ages" to the Modern Era. One of this epoch's key features is the ascendancy of the belief that, finally, man's destiny is in its own hands and not under the control of some sovereign and God-ordained power as represented by the monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church.

Simultaneous, therefore, with the film's showing of the French Revolution is the showing of the period of Enlightenment. This includes the understanding that societies are wholly human artifacts subject to the collective will and power of the people that ideologically challenged the class structure of not only the monarchy and its feudal base but also early capitalism and its liberal pretensions. Many therefore, including Marie Antoinette, interpret the French revolution as a progressive step away from the extreme inequities of feudal society and monarchical political formations and some quarters even regard it as an event that points to the possibility of egalitarian human societies (see also Lancaster 1953).

#### Marie Antoinette and Modernity

However, the film "Marie Antoinette" takes on a different stance regarding modernity. For Coppola and Antonia Fraser, whose book the film was based on, to depict the relatively unknown but human story of the Princess of Vienna who became Queen of France from the other side of "his-tory" so-to-speak, is in itself an important statement. More so because Marie Antoinette is mistakenly vilified in history texts as the callous Queen who, in the midst of France's bread shortage and general economic crisis, allegedly quipped "let them eat cake" in all her regal pomposity (see Thomas 1999).

Coppola shows to us instead a sympathetic and unknown side to the lives of these pampered royalties. The film takes great pains to show the struggle of Marie Antoinette and the King as they fit in to the unreasonable demands of being royalties as well as the privileges that they enjoyed. We are made to understand their humanity as they recapture their innocence in the

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Dionysian abandon of royal masquerades, deal with deaths in the family, and even suffer the distinct boredom of the rich and spoiled.

Some historians have also tried to present us this “human” side of Marie Antoinette and the French Monarchy. According to their studies, Marie Antoinette is not as evil as popularly presupposed (see Fraser 2001). Apparently, this is the same point the movie is trying to make.

That is why when the mob arrived at the palace gates, we are immediately herded by the film to the side of royalty since it is they who we are more familiar with; it is they who we found funny and endearing. Never mind that it is the moment of justice for the angry multitude as they vent out their anger after centuries of carrying the feudal yoke in order to provide the monarchs with the resources for their grand lifestyle and capricious wars.

Never mind that it is modernity and human progress that is, in a manner of speaking, knocking on the gates of Versailles and that this singular event would inspire movements of liberation throughout the world including our country's own struggle against colonizers. Coppola deftly avoids all these issues by framing this historical narrative through Marie Antoinette's eyes.

What is presented to us instead is the consistent template in film of how individuals, in the general sense, are victimized by history's unsentimental march. It subtly laments Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI's persecution since they were merely thrown into circumstances they did not choose. The reach of the royal imagination, the film seemingly apologizes, cannot go beyond

the intricate pastries, the petticoats and the other regal accoutrements of their regal existence.

Thus, when the mob, who was comprised of the first liberals in their original incarnation, demanded the King and Queen's literal heads, a degree of sadness was warranted. There was no indignation expressed in the film akin to the moral appeal of the liberal critique against Stalin ("the revolution will devour its own children," and it seems that the liberals also had an appetite for pale monarchs), but through a somewhat Nietzschean lamentation for the lost of Dionysian beauty and innocence. This was expressed in the film in a lingering shot of a defiled royal salon after the mob stormed the palace.

The room was once full of vibrant life, colors, opulence and laughter. Now, it was a drab grey room of broken furniture and torn curtains perhaps anticipating the abandoned factories of Manchester. Was Coppola intimating the view that history's march towards modernity must be interpreted in this way? Does she share the same dystopic vision of modern society as those espoused by this band of angsty and socially dysfunctional philosophers in the persons of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault whose disdain for modernity is legendary and influential to this day?

#### The Element of Ahistoricity in Marie Antoinette

By focusing therefore with the intricacies in the life of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, the film was able to make the audience sympathize with them. The possible danger here is the dilution of the revolution which culminated in the reign of Maria Antoinette and Louis XVI. Some studies have also pointed out



the quirks of the royal couple without dismissing the crime that they have committed (see Cronin 1989).

The use of contemporary cultural references for an otherwise period setting is therefore an important element in the light of these observations. The film achieves an ahistorical sheen as if insisting that its lessons are timeless if not enduring to this day. It seems to argue an interesting point - that the fate of Maria Antoinette and Louis XVI, who also danced to Siouxsie and the Banshees' "Hong Kong Garden" - they in an elaborate ball and we in our dingy night clubs - are also our shared destinies.

We are, in a manner of speaking, modernity's common victims. If the two were hanged by a vengeful mob at the cusp of modernity, we are its sad disenfranchised heirs existing in the rubble of modernity as a failed experiment two centuries hence. This is the shared stance of thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault. Modern life is synonymous to mediocrity, alienation (or inauthenticity) and debilitating bio-power (that society is one big prison and there is no escape). Our only refuge is towards individualism, introspection, and caring for the self. What better way to drive home this point through music than to employ the sensibility of post-punk's true heirs - shoegaze.

There are some interesting parallelisms between developments in social theory and popular culture. There was an attempt by the counter-cultural folk movement of the 60s in translating its agenda into a potent political force. However, the failure of the Paris Commune coincided with the cooptation of folk into "hippie"-dom and later corporate arena rock. In the academe, a

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post-political (or post-socialist condition) also assumed an influential position wherein the likes of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault became the gurus of a veiled individualism that places in its diametrical opposite society and history.

Punk presented a brief respite attracting a wide section of Britain's disaffected and unemployed youth under Thatcherism but eventually folded because of its nihilism and absence of class politics. This resignation is now embodied in the broad post-punk category that includes a variety of styles - self-referential and heavily sentimental at times while being angular and loud in others. Most of these bands eschewed the political and even anarchic stance of punk and insisted on appropriating an introspective tone while salvaging the innocent harmonies of The Beach Boys and the pop songcraft of the Beatles from the 60s.

Of course, in the larger context, mass culture was the more dominant cultural form where artists such as Madonna and Michael Jackson represented the new apex in consumerist popular culture. In the sub-cultural field, however, the post-punk ethos was eventually adapted by a new musical movement that melded together the dark undertones of cult bands such as Joy Division and The Cure with the ethereal pop sound of The Cocteau Twins and the drone of The Velvet Underground in the late 80s to early 90s. The result is a musical movement that has come to be labeled as shoegaze because of the penchant of these genre's guitar players to look down on their effects boxes to create their complex and dense signature guitar sound.

Meanwhile, in the academe, the same sensibilities are also gaining ground with the fashionable rise of postmodernism and its celebration of eclecticism, ahistoricity, identity politics and a deep and unrelenting individualism. It is, thus, no accident that these post-punk and the shoegaze movements found its most rabid supporters among the college set. By the 90s, the cult status of these sub-genres has imploded into the mainstream with the rise of the “alternative” and Nirvana.

With its wall of feedback, unintelligible vocals and sweeping melancholia, shoegaze's sound performs the sad and confused resignation of the post-political era. Marie Antoinette now follows a long line of fashionably sad cultural icons that include Kurt Cobain and the wind-swept plastic bag in “American Beauty.” These films make a claim for sadness as the universal currency of modernity whether you be of royal lineage or a working class clone (or even an inanimate object) and our only balm or remedy is to wallow in Kevin Shield's eloquent but loud and beautiful sound of sadness as we mourn the death of all-too-human Marie Antoinette - our new postmodern pop icon. But of course we know better.

Therefore, what the film tried to do was paint Marie Antoinette as a victim of history. What strikes us as suspicious is our knowledge that she had the choice to change the social system. What prevented them for doing so was perhaps their passionate attachment to what the French people are asking them to give up. It was of course tremendously difficult for Marie Antoinette to give up her lifestyle that rests on the wretchedness of the general populace since it was perhaps what she has been used to all her life.

This is precisely the problem with the ideological stakes raised by the film and the philosophical persuasions that side with such a dystopic reading of humanity's past, present and future. For that matter, these also draw attention to the utter lack of radical promise among the educated American youth because an assessment of even indie culture indicates that they are either too emo, fragmented and individualist to wield any form of potent politics unlike their French forbearers who were willing to destroy the monarchy in order to build liberal democracy.

Modernity continues to be a necessary human project in the light of the continuing inequalities of our modern life. Men and women must not relent in the political task of charting the direction of human history, the sadness and violence of the struggle notwithstanding.

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