

### ***Marie-Antoinette*, a film on the feminine condition**

In her third movie, *Marie-Antoinette* Sofia Coppola continues her exploration of the condition of women. She praises femininity and places it at the heart of this condition. From the very beginning of the movie, it appears that this film maker has opted to portray a very feminine *Marie-Antoinette*, a young woman who has an inner beauty that is revealed by the emotions she shows and by her easy spontaneity and generosity. The teenage girl (played by Kirsten Dunst, an actress who also played in Sofia Coppola's first movie, *Virgin Suicide*, which addressed the issues of adolescent girls) arrives in France in April 1770 at the age of fourteen is radiant and full of promise. But instead of inspiring admiration, she is rejected for being Austrian, and later on she is despised for not becoming a mother quickly enough and for having become an extravagant woman. Moreover, the film strongly suggests that she is rejected because of her blooming femininity which provokes jealousy. As Sofia Coppola remarked in an interview promoting the film<sup>1</sup>, her main interest was the character of Marie-Antoinette, not the historical context. Thus, the film *Marie-Antoinette* is primarily a reflection on the different ages in a woman's life.

The rock music the film director chose signifies the rebellion of a young lady who is still an adolescent and who experiences many difficulties in achieving the aim her mother assigned her (to be a good wife) and the obligation the French court expects of her (to give birth, and quickly, to a male heir to the throne). The attacks and pressure she experiences are staggering and the devices she resorts to in order to resist them have a very contemporary ring: women (and teenagers) often find solace in music, parties, games, and spending money on clothes to escape the many pressures of daily life.

Marie-Antoinette's innocence is such that it creates a startling contrast with the members of the French royal court who welcome her. She resembles a Jean Jacques Rousseau's character: as a young foreigner, she is looked at as though she embodies the "bon sauvage" in a state of nature. On her arrival from Austria she is literally stripped of everything she has: a major transformation of her identity is imposed on her when she has to go through a tent in the woods where all her Austrian court clothes are replaced by French ones. The transformation is underlined by a strong contrast between her simple blue Austrian dress and

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<sup>1</sup> See the official website of the film: <http://www.marieantoinette-lefilm.com/accueil.html>

the luxurious French dress and is forced to relinquish her little dog. This contrast is reinforced when she first discovers Versailles. The spectator is invited to discover it with her in a long sequence shot.

At first everyone in court is delighted by the presence of such a beautiful princess and everyone scrutinizes her very closely both in order to admire and criticise her, much as they would scrutinize a new object or toy. But all too soon political power and social organisation –which is created by men and organised for men’s benefit– puts her femininity on trial. “Feminine beauty”, which is symbolized in the film, as in a painting, by her carnation, by her elegant bearing suggesting the delicacy of her intentions, is a notion which is quite foreign to the categories of political power. Yet it has everything to do with the transmission of royal power which only needs a mother to give birth to a boy who will inherit the power from his father. One quickly understands that, as a beautiful woman, she will fail to achieve what is expected from her: to give birth to a son. “Beauty” is a cultural notion and it is a source of inspiration for artists. She, as a young woman, does not have to be beautiful to be used as a means of exchange, a way to seal a diplomatic alliance. “Beauty” as a notion is not significant to understand a period of history but it helps to understand why the Queen Marie Antoinette concentrated so much hatred upon herself. At first, because the newly-crowned French king, Louis the XVI<sup>th</sup>, seems uninspired by her teenage beauty and does not know what to do with it. His seeming incapacity to do his husbandly duty (he cannot sleep in the same bed and runs away every night) inspires curiosity and makes courtiers and others (including her mother, the empress of Austria, who writes her terrible letters about it) think that it is Marie-Antoinette’s fault. Their lack of a sex life provokes nasty pamphlets which imply that the queen is somehow responsible for the impotence of her husband. Her beauty inspires pornographic pamphlets suggesting that she lives a life of debauchery. She does not feel the need to answer to these accusations. Not only can she not become the mother everyone insists that she become, but she is also suspected of draining power from her husband, the King.

The scene of the masked ball symbolises a turning point in the sexual life of the royal couple. The masks enable freedom of speech and both the queen and the king find themselves in situations where they can speak about their desires. Marie-Antoinette is seduced by Count Fersen and Louis is told that his wife is very desirable. After the ball, Marie-Antoinette turns into a full-fledged French woman, accepts the ways of the French court and the extraordinary magnificence of Versailles with all the social constraints and all the expenses it implies.

In Coppola's film, Marie-Antoinette becomes the target of jealousy and hatred from those who suffer from the lack of everything she has: not only does she have enemies amongst the French court but increasingly the French people come to think that she is ruining the country. Having been strongly influenced by her friends at court to live a life of pleasure and expense, having followed the strong advice of her mother (and her clichés of femininity) in order to deliberately seduce her husband, she finds herself in a very difficult situation : she still does not have any children. Her brother, the emperor of Austria has to pay them a visit and brings Louis the XVI<sup>th</sup> the “key” to becoming a father. Marie-Antoinette finally gives birth to a daughter, not the long desired boy! Her motherhood impells her to change her way of life, by distancing herself from the court. After discovering the works of certain French philosophers, she attempts to recreate an environment that is closer to nature in her Trianon garden. The absence and ambiguity of Louis XVI as a husband will become more bearable to Marie-Antoinette as she reads French novels and philosophy (in which since 1720, the role of the father is no longer to be the stern authority but becomes the affectionate father). In some of these works, from the 1760s on<sup>2</sup>, fathers are either away or absent, dead or unknown to their wife and children. An interesting scene shows Marie-Antoinette and her friends taking care of her daughter as in *Paul and Virginie* of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1788). In this part of the film the Queen attempts to play a new role. This is illustrated by the second opera scene where she is on stage herself: she has dreamed of being an actor and plays the role of a shepherdess. It puts into perspective her new role as a mother in real life in her “Petit Trianon”.

At this point, we can say that Coppola's film *Marie-Antoinette* has much to say about the modern condition of French women and introduces a sort of post feminist perspective: the film does not tell us about how difficult it is to be a woman in a man's world, which has been amply demonstrated by eighteenth century English and French writers and later by the feminist movement. On the contrary the film develops a womanly vision of femininity and shows that if the attributes of femininity can be used in an advantageous way when they fit into cultural clichés, but it is very difficult to improve or reform what femininity is considered to be. In other words, the film is about the difficulty for a Queen, who has become a star after complying with the code, to live according to her “free will” (which is yet another modern cliché). Her life has been definitely divided in half since her arrival in France. She has a

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<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hunt, *The family romance of the French revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, p. 41.

strong sense of her destiny, as being closely linked to the destiny of France and wonders what will become of her if Austria and France turn into enemies. She asks Ambassador Mercy d'Argenson: "am I supposed to be Austrian or French?" She would like to be just herself. The opera scenes are very interesting from this point of view. Marie Antoinette wants to go to the opera, and when she does, overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, she breaks protocol with her enthusiastic applause. After a moment of silence, everyone in the opera starts to applaud too. But when she goes to the opera for the second time (which is the third opera scene), at the end of the spectacle, she applauds again but this time nobody follows her. The scenery shows clouds as a symbol of her decline. She has gone too far.

In the courtly world she revolves in, Marie-Antoinette expresses her ideas and emotions through the Arts which are inaccessible to the people of France. This illustrates the lack of communication between them, suggesting that the people do not understand what motivates their Queen and King and conversely that the latter cannot understand any of the problems of the ordinary folks. The lavish way of living in court contrasts sharply with the poverty of the people outside Versailles. As far as the role of women in French political life is concerned, a few more clichés are addressed by the movie. Marie Antoinette is seen by the people as a queen who spends unreasonably the money of the French Royal family, who then has in charge all the property of France, when people do not have enough bread to eat. A rumour says that hearing the need of the people for bread she would have said "let them eat cake!". This rumour spreads quickly among the people and is even heard in court. Once again she does not think it necessary to answer these accusations. As she is not seen as anything else than the wife of the King, she is expected to be a good accountant of the people's money. But as a foreigner and a woman, she cannot do much about the way she is perceived.

By the end of Coppola's film Marie-Antoinette has started to become interested in political matters and senses that as King and Queen they should do something to respond to the anger of the people. Her feelings are probably reinforced by the absurd inactivity of the King. In the scenes where the Royal couple is shown having dinner, at first with all the servants, then with only one or two left, we see that Marie-Antoinette looks desperately at her husband in search of a sign, but he keeps on eating just like as if nothing was wrong. He seems completely absent and therefore unable to take any decision. In this scene he is definitely not a decisive figure. In one of the last scenes the Queen does a respectful reverence before the people from one of the balconies of Versailles. This incredibly audacious gesture provides a way to speak about revolutionary times in an unexpected way: the spectator would

expect to see the people taking the palace in a violent assault but instead the Queen hands over her life in a gesture that presents her neck, that strongly suggest respect and humility, a behaviour which, as a young girl, she has been taught. The reverence also suggests that it is the first time Marie-Antoinette has actually encountered the people. It is her way of addressing the anger of the people. But the final scene suggests that her gesture was not taken for a sign of respect. On the contrary, the film shows Marie-Antoinette's bedroom torn into pieces, the very bedroom in which day after day, she lost credibility before the members of the court who watched her wake up alone in her bed, as the "etiquette" required, the bedroom from which the King ran away. Her feminine condition puts her in an impasse: not only is she rejected as a foreign woman who spoils France but she is denied the possibility to become the Queen she is expected to be. The destruction of her bedroom symbolises this impasse.

Gabrielle Costa de Beauregard