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### THE HISTORICAL THRESHOLD:

#### Crisis, Ritual and Liminality in Sofia Coppola's *Marie-Antoinette* (2006)

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*Marie Antoinette* does not pertain to any of the narrative tropes and standards set by the conventional historical drama. Rather, it is a film about the politicisation of the female body. Its focus on the rite of passage of a young girl into adulthood in an extreme situation is, in effect, highly political both in its effort to convey a specifically female subjectivity and in its eschewal of a more traditional treatment of its subject matter.

Critical response to Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* after it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 was markedly equivocal. Whereas Agnès Poirier of *Libération* castigated Coppola for making what she viewed as an 'empty' film devoid of any political content, Jean-Michel Frodon of *Cahiers du Cinéma* praised the director's irreverent and playful treatment of its hallowed historical subject matter.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Coppola was already known for her eclectic and highly pleasing visual style as evidenced in *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Lost in Translation* (2004), her subtle observation specifically of the female rite of passage and her ability to render, as critic Richard Brody (2012) puts it, "inner depths startlingly [and] straightforwardly visual". Antonia Fraser's revisionist biography of Marie-Antoinette then, entitled *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (2002), which centres on the queen's rite of passage from young Dauphine to reviled queen provided apt and fecund source material for the director's first venture into the genres of both 'historical biopic' and 'costume drama'. While this

specific historical narrative fitted naturally within the concerns and themes of Coppola's oeuvre, her deliberately anachronistic and flagrantly postmodern approach, which eschewed any pretense to accuracy or truth often associated with the 'heritage style', signaled a departure from the more subdued and dream-like atmosphere of her previous films. This caused a proportion of critics and scholars to denounce the film as a purely formal exercise in style that eschewed all substance.<sup>2</sup> The manifold ways in which *Marie Antoinette* engages with its historical subject matter, both in terms of its narrative and style, has made scholarly assessment of the film problematic. In this article, I seek to address the critical suspicion that the film is all 'style' with little 'substance' by demonstrating how the film filters history through the narrative (and anthropological) trope of the rite of passage. As such, I aim to demonstrate how the film's style makes apparent the private, inner world of the central protagonist. Contrary to the assumption that the film is 'lightweight' and superficial, I will argue that its surfaces contain depths that cannot be conveyed through the more traditional format associated with the historical costume drama. Furthermore, in opposition to a critic such as Poirier, I suggest that *Marie Antoinette* is, in fact, a highly political film due to its sustained focus on the appropriation and politicisation of the female body. Coppola's two prior films *The Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation* offered sensitive portraits of the female rite of passage. Both centre on young women who are trying to find their place in the world and to map out their own identities. Coppola has stated that, in this respect, *Marie Antoinette* is the final part of a triptych that deals with female subjectivity: "(i)t's a continuation of the other two films – sort of about a lonely girl...trying to grow up...This is a story about a girl becoming a woman." (quoted in Hohendal) I would argue that Coppola's decision to focus on Marie Antoinette's arrival in France as a young girl, her initiation into the court of Versailles and her unhappy marriage rather than the infamous downfall of the French monarchy proved to be so controversial precisely because she locates the film's political content within the female adolescent body and the way in which it is re-fashioned and controlled through various rituals. In giving us a cinematic impression of a young woman in extreme isolation, she radically undercuts the event that most representations of this period focus on (the French Revolution) and, most critically, attempts to salvage the figure of Marie Antoinette from a historical legacy that has served to perpetuate her status as a figurehead of hatred.

In delineating how Coppola disrupts and problematises cinema's traditional engagement with history, I will draw from the work of anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner on ritual theory and rites of passage. More specifically, I will

focus on the way that the film recuperates the figure of Marie Antoinette from the annals of history; instead of the Marie Antoinette of myth, the viewer is offered a portrait of a young woman in extreme crisis who is divested of her identity; in anthropological terms, she is a liminal entity: an ambiguous personage who is “betwixt and between” (Turner, 95) two worlds. For she is not only an outsider in a privileged world (the norms of which she does not understand) that is populated with a host of characters who are venomously hostile towards her, she is also a ritual subject caught up in a protracted rite of passage: indeed, Fraser suggests as much in her biography of the ill-fated monarch. Stephanie Zacharek (2006) notes astutely: “*Marie Antoinette* is an expansion of the idea of “belonging nowhere”...that may fit less comfortably in the genre of costume pictures than in that of teenage drama.” In other words, at the centre of this diegetic world is a naïve and lost adolescent who wields little power over her own destiny or, for that matter, her own body. Moreover, as Christina Lane and Nicole Richter have acknowledged: “(l)ike the war that France is fighting abroad, her body is contested terrain. It becomes a cultural battlefield” (in Radner and Stringer, 197). One of the most radical tactics Coppola takes in the film is to reveal, via sustained focus on mechanistic ritual, how female identity, in particular, is constructed and imposed. By extension, Coppola also examines the manifold ways in which historical ‘truth’ is created and sustained. In contrast to classical Hollywood films that often posit the female body as the site of spectacle, Coppola delineates how that body is harnessed and regulated via ritualistic processes: how it is *turned into* a spectacle and, by extension, a commodity to be owned by a patriarchal institution and, then, by the state.

### **Initiation Ceremonies.**

The film is structured on Marie’s rite of passage which helps to transform her from an Austrian princess into the Dauphine of France and, finally, into a queen. This focus on the specifically female rite of passage is made apparent very early on in the film as the introduction of Marie to her fiancé, the Dauphin of France (the future Louis XVI) is related almost uniquely from her perspective. Furthermore, in the moments leading up to their meeting, Marie undergoes a form of rigorous and strict ritual that functions, in and of itself, as a rite of passage. This event allies the spectator with the central character; indeed, there is no other character in the film with whom Coppola demands that the audience sympathise to a similar extent. The film makes us party to Marie’s journey exclusively. More specifically, the first section of the film delineates the way in which she is turned into a ritual subject or *tabula rasa* in preparation for her new role as Dauphine and Queen of France. Victor Turner writes of the ritual subject: “(t)he neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the

knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status...they have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society" (Turner, 103). The ritual process through which Marie becomes a queen serves to control and re-fashion her identity and body; as such, she becomes absorbed in the mechanistic procedures that maintain Versailles as an institution. By focusing on various rituals, the film appeals to the viewer's empathic capacity and also reveals the historical figure of Marie Antoinette as a creation. It is this specific notion of identity, as located within the historical (and female) figure, that *Marie Antoinette* seeks to disrupt. This is made apparent within the film's initial scenes, which I will examine now in detail.

From the outset, Coppola courts and subverts the viewer's expectations about Marie Antoinette as a historical figure. Before the film's title has even appeared, Coppola inserts a tableau shot that introduces us to the main character. We see Marie lounging on a chaise longue and having a pink satin shoe fitted onto her foot by a maid; as she extends out her arm to scoop some cream off of one of the many pastel-coloured cakes that surround her, she turns to the camera and engages the viewer's gaze. She raises one eyebrow as if to disarm the viewer and then smiles. A cut to a black screen ushers in the film's title, which appears in a deep fuchsia pink slogan (the design and font of which make reference to the album covers of the British Punk group, 'The Sex Pistols' as well as notoriously perfidious 'tabloid' newspapers). This opening sequence is noteworthy for a number of reasons: first, this highly stylised tableau shot appears directly after Kirsten Dunst (who plays Marie) has been credited; second, Coppola breaks what is known as 'the fourth wall' by having the main character acknowledge the film's viewers; third, the music that accompanies the entirety of the credit sequence is Gang of Four's *Natural's Not In It*, the lyrics of which ("the problem of leisure, what to do for pleasure, ideal of a new purchase, a market of the senses...this heaven gives me migraine") speak directly not only to the film's subject matter, but also to the extravagant lifestyle associated with the French court at Versailles in this period. Furthermore, Coppola confronts the viewer with her agenda within the film's opening moments: this will be a film that examines superficiality by focusing on surfaces. The fact that the actress playing the main character is introduced to us immediately before we meet her 'in character', so to speak, helps to foreground the way in which the film aims to deconstruct the historic personage of Marie Antoinette in favour of an impressionistic portrait of a young girl on the verge of becoming a queen. By playing to and holding the viewer's gaze, Coppola not only focuses the viewer's attention on the nature of any given historical representation as a construction of 'truth' (this particular

'truth' is mediated through cinematic narrative), but she also makes the viewer complicit with the main character's excess: here, it is the Marie Antoinette of myth (as played by Kirsten Dunst) that beckons us into the gilded and highly rarefied world of this story. However, Coppola also undermines subtly the notion of the female body as spectacle; famously, Laura Mulvey has noted that the female figure on screen connotes "to-be-looked-at-ness" (in Rosen, 2003), yet in the opening moments of *Marie Antoinette* it is the central spectacle who looks at us – her gaze serves to undercut our knowledge.



*Figure 1: Making the viewer complicit: The Film's Title Sequence*

After the film's frenetic credits, the action cuts to Austria in 1768 (or more specifically the court of Queen Maria Theresa).<sup>3</sup> We are re-introduced to Marie, this time as a young girl recently awoken from her slumber; she pulls her beloved pug dog towards her and holds him as though he is a soft toy. Heard over the top of this series of close-up shots is the imperious voice of Maria Theresa who announces that the alliance between Austria and France must be cemented through marriage and, to that effect, her youngest daughter 'Antoine' will be queen of France. A long shot then reveals Marie walking down a long and dimly-lit corridor that is partitioned by several archways and doorways. Once again, within a relatively short sequence, Coppola conveys a wealth of information to the viewer. The contrast between the presentation of Marie in this sequence and that of the credits speaks to the discrepancy between Marie Antoinette as a quasi-mythical historical figure and the extraordinary situation into which this girl is cast at the mere age of fifteen. The fact that it is her mother's voice that pronounces her

destiny ( 'Antoine' appears to be concerned only with childish preoccupations) suggests further the lack of control she will have over her own trajectory. Her body has already become a political bargaining tool between the countries of Austria and France, an object to be transported ritually from one country to another (a process which will also effect a change of identity). In this respect, Coppola's choice to film Marie walking down such an ornate corridor to meet her mother who will deliver the news of her fate does not seem arbitrary. Van Gennep and Turner have noted the significance of constructions such as archways and doorways in the ritual process as they demarcate a ritual subject's exit from one social sphere and entry into another. Marie is a passenger here, a liminal entity between her old life in Austria as 'Princess Antoine' and her new and daunting life in France as the Dauphine. Suitably, Marie Antoinette as a character on screen evokes strongly Turner's description of the liminal entity as: "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 95). Additionally, he notes that liminal personae are inherently 'ambiguous', 'indeterminate' and cannot be easily classified. By characterising Marie as a ritual subject, Coppola not only destabilises the accepted and historical description of Marie Antoinette, she also foregrounds the ways in which identity can be created systematically.

Following her departure from the Austrian court, Marie is transported to Schüttern, a neutral area between Austria and France where a 'handover' ceremony takes place. The journey to Schüttern is rendered in such a way as to emphasise the arduous and long nature of the trip. There are multiple cuts and ellipses within this short sequence, but instead of economically furthering the plot they serve to accentuate visually the theme of repetition; frequently a sharp cut reveals little change in action, while the use of fade in / out elides time, but the landscape through which the carriage travels remains uniform. Additionally, there are notable violations of screen direction in this sequence so the carriage conveying Marie to the place of the ceremony appears to erase its own movement. Crucially, when Marie leaves her home in Austria and enters this forested area the film viewer experiences her journey via strategies that de-centre time and space. The forested area is not only ritually significant, but is also a zone that is frequently invoked in fairy tales and myths as an enchanted or threatening place (as in The Grimm's *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Hansel and Gretel*). Van Gennep writes of such an area: "(t)he neutral zones are ordinarily deserts, marshes, and most frequently virgin forests where everyone has full rights to travel and hunt...the zone...is sacred...whoever passes from one [zone] to the other finds himself physically and

magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time" (Van Gennep, 18). Coppola seems to delineate her central character's rite of passage on two levels here: most importantly as a form of ritual that will transform her identity, status and nationality, but also as a fairytale (which will turn into a nightmare). Already at this early point in the film, Coppola indicates to the viewer that Marie is caught in a web of forces over which she has no control.

The 'handing-over' ceremony itself entails a ritual designed to dissociate Marie Antoinette from her old identity and mark her out symbolically as the Dauphine of France. She enters a makeshift structure, which forms a passageway through which she must pass: she enters on one side as a princess of Austria and exits on the other side (French soil) as the Dauphine. This ceremony also prepares her to meet her fiancé for the first time. The ceremonial space is decorated in a highly florid style with heavy brocade curtains and several crystal chandeliers; clearly, the full pomp and formality of the French court is adopted for the purposes of this ritual. Marie is curtly separated from her pug dog, her jewellery and her clothes and dressed in the accepted style of the French court (as it is a custom that a bride retains 'nothing belonging to a foreign court'). As she is de-robed, Coppola fragments her body through a series of rapid close-ups that stress her status as a symbol that solidifies the 'friendship' between Austria and France. Her body will no longer be her own, but on a more fundamental level this visual translation of the ceremonial act renders apparent the fragmentation and commodification of her body – she is transformed into a political pawn. In effect, Coppola shows the viewer that the elaborate rituals of the court of Versailles are employed in order to break her identity. Following on from this series of close-ups, Coppola captures in long shot an image of Marie's undergarment being removed by two maidservants; filmed from behind, her naked and small adolescent frame is highly apparent. This shot – composed beautifully by director of photography Lance Accord – has the central protagonist's figure at its centre, but the low-level lighting reduces her to a mere adumbration. Moreover, her body, which appears as a dark shape in the centre of the film frame, is offset starkly by the light from outside coming into the ceremonial tent. As a vulnerable young girl, Marie Antoinette stands divested of her identity (having been separated from her Austrian roots and yet to be integrated into the customs and costume of the French court) before the land that represents symbolically her new home and the country she will, eventually, become queen of. Once more, Coppola relays powerfully to the viewer the precarious and exposed nature of this young girl who is about to enter a world that is completely alien to anything she has become accustomed to. As we shall see the majority of the film makes

manifest an experience of extreme isolation and alienation by immersing viewers in the subjectivity of the main character, especially with regard to the presentation of certain rituals.



*Figure 2: A Threshold Figure.*

### **Institutionalisation through Ritual**

The main body of the film centres on a number of ostentatious rituals that maintain the hierarchical and divisive world of Versailles. As viewers, we experience these rituals through a specifically female subjectivity. As is apparent in *Lost in Translation*, the viewpoint of the main character and that of the director merge so as to form a cinematic subjectivity that is neither strictly subjective nor objective. Pier Paolo Pasolini elaborates on the binary nature of this kind of image in his description of *free indirect subjectivity* as a device which blurs the distinction between subjective and objective viewpoints.<sup>4</sup> The protagonist's outlook and that of the director fuse in a complementary and complicated process. John Orr (2-3) states of this style of filmmaking: "(t)he shot seems to express the point of view of the disturbed subject yet does not operate primarily through the point of view shot...[so that] we have simultaneously, subjective vision and a clinical distancing from it." Interestingly, there are very few point of view shots in *Marie Antoinette*, but we are compelled as viewers to form an allegiance with the central character. Although Coppola does not strategically suture the spectator into the narrative space through the use of traditional techniques such as the point of view shot and the eyeline match, she creates a far more potent form of identification through her delineation of the diegetic world. In other words, the film viewer's experience is mediated directly through the wandering and searching nature of the camera work that serves to emphasise the main character's isolation and bewilderment without solely showing her viewpoint or revealing her inner thoughts (as is the case in mind-screen or sound perspective). Coppola offers us a highly de-familiarising experience of Versailles;

we understand Marie Antoinette's plight *because* we experience it for ourselves. The state of loneliness does not simply belong to the protagonist, as it is intrinsic to our experience for the duration of the film: we are outsiders in this world as well.

The rituals of the court of Versailles are presented to the viewer as both comic and disturbing. Coppola's film shares similarities with Luchino Visconti's *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963), as both films focus on a hermetic society intent on maintaining its traditions through ritual; however, both films also demonstrate that being impervious to the outside world also ensures decline. One of the most persistent criticisms of the film was the alacrity with which it presents the viewer with seemingly crucial narrative details or under-elaborates important historical events within the period it portrays, while devoting the majority of the film's running time to exploration of 'dead time' in which nothing seems to happen. I would argue that such criticism, though not erroneous, misses the point. *Marie Antoinette* details a hermetically-sealed and unchanging social sphere that seems to function like a self-perpetuating machine running on empty; in this respect, Coppola's elision of contemporary and historical time seems appropriate. Important narrative events do take place (there are multiple births and deaths for instance), but the social structures and hierarchies that maintain this world remain seemingly steadfast and unassailable. Ritual, by definition, is repetitive but this is emphasised in the film to such an extent that it seems mechanistic and routine, if not otiose. Frequently Coppola cuts from one ceremony to another as a strategy to elide time. The viewer infers that one day is exactly like the next, an assumption which is underscored by the extra-diegetic Baroque music (the perpetual base of which suggests strict tempo and order). Indeed, a sequence that elaborates the Dauphine's morning routine of rising and dressing before female members of the court, attending mass and taking lunch with her husband is repeated no less than three times to comic effect. The increasingly obsolete world of Versailles is maintained and perpetuated through these rituals: the fact that the rituals seem mechanistic and enacted as a pure means to an end reflects the archaic and crumbling world which they support (a world that can only be upheld through intransigence to change). For instance, the meals served to the Dauphin and Dauphine are ridiculous precisely because the banquet of food is excessive (Marie appears not to eat) and only serves the purpose of display (fittingly, Coppola focuses on the grotesque nature of some of the jellied food, which 'wobbles' when poked with a fork). The viewer, undoubtedly, is meant to invoke images of the 'starving masses' (who are notably absent from Coppola's film, which renders them all-the-more present) while watching the scenes containing dining rituals. Interestingly, most of the film's point of view shots can be

located within the scenes depicting rites of commensality; the viewer is frequently put in the position of Marie in these moments by taking on her view point which is characterised by static framings at the centre of which, more often than not, is Louis XVI ingesting copious amounts of food. The tableau-like effect of these moments is complimented by several short cuts within one sequence that coincide with the Dauphin's predilection for tasting multiple courses of food. Although we do not see Marie herself express disgust, the *mise en scène's* organisation helps to evoke this emotion strongly. Another ritual that is lambasted in a similar fashion is that of Marie's aforementioned morning 'toilette' and 'dressing' during which she is attended to by a number of female members of the court who take over duties according to the rank of those present in the room; Marie Antoinette herself pronounces this daily ceremony as 'ridiculous' only to be reminded that this is simply the protocol at Versailles.

Another way in which the pervasive force of Versailles, as a social and hierarchical system, is made manifest within the film is through the soundtrack. In a manner similar to that of Robert Altman, Coppola separates the visual and sound tracks so that dialogue cannot be attributed to any one specific character. Moreover, by creating a multi-layered soundscape in which many conversations can be heard simultaneously, Coppola disorients the viewer further. This approach is especially apparent in the scene in which Marie dines formally, for the first time, at Versailles. Overtly, this sequence introduces the viewer to a number of important characters in the diegesis (several members of the court and the King's mistress, Madame du Barry). However, the predominance of the dialogue within the diegetic sound (which is placed very high within the sound mix) serves to foreground the malicious and relentless nature of gossip as a social phenomenon. Indeed, this gossip seems to be an inexorable and autonomous power. Gossip is commonly defined as being idle and malicious chatter about an absent third party and is largely associated with female discourse. Anthropologist, Max Gluckman (308) suggests that gossip is a socially sanctioned apparatus for maintaining the unity of a community and enforcing its most salient norms and values as a target of calumny is often judged against a prevailing moral standard. For Gluckman, gossip is also the hallmark of membership of a group; to gossip properly, one must have common knowledge of both a community and its ancestors and the "more exclusive" a community is, the "greater" will be its "amount of gossip" (309) making the walls of a closed group often impermeable to outsiders: "(t)here is no easier way of putting a stranger in his place than by beginning to gossip" (313). Through gossip, a community strengthens its bonds and ostracises that which threatens it. In this scene, the camera tracks around the dining table as though it were an anonymous observer onto the scene;

within this fluid movement, there are frequent cut-ins to Marie who appears to be bemused both by the ostentatious nature of the dinner and the seemingly idle chatter of the court's subjects. The viewer recognises that the camera work reflects the main character's own status as an outsider here; crucially, she cannot join in with the gossip as she possesses neither the right language nor does she know the cast of characters before her (tellingly, she has to ask the Comtesse de Noailles who the King's mistress is). Since the viewer cannot attribute specific parts of the dialogue to any single character in this scene, the gossip becomes as important a presence as any of the protagonists: indeed, it functions as an independent force that is capable of creating and re-shaping relations of power. The fact that Marie is already cast as an outsider within this scene intimates at the way in which gossip, as a nexus of power relations, ultimately will play a role in ostracising her (in fact, this is already apparent within the film's opening credits in which the very title of the film appears in a tabloid-slogan-type font). While this focus on ritualistic activity is undoubtedly harnessed to comic effect, Coppola also includes a number of more disturbing rituals that function as a form of control over the female body; for instance, the court of Versailles is summoned to gather in the bedroom of the Dauphin and Dauphine on their wedding night; the members of the court prostrate themselves in front of the young married couple as the priest blesses their marriage and King Louis XV wishes them "good luck and good work" while brandishing a sceptre with which he strikes the floor, as if to add emphasis and import to his words. Coppola choreographs the scene very specifically by cutting between the pomp and ceremony of this ritual and the evidently awkward and nervous young couple in their bed. Moreover, the sheer size of the marriage bed renders by comparison the young couple seemingly humble and small; the scene plays out to bathetic effect as a sharp cut (and time ellipsis) informs the viewer that 'nothing happened' between the young couple – a state of affairs that leaves the King decidedly confused. From the outset of her marriage, then, Marie understands that she is merely the vessel for producing an heir: her body is co-opted for the alliance between Austria and France. As we shall see, by emphasising Marie Antoinette's fragile and small frame in particular Coppola conveys to the viewer how daunting this task would have been.

It must be noted briefly that the mechanistic and repetitive nature of the various rituals discussed above is offset by a *mise en scène* that foregrounds the ephemeral and fleeting nature of sensory experience. Indeed, I would suggest that even before the violent end that awaits the monarchy is alluded to (in one of the film's final scenes Marie prostrates herself before the masses over a stone plinth), Coppola conveys the transient nature of this gilded and highly privileged world. *Marie Antoinette* contains a

number of purely cinematic moments which serve no specific narrative purpose, but rather function as irreducible specific elements that appeal to the viewer's embodied experience. These instants (for they are, by their very nature, momentary and transitory) give expression to the various components that make up any cinematic image: light, movement, texture, colour, sound. Yet, because they are not cleaved to any particular trajectory, the viewer experiences them as pure sensation. One example would be a close-up of Marie's skirt as it brushes against long grass and wild flowers, the delicate sound of which is heightened; another example would be the light-filled and grainy imagery of Marie and her friends watching the sun rise in the gardens of Versailles after celebrating her sixteenth birthday. Filmed on 16 mm film stock and bathed in natural light, Marie Antoinette appears ghost-like, as though on the cusp of dissolution, at the very moment that she revels in her youth. Coppola makes sustained use of an echo and refrain structure throughout the film (the repetitive nature of ritual being one such instance) and this beautiful yet melancholic moment finds its visual correlate in the final image of the film which shows Marie's bedroom: deserted and in ruin, a bird flies in through the shattered window and the light of the outside world finally infiltrates this sealed and rarefied world. It is in these moments that Coppola, as it were, opens history out on to life.



*Figure 3: Phantoms and Ghostly Spaces.*

### **The Female Body as Ritualised Object and Commodity**

The power and importance of ceremonial activity at Versailles is also made manifest in the way that 'institutional' forces are brought to bear on Marie's body. As a figure on screen, she is often physically overwhelmed by the landscape and architecture of Versailles (a symbolic representation of the power that governs over her). Two significant re-framings of her figure occur during scenes in which she is under intense scrutiny from the court and her family over her inability to consummate her marriage.

In one well-known scene, Marie reads a letter from her mother that details the successes of her fellow siblings in their marriages (in short, happiness and pregnancy). The content of the letter is revealed to us through the voice of Queen Maria Theresa, Marie's mother; in other words, the forcible message of this missive merges disparate spaces: in this moment, Marie is caught once again between Austria and France. In response to the queen's admonitions ("everything depends on the wife, if she is willing and sweet...employ charm and patience"), Marie drops the letter and sinks to the floor. The camera mimics her graceful movement by tracking down and zooming into a close-up of her face, which seems to show signs of exhaustion and despair. Milena Canonero's intelligent costume design aids the creation of an overwhelmingly claustrophobic atmosphere.<sup>5</sup> Robed in a floral bodice, brocade skirt and heavy petticoats and framed against florid wallpaper, Marie seems to be pulled down by and dissolved into her environment here; as she disappears into the very structure of the institution whose norms and codes govern her life (for this is the effect visually), Coppola's message to the viewer is made clear: this is nothing but a beautiful and gilded cage that crushes any specificity or individuality. A tracking shot that occurs earlier on in the film works to similar effect; in this scene, Marie is castigated by her mother for 'snubbing the King's favourite' (Madame du Barry) when her position at Versailles is so precarious; here, the camera tracks backwards from Marie as she stands on a balustrade, a movement which serves to reframe her twice (within a doorway and then between four heavy stone pillars). The effect of this series of re-framings situates Marie Antoinette as a diminutive figure within a cavernous space. The re-framing also acts as a de-framing in the sense elaborated upon by Pascal Bonitzer in his theory of *decadrage* in which the human figure is either tightly and closely framed or rendered nearly indecipherable within an immense diegetic space. Often a de-framing throws the viewer's gaze into crisis by de-centring it; Bonitzer writes: "l'œil habitué (éduqué) à centrer tout de suite, à aller au centre, ne trouve rien et reflue à la périphérie" (quoted and translated in Beugnet, 31). In other words, this cinematic device not only translates visually the main character's vulnerability within an implicitly patriarchal structure, it also engenders feelings of displacement and anxiety within the film viewer as well. Coppola employs a number of visual strategies to underscore the controlling and ordering forces inherent within specific ritual activities. Marie becomes a liminal and ambiguous figure whose identity is re-fashioned for her new role as queen of France. Divested of choice and control over her own body, she is integrated seamlessly into the institution that governs over her.



*Figure 4: Overwhelmed by Institutional Force*

One way in which Marie tries to escape the strict protocol of Versailles is by escaping to her private estate. Le Petit Trianon is a ritually significant space as it facilitates a (highly privileged) escape from the rigorous structures and etiquette of the court of Versailles. In anthropological terms, the Trianon estate functions in the film as a liminal zone in which it is possible to open oneself up to new relationships and encounters. Turner describes the liminal experience as one that affords the possibility of being: “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial”(Turner, 95). In this section of the film, Marie experiments with her appearance and identity; she asks her private couturier to make her more ‘natural’ garments in loose-fitting cotton that she can wear without a corset and she stages theatrical productions in the court theatre and ‘plays’ the role of a simple shepherdess; moreover, she forges new personal connections that would not be made possible within the hierarchical social structure of Versailles (most notably with Count Fersen of the Swedish army, with whom she has a romantic affair). Yet the stylistic manner in which these scenes are given to the viewer foregrounds the impossibility of Marie gaining her freedom, if not the ludicrous nature of her ideals. These scenes are made up of various bucolic tableau-like shots (for instance, Marie reclining in fields of wild flowers; close up shots of animals such as swans and lambs; Marie’s hands brushing through long grass). Shot in natural light, these images possess a hazy, over-exposed quality that makes them reminiscent of the way in which the states of dream, memory and fantasy are often conveyed in films.<sup>6</sup> Heard over the top of these scenes is Marie reading Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s treatise on nature out to her friends: “if we assume man has been corrupted by an artificial civilization, what is the natural state? The state of nature from which he has been removed? Imagine wandering up and down the forest...without industry...without speech...and without home”. While the viewer is invited to revel in the beauty of these images, he/she is also reminded of the highly artificial nature of Marie’s interest in such matters (tellingly, the servants clean the eggs in the hen hutch before she comes to collect them with her daughter Marie Therese). Although Le Petit

Trianon may afford Marie a pause from the hierarchical world of Versailles, it is still within the grounds of the palace: as with any liminal experience, it comes to an end and Marie must be re-incorporated back into the world that owns her and from which she came. Even though she tries, in this short section of the film, to regain autonomy over her own body (the film's sole and brief sex scene is notable within this context) it is quite apparent that she is owned firstly by the court of Versailles and, finally, by the state and the people to whom she must sacrifice herself.



*Figure 6: Sacrificial Selfhood.*

At the time of the film's release, many critics viewed it as an unmitigated celebration of vapidness, superficiality and consumerism; indeed, a montage scene in which shots of pastel-coloured shoes, cakes and ornate brocade materials appear in rapid alternation would seem to confirm such an assessment. Yet interestingly, Coppola subverts, subtly, an iconography associated with the 'Heritage' or historical drama. The latter tends to foreground its production values via sustained focus on objects that have been painstakingly re-created for the sake of authenticity. Critics noted with consternation the inclusion of a pale blue Converse trainer within this montage sequence; this playfully anachronistic (and accidental) addition undermines the historical drama's pretense to truth through 'accurate' depiction. I would suggest then that this sequence is important not merely for the 'sensory overload' it offers to the film viewer (as it has been read), but because it is highly political in its tone and message. The sequence is edited rhythmically (in what is known as an *MTV*-style aesthetic) to 'I Want Candy' by the band 'The Bow Wow Wow' so that every shot is cut to the tempo and chord changes of the song. This sequence can be interpreted in terms of the film's narrative: at this point in the action, Marie has been humiliated before the court as her sister-in-law has given birth to a healthy baby boy, while Louis and Marie seem incapable of consummating their marriage. The song's implicitly sexual lyrics ("you're my guy, you're what the doctor ordered, so sweet you make my mouth water. I want candy")

aid the viewer's inference that Marie's rampant consumption is caused directly by her dissatisfactory marriage. This is certainly a sound interpretation; however, it would seem that the inclusion of this scene could also have a possible political motivation behind it. Despite the amount of attention devoted to this section of the film by critics and scholars alike (see, for instance, Wortel, 116-117), specifically in relation to its sensorial appeal, the sequence is a stylistic anomaly within the film due to its formal construction and its ironic tone. Furthermore, it does not seem coincidental that we encounter this plethora of cinematic effect after we have seen Marie undergo a number of crucial rituals that have served to help integrate her into the court of Versailles and re-make her identity as Dauphine and, later on, queen of France. Rosalind Galt draws an intelligent and germane connection between the fetishistic (feminised and denigrated) image, the female body and consumerism: "*Marie Antoinette*, stages the fetishistic status of the royal body as a question of production design. The film connects a feminised world of objects (for instance, a deliberately anachronistic discourse on the shoe as commodity fetish) with the class and gender politics within which Marie's body can be owned first by the state and then violently by the people" (22). In other words, although this montage sequence appeals to our sensory experience of the film, it also evidences the link between excessive consumption and interpellation into a particular system of values. It may seem that Marie tries to re-gain control over her body by adorning it in jewels and robes of her choosing, yet this reckless behavior also inscribes her further within the patriarchal economy of Versailles. Interestingly, Galt argues that the decorative and pretty image is often disprised and de-valued precisely because it is associated with the feminine and oriental 'other'. By extension, the direct association of Marie's body with the decorative, which is choreographed in a highly fetishistic manner here, contributes to her characterisation as an object that can be inscribed within a system: she is passed from Austria to France, transformed from a daughter into a wife and from a princess into a queen and, finally, given over to the state.



Figure 6: 'I Want Candy'.

## Conclusion

*Marie Antoinette* does not pertain to any of the narrative tropes and standards set by the conventional historical drama. Rather, it is a film about the politicisation of the female body. Its focus on the rite of passage of a young girl into adulthood in an extreme situation is, in effect, highly political both in its effort to convey a specifically female subjectivity and in its eschewal of a more traditional treatment of its subject matter (which, I would suggest, would focus on more 'major' events such as the French Revolution). In delineating the manifold ways in which an individual subject is created through ritualistic processes, the film also attempts to deconstruct the mythical personage of Marie Antoinette as a historical figure. In contrast to critics who confused the film's fetishistic focus on objects and its ostentatious production values with a celebration of contemporary consumerism, I would argue that the film demonstrates ably how the female body itself is transformed into an object to be traded and owned (a gesture which is highly political). As such, its focus on objects can be read in functional terms, as ritualistic and symbolic activity forms the main fabric of the film. Additionally, in its exploration of surfaces and superficiality, *Marie Antoinette*, unexpectedly, beckons the viewer into the mind-space of its main character who experiences her world through objects and *as* an object. Moreover, in this juxtaposition of "a world of objects" (Galt, 22) with an alienated and vulnerable subjectivity, the film produces a feminist discourse by making the viewer partial to Marie's rite of passage into adulthood. As Coppola has commented, the film represents the final part of a triptych with *The Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation*, both of which explore alienated subjectivities and the creation of female identity and, I would suggest, that *Marie Antoinette* is best read within this context.

## NOTES

1. Poirier (2006) writes: "(t)he film is shocking because it is empty, devoid of a point of view, because the person who has made it has no curiosity for the woman she is portraying and the time that her tragic life is set in. The film director seems as unconcerned by her subject as Marie-Antoinette was indifferent to the plight of her people and the world she lived in".
2. Coppola's decision to allow all the actors to speak in their own accent and the script, which is decidedly modern and full of slang, caused consternation with many film critics.
3. Coppola's presentation of time is anomalous. Marie Antoinette did not leave Austria until 1770, but her mother started the process of forming an alliance with France in 1768. This elision of time need not be considered erroneous, however, as it is typical of the way in which Coppola will compress crucial events in Marie's life into a mere series of shots.

4. Although Pasolini's theory mostly refers to the viewpoints of neurotic or ill characters, it helps to detail how an altered state of consciousness can be manifested visually. Pasolini writes with reference, in particular, to the films of Antonioni such as *Il Deserto Rosso* (1964).
5. Canonero is renowned for her work on Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975); another film that demonstrates the impossibility of 're-capturing' a specific historical moment.
6. Coppola has stated that she took inspiration for these scenes from Terence Malick's film *Days of Heaven* (1978), which, famously, was shot only during the hours of twilight in order to achieve a similarly romantic and dream-like effect.

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