

Marie Antoinette: A Novel Take

An Essay written by Loren Crawford on the 2006 filmic release "Marie Antoinette" directed by Sofia Coppola.

Ascending from the cavities of bio-drama director Sofia Coppola's contempo film "Marie Antoinette" (2006) is born. The film is concerned with the outlandish and chiefly empathetic conveyance of the person and life of youthfully iconic French queen Marie Antoinette. Coppola uses this easily relatable character to connect to the audience, making this director's fifth feature film an enjoyably intense watch for both the common and the knowledgeable viewer.

The narrative commences quite untraditionally during the opening credits of the film. The audience is sprung by a montage of protagonist Marie Antoinette behaving undeniably lacklustre in an array of situations. For example, we are denuded to shots such as Marie having her shoes put on and eating a selection of rich desserts. This sequence would tend to fit more closely toward the end of the film than the beginning if, as with the rest of the film, we considered this sequence to fit into a fairly sequential temporal space. However, this unorthodox sequence should in fact be measured to serve multiple purposes not necessarily pertaining to the timeline of the film. This particular anterior sequence of course as with many, introduces the protagonist of the film, in our case, impending French queen Marie Antoinette. These initial shots outline the more socially accepted perception of Marie as an indifferent and self-indulgent queen and are perhaps designed to introduce the audience to the protagonist in a comfortable way. This perception of Marie's lifestyle introduces us to an acuity which Coppola undoubtedly intended to erase by the film's closure. Furthermore, this succession of shots establishes and allows it's audience to become comfortable with the characteristic stylistic elements that the film will carry for it's duration. Coppola's inaugural arrangement in particular, is able to set up the visually dominant sets, costumes and interesting shot types that the film deals with.

This opening sequence is blatantly juxtaposed against what some would call the genuine opening of the narrative which commences in a 1707 Austria; Marie's home nation and

the starting point of her journey. Why would Coppola present an audience with two sequences so conflicting so early in the piece? It is believable that Coppola is presenting the audience with two opposing representations of the same character. As the film commences it becomes blatant that Coppola pushes the second and less widespread representation; one of naivety and self-sacrifice.

Although Coppola's film is historical in the sense that it is set against the backdrop of 16C French history and stylistically through the chronological sequencing of events; the film is largely concerned with the character information of Marie Antoinette's identity rather than the historical information of her fate and though briefly detailed, her frivolousness regarding the French economy. In fact, in conflict to the way in which Marie's life is often detailed in history, viewers re-emerge from the cinema feeling empathetic to the young queen rather than scornful, as is the more universal way of perceiving the brewing of the French Revolution. Coppola through intelligent use of narrative and stylistic elements manages to portray Marie Antoinette as a principally naïve teenage girl rather than a clued-in and deliberately conniving queen of France. In this way, Coppola takes a familiar character and humanizes the way in which this representation is perceived using a modern and innovative platform of cinema.

"Marie Antoinette" though not always directly presented from the protagonist's point of view, is clearly empathetic to Marie, the central character. For example, during the scene in which Marie breaks down at the news of her sister-in-law's pregnancy, the camera zooms to an extreme close-up shot. This is a repeated technique throughout the film, and is a device used in order to permit each audience member to gain some insight into Marie's emotional conflict. It is a technique used to allow us as human beings, to be able to relate to Marie Antoinette not only as a historical figure but as an arousing, emotional character. Such dialogue in the first half hour of the film as "[You will] Leave all of Austria behind" outlines elements of self-sacrifice which the audience can relate to and correspondingly empathise with. The film is very deliberately constructed as so as the audience views Marie's transition from the Austrian court to the French court as an emotional experience. We are often given insight into the protagonist's thoughts, as outlined through acting performance and are shown sequences in which Marie is a solitary unit. Perhaps more than anything else, camera angles and compositions assist in

mimicking Marie's emotions. For example, in one sequence Marie is shown against the backdrop of Versailles. Such a small figure being contrasted against such a large background allows us to gain insight into such emotions as loneliness and also the scope of Marie's inner conflict and problems that she faces. In addition, as Marie gains her first look into the French court, many low angles are used. This aids in giving us, the audience the sensation that we are looking around and taking in the atmosphere as Marie does. This occurs multiple times throughout the film and is a definitely tell tale sign that Marie's point of view and empathy toward Marie's point of view is integral to the narrative.

This work of Coppola's is a legitimate instance of a film that uses a range of untraditional formal elements in order to retell or, more to the point; to interpret a traditional story. For example, Coppola's shot selection is extremely unconventional in the sense that the shot duration is longer than would be expected for most high budget films. The 2006 film is impregnated with laborious takes covering what would, at first glance seem to be unnecessary or purely additional information and even very occasionally what would appear to be very little information. Quite on the contrary, when a knowledgeable approach is taken to decoding the film, it becomes blatant that these shots are not only what separates "Marie Antoinette" from the historical film category but what drives the alternative, character determined narrative. These shots in actual fact are what humanize Coppola's representation of Marie Antoinette. Shots such as Marie sleeping, eating and thinking outline her human characteristics. It is obvious that even these three contents of shots allow an audience in a sense to relate to the character on a human level. These shots then, should not be taken purely as extensions of the by now established plot but as crucial facets of the film's character development and purpose.

By means of a range of formal and stylistic elements such as those previously discussed, Sofia Coppola is able to create a humanistic representation of an historical character. This director utilizes an auteurist approach to this film, as comparable to her previous releases "The Virgin Suicides" (2000) and "Lost in Translation" (2003) to deal with the scope of female emotion against hopeless circumstance. Coppola readily creates a visually satisfying, rich motion picture that can be enjoyed by both a 'blockbuster' audience and a critical one; a more than difficult feat in the feature film industry.