



SEEN & HEARD

Marie Antoinette

The screening on Tuesday 8 March will be introduced by Hannah Strong, Little White Lies Digital Editor and author of Sofia Coppola: Forever Young.

The spirit of fashion as creative reinvention, performance and personal style statement informs Sofia Coppola's movie, where costume and set design are used in various ways: to capture the essence of the period, to suggest mood, to reinforce and comment on character, to project the state of mind of its heroine, and to visualise the director's concerns. The young Austrian archduchess who married into the French royal family in the years leading up to the revolution and was beheaded at the height of the Reign of Terror is often remembered for her apparent disregard for the suffering of her starving subjects, encapsulated in her notorious remark, 'Let them eat cake'. Marie Antoinette has always been the focus of extremes of hostility and sympathy, though even sympathisers find it difficult to come to terms with her lack of interest in the world outside Versailles and her frivolous lifestyle.

Coppola has based her film on the 2001 biography *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* by Antonia Fraser, which counters many of the misconceptions surrounding its subject – in particular dispelling forever the myth that she uttered the infamous words with which she is generally identified. Fraser draws a picture of a teenager out of her depth in the French court and its political intrigues, faced with a sexless marriage and under pressure to produce a royal heir, who gradually grew to maturity only to face barbaric retribution at the hands of the revolutionary tribunal. Coppola claims that she was drawn to the idea of Marie Antoinette as a naive and warm-hearted character caught up in circumstances beyond her control. Rather than a sweeping historical epic, she wanted to paint an intimate portrait that gave an impression of the world in which her heroine was cast adrift from the young woman's own perspective.

While obviously a sympathetic portrayal, Coppola's film does not entirely let Marie Antoinette (played by Kirsten Dunst) off the hook. Instead it remains true to the contradictions that make her an ambiguous figure. The sequences of her enjoying a chic 'rustic' lifestyle at her well-appointed country retreat Le Petit Trianon, or consuming exquisite pastries and buying extravagant designer shoes (some of Manolo Blahnik's most exotic creations), have an ironic distance that is absent from other scenes. When Marie Antoinette is stripped of her Austrian clothing before entering France, or stands naked and shivering while the pecking order of courtiers who dress her is decided, her vulnerability is palpable.

Similarly, her emotional devastation that her sister-in-law has delivered a child when she and Louis XVI (played by Coppola's cousin Jason Schwartzman) are unable to conceive, expressed in private away from the prying eyes of the court, is an insight into her gut-wrenching isolation. Coppola's strategy is to move between exterior observation and interior perception so viewers experience both empathy with and estrangement from her flawed heroine. Although we witness Marie Antoinette's progress towards maturity, we are not invited to decide whether she is good or bad. Rather, we are encouraged to respond on an emotional level to her situation.

This emotional response is one of the innovative aspects of Coppola's intuitive and impressionistic approach to history. Her style is fragmented and episodic, privileging symbolic and affective elements of the image such as colour, pictorial design, light and texture. Sometimes she executes a jarring change of mood, as when the shift in public opinion against Marie Antoinette is depicted tabloid-style by slapping slogans such as 'Madame Deficit' on a crude, modern representation of her portrait. This refers to the fact that Marie Antoinette's overspending on clothes and other pleasurable pursuits was blamed for France's financial crisis – though as the film suggests, the insistence of Louis XVI's advisers that money should be sent to support the revolutionaries' cause in the American War of Independence was equally responsible.

In a fleeting scene, Marie Antoinette is shown responding to a warning from her mentor Ambassadeur Mercy (Steve Coogan) that she cannot afford her extravagant plans for the palace garden by accepting economies. Coppola takes the fragments of historical record and uses a collage technique to bring into conflict the diverse aspects of the way history has viewed her subject. This is a creative activity rather than the exposition typical of more conventional histories, and while it may not offer viewers much in the way of hard evidence, it does say something about the selective nature of the process of historical reconstruction.

To reinforce this idea, Coppola plays off authenticity and historical document against inventive remixing. *Marie Antoinette* was shot on location at the Chateau de Versailles, where the crew was allowed unprecedented access to rooms including the grand Hall of Mirrors and Marie Antoinette's bedroom. The lavish palace and gardens, capable of housing 20,000, were commissioned by Louis XIV, and by the 18th century had become hugely expensive to maintain – one of the problems facing Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

Production designer K.K. Barrett (who also designed *Lost in Translation*) embellished the place with furniture, food and draperies that respect the original settings while reinterpreting them, bringing ostentation and conspicuous consumption to the fore and instilling a bright, youthful whimsicality. The resulting visual overload is both seductive and decadent, invoking Marie Antoinette's candy-coloured perspective while at the same time commenting on her addiction to taste and fashion.

Costume designer Milena Canonero is similarly inventive, giving Marie Antoinette's status as an 18th-century style icon a contemporary twist by simplifying her outrageous dresses and hairstyles (the young dauphine's 'big hair' became her trademark) without losing their original value as culture-shock. For Coppola, Marie Antoinette was like a caged bird who found her escape from suffocating court etiquette, gossip and the glare of publicity by forging a personal style and identity through her clothes, designs for the palace and her private retreat, and a sophisticated lifestyle (including an interest in music and theatre). Her fascination with fashion was related to performance, and she installed a private theatre at Le Petit Trianon where she enacted scenes from the latest plays (theatre, like cinema today, was a major influence on fashion). Unfortunately, this creative endeavour also brought about her downfall, turning public opinion against her as republican fervour quickened.

Coppola's film shows Marie Antoinette as essentially misunderstood. Her apparent superficiality and lack of knowledge of political issues were fostered by her indulgent husband, who encouraged her interest in more frivolous pursuits, including gambling parties and masked balls, which fed rumours of her infidelity and became the subject of vitriolic anti-royalist pornographic cartoons. But Coppola is not primarily concerned with setting the historical record straight. There are unmistakable parallels between the director's experiences as a celebrity member of one of Hollywood's royal families and Marie Antoinette's situation as a target for xenophobia, malice and envy in pre-revolutionary France.

Like Marie Antoinette, Coppola is not much interested in the political events that engulfed her heroine, which take place off-screen. She finishes the film with the flight of the king and queen from Versailles to Paris, before the darker days of their trial and beheading. During this later period Marie Antoinette gained political skills and kudos as she attempted to negotiate their release. In Coppola's film, her growth to maturity is encapsulated in an apocryphal moment, as she faces the angry crowd of peasants from the palace balcony and bows before them. It is a theatrical scene that Dunst plays to the hilt; reputedly Marie Antoinette's courage was admired by even the most ardent revolutionaries present. For Coppola, the confrontation provides an opportunity for Marie Antoinette to utilise her love of drama and performance.

Other matters of historical debate are dealt with in summary fashion.

The reasons for Louis XVI's impotence are not clear, though it is thought that an operation eventually solved the problem and made it possible for the couple to conceive. In the film, Marie Antoinette's brother Joseph II (Danny Huston) manages to arouse the dauphin's libido by likening sexual intercourse to finding the right key to a lock, drawing his metaphor from one of Louis' favourite hobbies. Marie Antoinette's flirtation with the Swedish playboy Count Axel von Fersen (Jamie Dornan), the subject of gossip and speculation but never verified, is presented in a teasing montage as a full-blown affair. One major episode, 'The Affair of the Necklace', the subject of a 2001 film starring Hilary Swank, is omitted completely, despite the fact that it played a large part in swaying public opinion against the queen.

Such insouciance, together with a nonchalant approach to period trappings in design, performance and soundtrack, may antagonise those who demand more substance to history. In Coppola's film, style is substance, a gesture that is entirely appropriate to her project and to the statement she wants to make. The combination of effortless artistry, quirky humour, cool charisma and hip lifestyle is essential to her creative persona, which has been achieved at some personal cost. Her in-crowd, pop-culture aura is reminiscent in some ways of Andy Warhol (another shoe fetishist). It is, then, no surprise to learn that during the shooting of *The Cotton Club* (1984), a precocious Sofia Coppola, aged 11, would sit on Warhol's knee at the Sherry-Netherland hotel on Fifth Avenue engaged in serious conversation about art.

Pam Cook, *Sight & Sound*, November 2006

MARIE ANTOINETTE

Directed by: Sofia Coppola
©: I Want Candy LLC
Production Company/From: American Zoetrope
Presented by: Columbia Pictures Corporation
Presented in association with: Pricel,
TFC - Tohokushinsha Film Corporation
Executive Producers: Paul Rassam, Fred Roos, Francis Ford Coppola
Produced by: Ross Katz, Sofia Coppola
Co-producer: Callum Greene
Line Producer: Christine Raspillère
Unit Production Manager: Callum Greene
Unit Manager: Martin Jaubert
Production Co-ordinator: Agnès Berméjo Lainé
Financial Controller: Chantal Malrat-Atanassian
Location Manager: Henry Le Turc
Post-production Supervisor: Jonathan Ferrantelli
2nd Unit Director: Roman Coppola
1st Assistant Director: Christophe Cheysson
2nd Assistant Director: Emilie Cherpitel
Script Supervisor: Eva Z. Cabrera
CASTING: Antoinette Boulat, Karen Lindsay-Stewart
Additional French Casting: Stephanie Hayman
Written by: Sofia Coppola
Based on the book by: Antonia Fraser
Director of Photography: Lance Acord
Camera Operator/B Camera (2nd Unit): Berto
Steadicam Operators: Valentin Monge, Benoît Theynissen
Gaffer: Mikaël Monod
Key Grip: Bruno Dubet
Still Photography: Leigh Johnson
Visual Effects: Benjamin Murray
Additional Visual Effects: L'E.S.T.
Special Effects Supervisor: Philippe Hubin
Special Effects: Bigbang SFX
Film Editor: Sarah Flack
Production Designer: K.K. Barrett
Supervising Art Director: Anne Seibel
Art Director: Pierre du Boisberranger
Art Director/Draftsman: Jean-Yves Rabier
Set Decorator: Véronique Melery
Prop Masters: Michel Conche, Marc Pinquier
Costume Designer: Milena Canonero
Special Shoes Designed by: Manolo Blahnik
Wardrobe Costume Supervisor: Patricia Colin Talandier
Key Make-up: Jean-Luc Russier
Ms Dunst's Make-up Consultant: Stéphane Marais
Ms Dunst's Make-up: Hué Lan Van Duc
Key Hairstylist: Desiree Corridoni
Ms Dunst's Hair Design: Odile Gilbert
Ms Dunst's Hairdresser: Raphaël Cornillon
Principal Hairdressers: Mario Pegoretti,
Véronique Boitout, Lorraine Glynn
Wigs Co-ordinator: Carla Indoni
Title Design: Peter Miles Studio
Music Producer: Brian Reitzell
Historical Music Consultants: Roger W. Neill, Karen Hiles
Choreographer: Corinne Devaux
Sound Design: Richard Beggs
Production Sound Mixer: Stuart Wilson
Re-recording Mixers: Richard Beggs, Kent Sparling
Supervising Sound Editors: Richard Beggs, Michael Kirchberger
XVIII Century Meals Conceptor: Marc Meneau
Historical Consultant: Evelyne Lever
Historical Adviser: Jacques Charles-Gaffiot
Carriages/Horses: Ecuries Hardy, Frédéric Hardy

Cast

Kirsten Dunst (*Marie Antoinette*)
Jason Schwartzman (*Louis XVI*)
Judy Davis (*Comtesse de Noailles*)
Rip Torn (*Louis XV*)
Rose Byrne (*Duchesse de Polignac*)
Asia Argento (*Comtesse du Barry*)
Molly Shannon (*Aunt Victoire*)
Shirley Henderson (*Aunt Sophie*)
Danny Huston (*Emperor Joseph*)
Marianne Faithfull (*Maria Teresa*)
Mary Nighy (*Princesse Lamballe*)
Sebastian Armesto (*Comte de Provence*)
Jamie Dornan (*Count Fersen*)
Aurore Clément (*Duchesse de Char*)
Guillaume Gallienne (*Vergennes*)
James Lance (*Leonard*)
Al Weaver (*Comte d'Artois*)
Tom Hardy (*Raumont*)
Steve Coogan (*Ambassador Mercy*)
Clara Brajman, Mélodie Berenfeld (*Austrian girlfriends*)
Jean-Christophe Bouvet (*Duc de Choiseul*)
Io Bottoms, Céline Sallette (*ladies-in-waiting*)
André Oumansky (*Cardinal de la Roche Aymon*)
Jean-Paul Scarpitta (*Baron Scarpitta*)
René Lucien Rolland (*archbishop*)
Clementine Poidatz (*Comtesse de Provence*)
Camille Miceli (*Grand Chambellan*)
Paul Fortune (*Duc Fortune*)
Natasha Fraser-Cavassoni (*Comtesse de Cavazzoni*)
Alexia Landeau (*Comtesse de la Londe*)
Joe Sheridan (*catty courtier*)
Katrine Boorman (*the English duchess*)
Sarah Adler (*Comtesse d'Artois*)
Jean-Marc Stehlé (*Doctor Lassonne*)
Paul Jasmin (*Baron Jasmin*)
Francis Leplay (*doctor delivery Provence*)
Mathieu Amalric (*man at masked ball*)
Carlo Brandt (*palace gardener*)
Raphaël Neal (*garden page*)
John Arnold (*minister of finances*)
Scali Delpeyrat (*doctor delivery M-A*)
Chloé Van Barthold (*Elisabeth*)
Phoenix (*Petit Trianon musicians*)
Lauriane Mascaro (*Marie Therese 2 years*)
Gaëlle Bona (*girl at Petit Trianon*)
William Doherty (*councilman*)
Florrie Betts (*Marie Therese 6 years*)
Dominic Gould (*count*)
Jago Betts, Axel Küng, Driss Hugo-Kalff (*dauphin 2 years*)
Fabrice Scott (*king's messenger*)
Alain Doutey (*chief valet*)
Bo Barrett (*page*)
Joseph Malerba (*queen's guard*)

USA/France/Japan 2005©

123 mins

SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

Skate Kitchen Tue 1 Mar 20:40; Sun 13 Mar 20:45

Divines Wed 2 Mar 20:50; Tue 15 Mar 20:50

Jinn Sat 5 Mar 17:45; Tue 8 Mar 21:00

37 Seconds (37 sekanzu) Sat 5 Mar 20:30; Sat 12 Mar 20:45

Water Lilies (Naissance des pieuvres)

Sun 6 Mar 18:45; Mon 14 Mar 20:50

Marie Antoinette

Tue 8 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Hannah Strong, Little White Lies Digital Editor and author of *Sofia Coppola: Forever Young*); Sun 13 Mar 18:00

Somersault Fri 11 Mar 20:50; Mon 14 Mar 18:10

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