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FEMALE BIOPIC IN SOFIA COPPOLA'S *MARIE ANTOINETTE*¹

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ABSTRACT

Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006) constitutes a biographical portrayal of the homonymous young French queen. Nevertheless, the film challenges a realistic view, and favours a "personal style in historical representation" (COOK, 2014, p. 214). This paper analyses how the contrast between the notions of excess and naturalness present in the construction of this female biopic, as defined by Dennis Bingham (2010), point to criticisms in consumerism and alienation. In this way, the ideas of personal style and female biopic contribute to the construction of a historical representation which dialogues more with the contemporary audience than the decapitated French queen.

Key-words: Female biopic; Marie Antoinette; Historical film.

RESUMO

Maria Antoinette (2006) de Sofia Coppola constitui um retrato biográfico da homônima e jovem rainha francesa. No entanto, o filme desafia uma visão realística, e favorece um "estilo pessoal em representação histórica" (COOK, 2014, p.214). Esse artigo analisa como o contraste entre a noção de excesso e naturalidade presentes na construção dessa *biopic* feminina, como definida por Dennis Bingham (2010), apontam para uma crítica sobre consumismo e alienação. Dessa forma, as ideias de estilo pessoal e *biopic* feminina contribuem para a construção de uma representação histórica que dialoga mais com a audiência contemporânea do que a rainha francesa decapitada.

Palavras-Chave: *Biopic* feminina; Marie Antoinette; Filme histórico.

Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette* (2006) exhibits a recurrent contrast between extravagance and a more natural inclination, which seems to emphasize the main character's, Marie Antoinette (Kirsten Dunst), positions towards different

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moments of her life. Thus, this contrast reveals much of her personality. In this sense, the duality between exaggeration and naturalness complies with Dennis Bingham's argument of this film's tendency to construct a female biopic (2010, p. 361). The female biographical picture is that of the famous Maria Antoinette. The tale tells the story of how this young Austrian princess arrives and matures in France, facing problems in her marriage and in the French court, until she becomes French Revolution's most symbolic persona, the decapitated Queen.

Having this in mind, this paper objects to analyze and contrast these notions of excess and naturalness, in order to unveil the construction of the main character's biopic and a possible commentary on consumerism and alienation. The close reading relays on three main aspects, where these contrasting aspects are in evidence: mise-en-scène, narrative and soundtrack. These three aspects synchronize to create the notion of a complex and conflicting character. Through this perspective, I also follow Pam Cook's argument that this historical and biographical film conveys a "personal style [Coppola's] in historical representation" (2014, p. 214). In defending such idea, I understand this historical female biopic film as grounded in its contemporary perspective, which does not disallow the film as a historical source. The main idea is that *Maria Antoinette* relates more to Sofia Coppola's perspective on the history of the decapitated French Queen than to the real historical Maria Antoinette. In fact, the challenge in analyzing and comprehending such film is the borderline between real history, however difficult this notion might be, and its contemporary view.

Theorist Linda Hutcheon refers to such historical representations, which relate as much to the production's period as to the moment it portrays, as historiographic metafiction. Although Hutcheon's term focuses mostly on literature, this idea can easily be associated with film. Therefore, she defines that a historiographic metafiction is a postmodern tendency, which "foregrounds this inherent paradox [historical and contemporary] by having it historical and socio-



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political groundings sit uneasily alongside its self-reflexivity” (1989, p. 15). Meaning that history emerges from a contemporary consciousness. In this particular case, Cook argues it is not only Sofia Coppola’s view, but also her personal style and authorial identity (2014, p. 214), which reflects in this historical biopic construction.

The construction of *Marie Antoinette* as a female biopic film surrounds the idea of an extravagant life. The character, and let us say also the person, Marie Antoinette, is/was an Austrian princess, who was married to a French dauphin, Louis XVI (Jason Schwartzman) and eventually becomes a very young 19-year-old Queen of France in 1774. In the film, the idea of a life full of excesses does not seem to be a particular trait of the character, but rather a characteristic of the Versailles palace, where Marie Antoinette moved after marrying Louis. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore that the young queen assimilates the expending rituals better than one could imagine.

The plot and mise-en-scène express this over-the-top behavior through an ironic and postmodern construction. At first, Marie Antoinette does not comply with the excessive behavior, which comes to the fore in her first morning dressing ceremony. After having her gown passed by three lady members of the high court according to their rank status, a cold and naked young dauphine says “This is ridiculous”, which the mistress of the household, Comtesse de Noailles (Judy Davis), promptly replies “This, Madame, is Versailles” (00:25:19). Nevertheless, she soon learns the rules and enjoys the extravagance, as her high-top-bird-hair shows. The camera is quite ironic in this shot; it begins focusing on the feather and the hairstylist Léonard (James Lance) putting a bird on the top of her hair, then we see a long shot of a continuous hair bun while she raises, and the spectator realizes how tall her hair is. She even asks “It is not too much, is it?”, as if not knowing the answer.

Marie Antoinette speaks very little along the film. Indeed, it seems she speaks less than anybody else, if we compare her to the other characters and their



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screen time. First time she speaks is around five minute of screening, and we do not really see her talking, it might be one of her companions, which indicates a quite literal metaphor to how little she has to say, or rather, and I prefer this reading, that she in fact does not have a sounding voice. As a woman and a foreigner, her voice would not be heard, but her appearance and attitudes might more prominently be noticed by the French court, and these are the tools she has to use. Adding to this, the few moments she actually speaks, her words are quite revealing.

Furthermore, the extravagance also features in the Versailles rules and in a consumerist tendency. The sequences of shoe exposition and dress choosing are a clear example of this notion. In these moments, the main character is filled with a happy, enthusiastic and lust feeling when shopping, as any teenager contemporary girl would. Though, Maria Antoinette's consumerism relates to a sexual frustration. These shopping moments appear right after her sexual attempts and fails. Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI did not consummate their marriage immediately after getting married, as the French court expected. Such situation put her into a difficult position since her role as a dauphin is basically to procreate royal children. The film does not explain his sexual disinterest and rather portrays a clueless dauphin, which Bingham argues to be Coppola's vision of how unknown historical facts can be (2010, p. 371). Still this excessive consumerist infers a negative critic to the character, since this was the position held by the people at film's historical moment. Maria Antoinette becomes a token of how careless French royalty was with money and because of this, how far they were from the common citizens, which contributed to the French Revolution's indignation from 1789 to 1799.

Nevertheless, the film does not solely condemn the character for her excessive behavior. The plot actually suggests that Marie Antoinette is a victim of her status. This idea comes to the fore in the more organic and related to nature moments. After having her first child and overcoming her sexual frustration, Louis



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gives her a country house, the Petit Trianon, where she can wear “something more simple, natural, to wear in the garden” (01:22:53), as she says. In this retreat, the excess is left behind. Wilder and more natural landscapes substitute the artificial gardens of Versailles. There, she finds a happiness in bathing in the sun, laying on the grass, feeding the lamb, picking up eggs and flowers, harvesting strawberries. No artificial cakes appear in this sequence, and as Bingham describes cakes are associated to her as a decorative accessory (2010, p. 362). Cakes are beautiful and decorative, but are not proper and nourishing food; which implies that she is also a decorative element of the court, but does not have any real power in the state. Cakes do appear everywhere in the Versailles sequences. In this relaxed moment, even the parties are in outside tents (01:29:25).

The plot infers that this other, simpler and more natural side of Marie Antoinette was stripped out of her. Before meeting her future husband and even entering France, the young princess has to “leave all of Austria behind” (00:06:53), says Comtesse de Noailles. Her Austrian friends and dog have to go, as well as her clothes, which the French court literally takes out of her. This transition shot is symbolic because she is presented naked inside a luxurious tent and in-between nations, France and Austria. Her nakedness symbolizes her leaving Austria behind, her being exposed to the court (and also foreshadows how much she will be exposed), and her natural organic self being hidden under layers of squandering clothes, make-up and hair buns. The surrounding is dark, as if suggesting a doomed destiny, which will come from this excessive lifestyle. Such reading does not imply Austria as an organic nation, and France as an artificial environment, rather it indicates that French court demanded an extreme lavish behavior, which Maria Antoinette did not have before. She acquires such behavior, but not completely loses her old self. When she leaves the tent, she is finally all-doll like. As if in an inverted



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Pinocchio tale, who goes from puppet to boy, Marie Antoinette is the girl who becomes a doll.

Thus, the film portrays a complex Marie Antoinette, who enjoys extravagant shopping as part of her court privileges, but also has a different less exorbitant side. In this sense, soundtrack is also a revealing aspect. The opening sequence, for instance, plays *Natural's Not in It* (Entertainment album from 1979) by Gang of Four, which sings: "The problem of leisure/ What to do for pleasure/ Ideal love, a new purchase/ A market of senses," while Marie Antoinette lustful tastes a cake and has her shoes put on by a handmaid, she looks strait to the camera and smiles as if saying "so what" to the audience. Thus, the first sequence's visual and sound elements associate pleasure with shopping and luxury, which is the main idea of the film.

The music also conveys the idea of rebellion. Bingham explains that Coppola uses "contemporary music to make the past accessible" to younger audiences, similar to Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2010, p. 304). The contemporary pop rock punk music appears in moments of defiance, as if the film itself is defying classical cinematography. When Marie Antoinette is choosing dresses, fabrics and shoes, *I Want Candy* (homonymous album) in the Bow Wow Wow's 1982-version is playing; when she and her party decides to go to a masquerade party hidden, we hear *Hong Kong Garden* (1978) by Siouxsie and the Banshes; when she has an affair with general Fersen, the music is *Kings of the Wind Frontier* (1980) by Adam and The Ants, and when remembering him we hear *What Ever Happened* (Room on Fire album from 2003) by The Strokes. On the other hand, classical music as ballads, sonnets and waltz do appear in more serious and traditional moments as in their wedding party. This kind of music becomes associated with boredom through the repetitive shores of going to mass, dinning, waking up, being dressed, with the frustration and sadness when she is not able to "inspire the dauphin" (00:33:02), as



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the embarrassed Ambassador Mercy of Austria (Steve Coogan) says, and when one of her children die.

Furthermore, the soundtrack does not seem to condemn Marie Antoinette's excessive shopping and behavior. It rather infers this attitude as a fun and rebel like. Marie Antoinette can be a little bit vain and foolish, but not too much. Her social role imprisons her, since it allows and demands her the single task of motherhood. In this situation, she tries to make the best of it with what she can. Thus, the relation between rebel and excess is complex, because the latter is both part of the French court tradition and a way to rebel against it. Maria Antoinette might be a punk of her period, as the film implies, but a punk within the court domain, and not really out of it.

In the Petit Trianon sequence, which I associate to a more natural orientation, sound is mostly diegetic. The spectator hears the chickens, the goats, milk being poured, birds and nature. In here, the whispering so familiar in the Versailles sequences, which implies the malevolent and envious comments of the court, do not appear. In fact, Marie Antoinette seems to speak significant more than in previous sequences, as when she quotes Rousseau in voice over. The only music comes from the diegetic playing of Spanish guitars (whose players are composed by the indie pop French band Phoenix), while the queen of France lazily appreciates. This realistic soundtrack complements the natural aesthetic opted in the Petit Trianon sequence.

Thus, the excessive moments of the film infers consumerist and alienated characters, as Marie Antoinette. Nevertheless, the soundtrack and the plot allude to the idea that her consumerism has complex implications, and that it also can reflect a rebel and defiant young Queen. The fact that she is part of Versailles does not necessarily mean she is enjoying all of it, though she is complying. Following this perspective, her escape to the Petit Trianon represents a denial of the court of Versailles, its rules and excesses. On the other hand, Coppola's film does not



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redeem Marie Antoinette from being so detached from real people. She does enjoy the shopping, the extravagance, and plenty of laying down and daydreaming shots show pleasure and indulgence.

The critic to consumerist is then ambiguous. In a way, we can affirm that it led to her decapitation, since she was used as a symbol of wasting too much public money, though she was not the only one. Through a different perspective, soundtrack shows us that the excessive parties and shopping is a way to get her out of the court's pressure, to be young and enjoy life. This ambiguity in celebrating and disapproving consumerist agrees with Fredric Jameson's explanation of a postmodern and paradox construction, in which mass production thinking dominates art production not only in its modes, but also in its thematics (1984, p. 60). Above all, consumerism is a thematic dear to Coppola, as the authorial and style bound perspective of Cook argues. In *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), which also features Kirsten Dunst, a simple life leads four young girls to suicide; the lack of consuming represents a lack of teen opportunities, leading to unhappiness and dislocation. In the recent *Bling Ring* (2013), a group of teenager steals from famous people, they go to jail, but they are happy as long as they share a sell with Lindsay Lohan, who is also a shoplifter.

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