

Home / DV-Film /

MARIE ANTOINETTE:
A Feminist BioPic from a Most Surprising Source

Special for Digital Filmmaker
by Jan Lisa Huttner

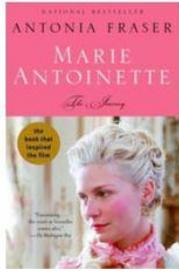


Although I am totally committed to supporting women filmmakers in their fight against the “celluloid ceiling,” my emotions were painfully mixed the day Sofia Coppola became the first American woman in Oscar history to receive a “Best Director” nomination. I thought *Lost in Translation* was way over-rated. I suspected that members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences were just trying to make up for past mistakes (as they often do): they gave *Frida* six nominations but didn’t nominate director Julie Taymor, so the next year, having taken a lot of flak, they nominated Coppola.



“...I have tried not to allow the somber tomb to make its presence felt too early... Above all, I have attempted, at least so far as is humanly possible, to tell Marie Antoinette’s dramatic story without anticipating its terrible ending...”

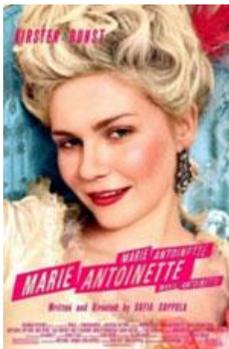
-- Historian Antonia Fraser



Marie Antoinette had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival on May 24, 2006, and opened in American theaters on October 20, 2006.

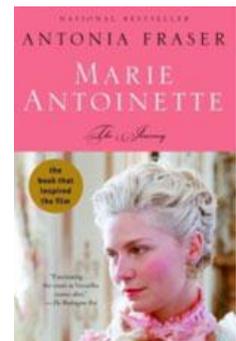
<http://www.thehotpinkpen.com/?p=375>

Although I am totally committed to supporting women filmmakers in their fight against the “celluloid ceiling,” my emotions were painfully mixed the day Sofia Coppola became the first American woman in Oscar history to receive a “Best Director” nomination. I thought *Lost in Translation* was way over-rated. I suspected that members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences were just trying to make up for past mistakes (as they often do): they gave *Frida* six nominations but didn’t nominate director Julie Taymor, so the next year, having taken a lot of flak, they nominated Coppola.



“...I have tried not to allow the somber tomb to make its presence felt too early... Above all, I have attempted, at least so far as is humanly possible, to tell Marie Antoinette’s dramatic story without anticipating its terrible ending...”

-- Historian Antonia Fraser



Marie Antoinette had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival on May 24, 2006, and opened in American theaters on October 20, 2006.

For these reasons, I refused to read any of the hype about Marie Antoinette in advance. I went into the screening room determined to see it with fresh eyes and an open mind. Alas, although I doubt it will happen, I would be delighted to see Ms. Coppola receive Oscar nominations this year in both the “Best Director” and “Best Adapted Screenplay” categories. This time, I really do believe that she has earned them.

Coppola’s narrative is based on Antonia Fraser’s sympathetic biography *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*. When I read it, after having seen the film a second time, I was surprised to find that the screenplay was remarkably faithful to the historical record. The facts of Marie Antoinette’s intimate life are shockingly accessible. Letters documenting obsessive interest in her menstrual cycle, for

example, are now museum treasures, displayed side-by-side with articles of clothing, jewelry, furniture, and obscene pamphlets depicting her as a voracious sexual predator. Furthermore, the poor girl, whose designated godparents were the King and Queen of Portugal, was actually born on the day of the great Lisbon earthquake (November 2, 1755). Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction.

The Arc of a Life:



Kirsten Dunst stars as French Queen Marie Antoinette.
All photos courtesy of Sony Pictures. All rights reserved.

Contrary to many of my fellow film critics, I believe that the opulent mis-en-scene and the provocative soundtrack of Marie Antoinette are both subordinate to the narrative rather than ends in themselves. As I see it, Coppola's goal is to depict the arc of a controversial life in such a way as to make that life relevant to viewers who not only lack interest in history but downright scorn it. (Remember, even while this film was under development American congressman were insisting that the "French Fries" served in their dining room be renamed "Freedom Fries.")

Far from being a party animal (count the critics referencing Cyndi Lauper's 1983 chart buster "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun"), Coppola's Marie is the ultimate good girl. Her overriding concern is to make other people happy, and the one person she is most eager to please is her mother, Austrian Empress Maria Theresa. Marie is only fourteen years old when Maria Theresa arranges her marriage to the heir to the French throne, and once Marie leaves Vienna and moves to Versailles, she never sees her mother again.

But Maria Theresa's insistent letters continuously assert her control over her daughter's life, and one of Coppola's master strokes was to cast singer Marianne Faithful in this critical role. Faithful's voice is rich, dark, husky and powerful, and wherever she is, whatever she's doing, this is the voice from which Marie can never escape. Hence her sadness in the midst of revelry; when Marie parties she does it to win the love of sycophants, and when she drinks, she does it to dull the nagging voice that's always in her head.

Maria Theresa has pride of place in the huge crowd of courtiers and hangers-on watching and waiting for this immature young girl and her equally inexperienced consort to mate, as if they were nothing more than domesticated animals with exalted blood lines. Their most intimate acts are sources of endless speculation, advice, and criticism. Even with all her finery, it is impossible to envy Marie Antoinette. Only a fool would want to walk in this woman's fancy shoes for more than the film's 123-minute run time.

And yet, despite all the odds, Marie and Louis do eventually come together as a couple, and by the end they are clearly affectionate friends. When furious revolutionaries descend on Versailles, friends urge Marie to run, but she chooses to remain with Louis. Coppola didn't make any of this up, and she doesn't try to romanticize any of it. Devoted to their royal duty as well as to each other, Marie and Louis stand their ground together as husband and wife as well as the King and Queen of France.

The Arc of Marriage:



Dunst with Jason Schwartzman in the role of Louis XVI.
All photos courtesy of Sony Pictures. All rights reserved.

We know from the beginning how it will end. Coppola doesn't need to show Marie walking up to the guillotine. It's enough to know that she's matured from girlhood to womanhood with both her courage and dignity fully intact. Although she is only 24 years old, Kirsten Dunst already has a huge body of work, and yet nothing prepared me for the depth and poignancy she brings to this role. When the Oscar nominations are announced on January 23, 2007, I hope to see Dunst's name on the list of "Best Actress" candidates.

For those of us who are interested in history, for those of us who believe that "those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it," Marie Antoinette holds some valuable lessons. According to Fraser, Marie never said "Let them eat cake." Quite the contrary, she was known for her philanthropy and was considered more generous in this regard than most of her contemporaries. Furthermore, while she did have an extravagant period, it was of relatively short duration. After Maria Therese Charlotte, her first child, was born in 1778, Marie settled into a domestic period centered around her growing family. What pushed the French economy to the breaking point was Louis XVI's financial support for the American Revolution.

Coppola doesn't belabor any of these points, but she does embed them in her narrative. She shows Louis and Marie living in a bubble, much like our current leaders do. To the extent that he paid attention, Louis put the needs of his own people second to besting the British in a game of global hegemony. The consequences were dire. "Let them eat Freedom Fries!"

Creative Teamwork:



Kirsten Dunst (left) and Sofia Coppola (right) began their creative collaboration with *The Virgin Suicides* in 1999.
All photos courtesy of Sony Pictures. All rights reserved.

© Jan Lisa Huttner (11/1/06)—Special for Digital Filmmaker (digitalfilmmaker.net)

Jan Lisa Huttner is the managing editor of [Films for Two: The Online Guide for Busy Couples](http://FilmsforTwo.com). In addition to freelance work for a variety of print and online publications, Jan writes regular columns for the [JUF News](http://JUFNews.com), Chicago's Jewish community monthly, and [Chicago Woman](http://ChicagoWoman.com), a bi-monthly published by The Woman's Newspapers. She is an active member of the Chicago Film Critics Association and the Illinois Woman's Press Association.