



Kirsten Dunst as Marie Antoinette in the garden  
of Versailles

# Let Them Wear Manolos: Fashion, Walter Benjamin, and Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*

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Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette* (US, 2006) is about fashion and the construction of feminine identity—but not, at its heart, those of ancien-régime France. Rather, it is a modern consideration of contemporary sartorial networks that reflects an ironic twenty-first-century attitude that the filmmaker herself has come to represent. In fact, it is the modern rather than the historical qualities of the film that have captured the attention of most reviewers: Coppola's work has been called a “modernisation of French aristocratic manners and language,”<sup>1</sup> “a thoroughly *modern* confection,”<sup>2</sup> and “a comment on *modern* celebrity youth culture.”<sup>3</sup> This critical attention to the contemporary quality of the film invites the questions: what, precisely, is “modern” about *Marie Antoinette*, and how is the film's modernity distinguishable from the labels of “post-modern” and “pastiche” that have been used, often unflatteringly, to describe Coppola's works?<sup>4</sup> At first glance, the answer to the former question seems obvious: although set in revolutionary France and filmed in the very halls of Versailles where the Austrian-born

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queen resided, the film takes clear liberties with historical accuracy and provides a post-punk<sup>5</sup> sound track and contemporary-sounding dialogue as it playfully captures the experience of feminine adolescence in an era closer to our own than to that in which the title character lived. However, as this essay will argue in answer to the latter question, the film's modernity lies not solely in these recontextualizations of the French queen's biography but more interestingly in the way in which its self-conscious reinterpretation of linear history makes it a successful expression of the modernity theorized by Walter Benjamin, whose early twentieth-century texts remain critical to today's discussions about what was and is the nature of the modern. Fashion is key to Benjamin's conceptualizing of modernity; thus, his writings resonate importantly with Coppola's construction of the modern in *Marie Antoinette*, which is similarly concerned with notions of style and dress and their relationship to history. Moreover, the ways in which Coppola self-consciously links herself, a well-known style icon, to her glamorous eighteenth-century protagonist suggests the blurring of boundaries between her complex high-profile persona and the characters she constructs. Fashion is a crucial signifier that enables Benjamin to articulate the temporal instability that is, for him, constitutive of modernity; fashion is also a vital tool used by Coppola to overlap her life with the modern Marie Antoinette that she creates in her film. Despite her prominence as a contemporary maker of style, however, Coppola's insistence on her primary role as a maker of movies invites us to read her interpretation of the life of the Austrian dauphine as a commentary on her own experience as a contemporary woman filmmaker, one that has proven to be as problematic as Marie Antoinette's eighteenth-century experience as the queen of France.

Sofia Coppola and Walter Benjamin might appear to have little in common, but in fact both are ironic observers of a constructed past that is used to interpret their respective media-driven, commodity cultures. Moreover, sartorial fashion plays a capital role in both of their aesthetic productions.<sup>6</sup> The story of Marie Antoinette is implicitly a story about the power and expression of dress, as historian Caroline Weber's recent book *Queen of Fashion: What*

*Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* persuasively documents.<sup>7</sup> In Coppola's version of the queen's history, which won the Academy Award for Best Costume Design,<sup>8</sup> fashion often speaks for the characters as they themselves utter so little. Indeed, the sparseness of the film's dialogue heightens the importance of the visual aspects of the production, wherein pastel gowns and myriad silk shoes, ribbons, and bows, sometimes shown in rapid succession, compete for the viewer's attention. Yet if the dialogue is minimalist, this does not suggest that text is unimportant. Refrains from period documents, many culled from letters sent from Austria to France by Maria Theresa, Marie Antoinette's mother, run like an epistolary leitmotif through the film, and are juxtaposed with the cynically subversive lyrics of urban pop bands and the youthful cadence of the characters' atmospheric chatter. What interests me is Coppola's construction of Benjaminian modernity in the visual culture of fashionable phantasmagoria that she creates, and its play with the film's dialogues, both spoken and sung.

My reading of *Marie Antoinette* thus centers on the interplay of costume, music, and language through the lens of fragments from *The Arcades Project* in which the sartorial fashion of women informs Benjamin's formulations of the modern. In particular, as I will show, Coppola's film is consistent with Benjamin's figuration of feminine fashion as a transhistorical manifestation that draws from the past even as it looks to the future in its representation of the present. However, *Marie Antoinette* is also problematic in this regard, for the film acts as both an echo of and a challenge to the way in which Benjamin links fashion to femininity and death through its three registers of sartorial, textual, and musical expression. In the final section of this article, I challenge the notion that *Marie Antoinette* is merely frivolous, postmodern pastiche by reading it through the lens of contemporary fashion and examining its protagonist as a self-consciously created extension of Coppola herself. I conclude by suggesting that Coppola uses her conspicuous role in today's world of haute couture to subvert and confuse attempts by her critics to "read" her as a director, both establishing and complicating her own identity as arguably one of the most important woman filmmakers of her generation.

### Benjamin and the Transhistoricity of Fashion

Walter Benjamin's belief that film was an important hallmark of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity, crystallized most famously in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," has invited rich scholarly activity that considers the relationships between modernity and the cinematic arts.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, what I propose here is to approach Coppola's film not through Benjamin's writings on the moving image but rather through his far less examined discussions of sartorial fashion. As Ulrich Lehmann and Peter Wollen have convincingly argued, fashion was integral to Benjamin's theorizing of the dialectical forces inherent to modernity. Wollen notes that, of the numerous sections composing *The Arcades Project*, only Convolute B holds the title "Fashion," yet the subject is in fact never far from Benjamin's mind.<sup>10</sup> References to fashion occur throughout the entire work, from allusions to "the costume of the traveler" in his fragments on the flaneur to his notes on the "heroic role" of the commissioner of made-to-order tailored suits in his reflections on the poet Charles Baudelaire.<sup>11</sup> In document 7 of the Materials for the Exposé of 1835, a skeletal outline that has come to be understood as an intended organization for the entire *Arcades Project*, Benjamin cites fashion as an essential component to his overall dialectical schemata:

Hell—golden age

Keywords for hell: ennui, gambling, pauperism

A canon of this dialectic: fashion

...

Dialectic of the newest and oldest

Fashion is a canon for this dialectic also (906–7)

Thus, in a passage seen as pivotal to defining a comprehensive system of relations for the *Arcades Project* fragments, fashion is twice mentioned as "a canon" for the Benjaminian dialectic. For the critic familiar with Benjamin's figuration of modernity as dependent upon a nonlinear conception of history, this should come as no surprise. Fashion, representing the oppositional yet paradoxical

cally generative friction of "the newest and oldest" in its ability to reconfigure past styles into the latest looks, was, for him, the perfect metaphor for modernity: it, too, relied on the manifestation of dialectical tensions for its expression. As Lehmann puts it, "Encompassing everything that was at the height of its time, yet in the same moment leading us back into antiquity, fashion became for Walter Benjamin the one dialectical image, the 'tiger's leap in the open air of history.'"<sup>12</sup> This metaphor of the tiger's leap derives from "Theses on the Philosophy of History," an equally fragmentary collection of reflections from Benjamin's late writings. In it he states,

History is object of a structure whose site is not homogeneous and empty time but one filled by now-time (*Jetztzeit*). For Robespierre the Rome of antiquity was thus charged with now-time and blasted from the continuum of history. The French Revolution regarded itself as Rome reincarnate. It quoted ancient Rome as fashion quotes a past attire. Fashion has the scent of the modern wherever it stirs in the thicket of what has been. It is the tiger's leap into the past.<sup>13</sup>

Here the tiger's leap is Benjamin's poetic figuration for the way in which fashion quotes from the past even as it anticipates the future, while representing the present moment. Fashion can therefore be described as *transhistorical*, to borrow Lehmann's term, for it defies the sequential ordering of history as the past leading to the present in favor of a vision of what Benjamin terms *now-time*, in which history, the here-and-now, and that which is to come mutually inform one another to form a new temporal reality: modernity itself. This link between the modern and fashion in Benjamin's model of history provides a useful framework for examining Coppola's film and explaining its modern impulses. Before considering *Marie Antoinette*, however, I would like to turn briefly to the treatment of gender as it relates to discussions of fashion in *Convolute B*, for here, too, connections can be made between the filmmaker's construction of the vilified queen, the feminocentric world of glamour portrayed in the film, and Benjamin's problematized personification of fashion as a woman.

### **Fashion, the Courtesan, and the Feminine Collective**

For Benjamin, intrinsic links connect fashion, death, and the feminine. He begins *Convolute B* with the opening lines from Giacomo Leopardi's witty 1824 "Dialogue between Fashion and Death," in which the title characters are personified as two sisters, the "daughters of Decay," who blithely discuss the tortures of Fashion—eye-popping corsets, tight boots, bindings, and piercings—that harm the body and push humanity away from life and closer to death.<sup>14</sup> Reiterating fashion's ties to femininity and morbidity, he evokes the metaphor of the nineteenth-century courtesan, writing, "And boredom is the grating before which the courtesan teases death. Ennui" (62). As Benjamin well knew, the courtesan, or high-class prostitute, was an allegorical figure that was often called upon in art and literature to represent *fin de siècle* pleasure and decay.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, she embodied the terrors of deathly disease, for it was widely held that the courtesan's sexual liaisons facilitated passage from body to body of nineteenth-century killers such as syphilis and tuberculosis. On the other hand, the courtesan also represented high fashion, for wealthy prostitutes often wore the most daring, up-to-the-minute looks and were frequently perceived by society as pinnacles of stylishness. The Belle Époque man of letters Arsène Houssaye once noted that, although courtesans and elegant upper-class women were both clothed by the same dressmakers, the prostitutes were somehow always more chic than their socially upstanding counterparts.<sup>16</sup> Benjamin's courtesan is a fashionable and seductive *femme fatale*, who teases death through the iconic iron gratings of late nineteenth-century Parisian gateways and covered passages, and represents a dangerous temptation to men plagued by the *mal de siècle* of ennui. For him, fashion and death go hand in hand, and the dangerous—and unambiguously female—temptress is a catalyst for both. In her film, by contrast, Coppola evokes Benjamin's deadly female seductress precisely at the most culturally resonant moment of *Marie Antoinette*: as the protagonist utters her infamous (and apocryphal) phrase, "Let them eat cake." Unlike in Benjamin's example of the smiling courtesan, however, the image in the film of a taunting, monstrously black-lipped queen—referred to as the

“Fantasy ‘Wicked Queen’ Sequence” in the DVD’s “The Making of *Marie Antoinette*” featurette<sup>17</sup>—is soundly denounced and serves instead to criticize the rampant demonization that the queen suffered due to rumors that falsely ascribed to her that notorious slogan. Like a wicked fairy-tale queen, this smirking villainess is for Coppola an injurious fantasy, one that her film seeks to discredit by bringing to light the affective vulnerability of Marie Antoinette as a young woman.

Benjamin’s interests in garments and the feminine are, of course, directed less toward the affective experience of stylish women and more toward what he views as femininity’s privileged status in the cyclical system of fashion. In *Convolute B* he notes that

fashion is in much steadier, much more precise contact with the coming thing, thanks to the incomparable nose which the feminine collective has for what lies waiting in the future. Each season brings, in its newest creations, various secret signals of things to come. Whoever understands how to read these semaphores would know in advance not only about new currents in the arts but also about new legal codes, wars, and revolutions.<sup>18</sup>

Fashion’s power of “extraordinary anticipations,” its uncanny ability to predict future trends, is here accorded to women, the “feminine collective” whose “incomparable nose” gives it the gift of foreseeing styles that are yet to come (63). For Benjamin, the implications of women’s ability to forecast “what lies waiting in the future” in the “newest creations” of each season surpass those of the merely sartorial. Juxtaposing the art of dress and power, he declares that those able to “read” fashion’s signals have the upper hand in predicting turns of tides in weighty political and social realms, including those of legislation, warfare, and collective upheaval.

Although Benjamin thus sees women as crucial harbingers of both aesthetic currents and future events of grave consequence, he seems not to grant them the interpretive—and thus subjective—power to decipher the “secret signals” and “semaphores” that they



wear on their own bodies. Rather, the ability to decode sartorial semaphores, as suggested by the importance of fashion in Benjamin's own writing, is reserved for the male critic himself who, like his hero Charles Baudelaire before him, interprets culture through women's garments. In *Marie Antoinette*, Coppola reinforces Benjamin's notion of a privileged relationship between femininity and fashion by depicting an almost exclusively feminine universe that revolves around dressing and sartorial display.<sup>19</sup> Like Benjamin, she imagines fashion as beautiful spectacle, although she also views garments as opulent fetters from which her "feminine collective" temporarily breaks free at the Petit Trianon retreat, where loose, comfortable dresses replace the bondage of tightly corseted bodices. It is a subtext of the film that the richly elaborate silks, shoes, jewels, stockings, and gowns of the queen's entourage are presages of what is to come, for they are symbolic of Marie Antoinette's and the court's capricious wastefulness and are held up by angry revolutionaries as signs of the monarchy's lavish squandering of funds. In different ways, then, both Benjamin and Coppola strip the feminine collective of the agency to use fashions as powerful tools of self-expression. For the former, the clothed female body exists in service of an outside (masculine) observer who seeks insight into the future; for the latter, it serves a patriarchal court that performs its supremacy in the exterior signs of feminine sartorial pageantry in order to justify and reinforce its own power. Yet if fashion appears to lose its subjective potency for the predominantly female characters in *Marie Antoinette*, in her own life, as we will later see, Coppola uses it both to construct and to destabilize the way in which she is perceived as an important influence to style and to cinema. She does so by suggesting, through the intriguing example of herself, the appearance of a unique brand of contemporary woman filmmaker who uses cinema and its interplay with the haute couture industry to fashion herself as icon and writer/director alike.

It is important to note that, even as Benjamin tends to reduce fashionable women in *The Arcades Project* to either dangerous femmes fatales or passive objects of display, he is also responsible for troubling these very formulations. In an enigmatic pas-

sage from Convolute B, Benjamin's metaphor of the lethally stylish courtesan appears, at first glance, pushed to its morbid extreme: "Fashion was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through the woman. . . . That is why she changes so quickly; she titillates death and is already something different, something new, as he casts about to crush her."<sup>20</sup> Yet gender, fatality, and fashion are here complicated, for death is revealed to be not a courtesan but a clerk, who "serves as mannequin himself to save costs." A "tall and loutish" man draped in women's clothing, death seeks in vain to quash fashion by crushing her and suppressing her incessant, rapid retransformations (62–63). In this passage, the female-gendered fashion is not death but a "parody" of the cadaver, a caricature or impersonation of the corpse rather than the decaying body itself, who "titillates" and nimbly outraces death at every turn. In tandem with the unmistakably macabre undertones of his metaphorical image, Benjamin evokes the rebellious and resilient side of a feminized fashion who defies death and makes a mockery of him. In this way he deviates from simply casting fashion in the role of alluring female executioner and nuances her as agile and swift, one whose garments generate pleasurable excitement, thwart stagnation—represented here by the sluggish and uncouth salesman—and undergo a dynamic, spirited revolution with each passing season. In this metaphor, fashion-as-woman gains the upper hand over the masculine presence that endeavors to suppress her and "holds her own against him" (63). In his own way Benjamin was, perhaps, not far from anticipating the arrival on the cinematic scene of Sofia Coppola, a successful woman of fashion who is a nimble sartorial manipulator, both in the context of her films and in the powerfully ambivalent public persona that she constructs of herself. As we will see, seventy years after Benjamin theorized cinema's new potential to express the dialectical tensions of modernity, Coppola is exploiting these very instabilities that film and fashion offer her in unapologetic defiance of those who dismiss her as nothing more than a perpetuator of ahistorical pastiche.

### Now-Time and *Marie Antoinette*

Benjamin's above references to stylish femmes fatales and imminent social turmoil invite us to turn in earnest to Coppola's film on Marie Antoinette, wherein feminine fashion, the stereotype of a dangerous woman, and the threat of impending revolution are also key themes. A highly anticipated follow-up to Coppola's award-winning *Lost in Translation* (US, 2003), *Marie Antoinette* sparked immediate controversy, receiving both jeers and a standing ovation at its first public screening at Cannes. In the months that followed, the film was heralded and panned by critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Caroline Weber, who published *Queen of Fashion* the same year that Coppola's film was released, dismissed *Marie Antoinette* as "yet another variation on the insipid, pastry-devouring party girl of legend."<sup>21</sup> Other historians took Weber's lead and condemned Coppola's interpretation of Marie Antoinette's years at Versailles, deeming it "pointless,"<sup>22</sup> and, even more cynically, the product of a shrewd "master marketer" who is the "daughter of a gilded age with her own entourage of courtiers."<sup>23</sup> In contrast, film scholars Diana Diamond and Pam Cook were more forgiving of the young filmmaker's work. The former referred to *Marie Antoinette* as an example of third-wave feminism that "grew out of the spirited individualism and materialism of women in their 20s and 30s in the mid 1980s and '90s who still advocate for women's rights while embracing a 'girlie culture' that celebrates sex, men, gay culture, and clothes,"<sup>24</sup> and the latter called it an attempt at "an intimate portrait that gave an impression of the world in which her heroine was cast adrift from the young woman's own perspective."<sup>25</sup>

This uneven reception of the film can be attributed in part to the way in which Coppola willfully separates her work from "traditional" historical costume dramas, especially with her choice of music, while continuing to retain major visual elements—namely costume and settings—from them. *Marie Antoinette*, as Cook perceptively argues, can be called a "travesty" in that it "irreverently wrests its source material from its historical context, producing blatantly fake fabrications that challenge accepted notions of authenticity and value" (38). In this way Coppola's film troubles the notion



*Let them eat cake*

that an accurate representation of history is desirable or even possible. The opening credits illustrate this point well and give a first taste of the multisensorial techniques upon which Coppola relies in her problematizing of historical representation throughout her work. The film begins not with picture but with sound: the hard guitar tones of British post-punk band Gang of Four's "Natural's Not in It" (1979) reverberate against a blank black screen. Credits in hot pink letters then appear, and the spectator is confronted with an image of the actress Kirsten Dunst in the title role. Lying on a period chaise longue in a pastel blue chamber, she tastes lazily from the masses of (let-them-eat) frosted cakes that encircle her, while a maid fits her with a pair of cotton-candy-pink shoes.

The juxtaposition of late twentieth-century punk music and an authentic eighteenth-century setting—recall that the filmmaker shot her footage at Versailles in the very rooms in which Marie Antoinette lived—shocks expectations by establishing a dissonance between the (accurate) historical setting that is seen and the contemporary strains of distorted guitars that are heard. Coppola, after creating this jarring effect, then solicits audience participation in the travesty. The queen reclines in her white undergarments in posture and clothing that suggest seductive intimacy with the

spectator, Benjamin's courtesan in cinematic redux. Intimacy turns conspiratorial: Dunst breaks the fourth wall by smiling directly at the camera while the music blasts on, inviting the viewer to be seduced both by her demure charms and by the film's playful temporal anachronisms.<sup>26</sup> Confronted with an image recognizable as a stereotype of Marie Antoinette, the audience is asked simultaneously to challenge and to indulge in Coppola's twenty-first-century version of history.

To my mind, it is in the very dissonance of time, sound, and image—a dissonance exemplified by the harsh, discordant strums of the guitar—that Coppola, through fashion, captures the type of transhistorical modernity of which Benjamin wrote. To shed light on the filmmaker's approach to transhistoricity, let us recall Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image. Michael Jennings usefully summarizes the concept as follows: "The things that seem to be plucked from their context in the period and forced into an often uncomfortable proximity to other, seemingly unrelated objects and images hold an explosive charge in that they contain within themselves not only a diagram of their previous and projected development but also an image of an experience untainted by historical life under capitalism."<sup>27</sup> Thus the dialectical image is characterized by an unstable generative potential that stems from the fact that its constitutive elements derive from disparate contexts and periods. It is imbued with a volatile tension—one notes Benjamin's frequent use of the terms *blast* and *explode* to characterize its unstable potential—whose detonation creates the now-time of the present moment. Coppola's film is a twenty-first-century expression of now-time that thrusts together into "uncomfortable proximity" auras of the "previous" and the "projected" inherent to the sartorial objects that she carefully selects. In the opening scene, for example, the filmmaker expresses the transhistorical moment through her protagonist's white garments and accessories. As the first image flashes onto the screen, the grandiose plumes in Dunst's hair immediately collide with Gang of Four's music, creating dynamic tension between the ancien-régime extravagance of feathers and the mechanized minimalism of the post-punk aesthetic. The friction between past and present is further enhanced by the young

woman's ruffled white petticoat and camisole. On the one hand, these underclothes evoke the elaborate formality of aristocratic dress: Marie Antoinette's conspicuously white garments, Weber informs us, linked her unmistakably to the fleur-de-lis, the white insignia of the royal Bourbon family.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, these same garments seem to defy strict historical categorization through their white neutrality. Here Marie Antoinette is in a state of undress, still to don the garments that will serve to mark her social and historical identity. The fact that she will soon be transformed into a clothed body is suggested by the maid, who is in the process of placing the satin pumps on her feet. Marie Antoinette thus exists in a moment of sartorial potential that is neither past nor future but on the threshold between both: the present time itself. In this moment Coppola forces together late-1970s punk music, which was already retroactive with respect to the film's 2006 debut, and Dunst's polyvalent white garments, producing a disquieting, explosive tension that the viewer experiences as an expression of the modern and contemporary, Benjamin's now-time for a new generation.

Perhaps the most significant transhistorical fashion moment in the film occurs during an infamous music video montage, which presents a dizzying tableau of shoes, pastries, wigs, card games, and champagne, all set to Bow Wow Wow's 1982 hit "I Want Candy." In a brief moment following a series of pans across rows of brightly colored satin shoes, a discarded pair of sky-blue Converse hightops is momentarily visible. The playful incongruity between the twentieth-century sneakers and the ordered lines of eighteenth-century pumps creates a momentary temporal discord that intensifies the dissonance between the sassy jangle of the Bow Wow Wow song and the pastry-colored ancien-régime setting, the present and the past in volatile proximity. What is particularly intriguing about this scene is that Coppola also confuses the very notions of old and new through her sartorial choices. The Converse hightops that viewers read as anachronistically modern were, in fact, invented as basketball shoes in 1917, and enjoyed their first of many waves of popularity when marketing genius Chuck Taylor attached his name to them in the early 1920s. When *Marie Antoinette* debuted in 2006, "Chuck Taylors" were a nearly ninety-year-old fashion classic. By

contrast, as was widely reported before the film's release, the opulent costume shoes featured throughout were designed by contemporary haute couture footwear guru Manolo Blahnik, who today sells his pricey stilettos, dubbed *Manolos*, with similar self-branding prowess.<sup>29</sup> The spectator is then left to puzzle: which accessory is in fact modern? A basketball shoe from the 1920s that generations of youth have adopted for decades, or a stylized Manolo created by one of today's most recognizable high-heel designers? The answer, of course, is both: belonging neither wholly in 2006 nor in the days of Marie Antoinette, both sets of shoes are imbued with what Benjamin calls above "the new in the context of what has always already been there," a quality upon which Coppola cleverly relies to infuse her film with fashion's "scent of the modern."

An interview with *Marie Antoinette*'s production designer K. K. Barrett, which is included in the "Making of *Marie Antoinette*" featurette on the 2007 DVD of the film, underscores that it was indeed a transhistorical aesthetic, rather than a quest for historical accuracy, that informed the filmmaker's costuming decisions. Barrett notes that, instead of clothing the cast in the royal blues, burgundies, and golds of period canvases that depict eighteenth-century aristocrats wearing their court finery, Coppola creates a new image, one based on the pastel palate of brightly colored French pastries from the renowned gourmet cake boutique Ladurée. Referring to the finished film metaphorically as both a painting and a photograph, Barrett declares that, unlike in pictures tinged with sepia tones to suggest age, the colors of the costumes in *Marie Antoinette* are "a little bit richer because the paintings haven't faded yet; the photography hasn't faded yet."<sup>30</sup> Barrett's reference to garments in an imaginary painting or photograph from the past that will, in the image's own future, become faded with age, captures the transhistorical spirit of Coppola's film in uncannily Benjaminian style. In "A Little History of Photography" (1931), Benjamin describes a viewer's desire to find a modern point of reference in an old photograph: "The beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten

moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it."<sup>31</sup> In *Marie Antoinette*, costume sends viewers back in history while simultaneously wresting them from it, forcing them to see "the tiny spark of contingency"—a Manolo stiletto or Converse sneaker—that gives the film the "immediacy" of "the here and now" and codes it as modern. In a sense, then, Coppola's film turns Benjamin's example on its head, for, instead of presenting viewers with an archival image in which a viewer hopes to find elements of the present, she uses the modern medium of film to construct, with the help of fashion, a moment that frustrates attempts to read it as either historical or as contemporary. Rather than presenting the spectator with a record of the past, such as a faded painting or a photograph, the filmmaker fleshes out contemporary meanings in past events and does so by conceiving of her film as a historical object that has yet to age.

### **Fashion and Death: The Motley Cadaver**

In *Marie Antoinette*'s day, Weber argues, the queen's status as a fashion icon was used against her to construct a myth that was based largely on "unflattering tales about her narcissism, her financial recklessness, her ruinous addiction to fashion."<sup>32</sup> As the opening credits flash, Coppola uses dress to provide a visual representation of this stereotype of the ruinous female narcissist: Dunst's vertically upswept hair makes reference to the extravagantly expensive pouf hairstyle that became the queen's emblematic coiffure; her provocative state of semi-undress brings to mind the licentiousness of which her critics accused her; the frosting-colored shoes—pretty enough to eat—symbolize the voracious consumption of luxury items that the queen's detractors cited in their successful efforts to perpetuate her downfall in public opinion. Gang of Four's lyrics, "The problem of leisure / What to do for pleasure / Ideal love a new purchase / A market of the senses," reinforce the infamous image of Marie Antoinette as an idle shopaholic, one whose existence revolved around the acquisition of sumptuous clothing that signaled a state of perpetual "leisure" and the endless pursuit of "pleasure."



However, in basing her screenplay on a sympathetic biography from 2001 written by Antonia Fraser,<sup>33</sup> Coppola also seeks to debunk this negative legend of her construction of the queen by depicting her sartorial excesses as, on the one hand, innocent, girlish indiscretions and, on the other hand, an escapist reaction to the unfair judgment Marie Antoinette faced as an outsider foreign princess from Austria. Indeed, as the film develops, the spectator is increasingly made to feel that such diverting retail therapy is understandable, given the snobbish comments about the queen's Germanic provenance murmured by courtiers within her earshot as well as the heartbreaking lack of attention in bed that the young woman receives from her naive and oblivious husband, Louis XVI (played, significantly, by Coppola's own cousin, Jason Schwartzman). The king's bungling reluctance to consummate their marriage for seven seemingly interminable years is the pervading tension that drives the first two thirds of the film, wherein the dauphine is unable to conceive the heir to the throne that she, France, and Austria so desperately desire. When reconsidered in this light, the childlike proffering of foot for shoe in the opening scene can also suggest the queen's youthfulness and childlike inexperience as she is thrust into an international limelight filled with intense political pressures, and as her virgin reproductive organs are called upon to serve the political machine of two ancien-régime superpowers. The chaste innocence of her white underclothes, Dunst's delicate porcelain-doll features, the girlish pastel pink of the satin shoes: all these suggest that the queen-to-be is but a girl playing dress-up in pumps that are a size too large. More than signifying a simple fashion addiction, the shoes also foreshadow the tragic side of Marie Antoinette's position as an unfulfilled wife who will attempt to substitute, as Gang of Four's song cynically implies, "ideal love" with "a new purchase" of yet another pair of high heels.

In this way, *Marie Antoinette* symbolizes Coppola's critical assessment of the unfair demands of society on its young women, even, or perhaps especially, those who face the pressures of a high-profile life of privilege. In a poignant scene located midway through the film, the text of a letter written in 1771 by Marie Antoinette's mother, Maria Theresa, is heard in voice-over against the image of

the young queen, dressed in a flower-print gown, leaning against a wall papered with an ornate blossom motif.<sup>34</sup> Her mother's news that her siblings are happily producing their requisite heirs, coupled with the reprimand that she is failing not only as wife and mother but also as the linchpin of an alliance between Austria and France, prove too great a humiliation, and Dunst sinks to the floor in despair. Flowered wallpaper and fabric, ironic symbols of fecundity unrealized, overwhelm the screen. The actress's head falls back wearily, highlighting a peach-colored bow tied prettily around her delicate neck. The ribbon seems, at first glance, nothing more than an inconsequential sartorial ornament. However, it is also suggestive of a metaphorical noose, one that places the queen in, as her mother's letter implies, a "dangerous situation." As Dunst swallows back tears, the symbolic stranglehold of her aptly named choker, juxtaposed with the blossoms on her dress and the walls behind her, emphasize Marie Antoinette's impossible position: she has made valiant efforts to cajole the reluctant king into deflowering her but has nonetheless failed to produce a successor to the throne of France.

Critics question Coppola for ending her film long before Marie Antoinette's execution.<sup>35</sup> Yet, as this scene suggests, the filmmaker's layered treatment of fashion ensures that allusions to the queen's death are a constant presence throughout the work. The lighthearted pastels, which stand out in contrast to the melancholic mood of the sequence, perfectly express Benjamin's statement that fashion has two extremes: "frivolity and death."<sup>36</sup> He connects these two concepts by declaring that, through fetishism, fashion generates "the sex appeal of the inorganic" by linking women's body parts to inert substances such as precious stones. Ultimately, he notes, "the parceling out of feminine beauty into its noteworthy constituents resembles a dissection" and results in "the image of the corpse" (79). That is, garments and jewelry cultivate the notion of the replacement of flesh with nonliving matter, thereby bringing the animate body closer to death. In this scene the horizontal ribbon, which accentuates the artificial whiteness of the queen's breasts and bare neck, echoes Benjamin's observation that fashion simulates a corpse by linking flesh to nonliving material.

In fact, as Caroline Evans and others have shown, death is a necessary part of fashion's renewal, for, as an illustration of fashion's fickle nature, by the time an outfit is deemed to be an example of the latest style, it is already on its way out of vogue.<sup>37</sup> This process is cyclical and leads paradoxically to self-generation. As Lehmann puts it, "When the design has been accepted into the sartorial mainstream, the actual innovation dies and the process of inventing and promoting a new style or look begins anew."<sup>38</sup> In this scene Marie Antoinette seems to be, to borrow Benjamin's phrase, a "parody of the motley cadaver," a body clad in fashions that prefigure its own demise. As the camera slowly zooms in on the young woman's tightly corseted torso and gently heaving bosom, her body is reduced through visual dissection to the erogenous zones of her pale chest and collarbone, an illustration of Benjamin's "sex appeal of the inorganic." Moreover, the dainty strip of satin around Dunst's neck foreshadows the queen's decapitation by demarcating the line across which her head will be severed from her body by the guillotine.<sup>39</sup> Juxtaposing inorganic ribbon with the organic pulse of her actress's chest, Coppola makes her protagonist a supple corpse-to-be, marked by death even in the flower of her youth.<sup>40</sup> At this crucial moment in *Marie Antoinette*, Coppola's use of the sex appeal of sartorial fetishes, including the tight corset and the constricting choker, subtly underscores the ties between the feminine body and death. Thus, although the profusion of luxurious pastel garments works for some of the film to emphasize the giddiness of the protagonist's youth or the formal nature of courtly life, it is also true that fashion works not to trivialize the story of the French queen but rather to preview Marie Antoinette's eventual demise.

### **Self-Fashioning: Sofia Coppola as Marie Antoinette**

Collapsing against flowered wallpaper and face framed in close-up, Dunst once again turns her gaze to the audience, her tearful expression articulating a critique of a social system that confines women to gilded cages while unjustly placing the political stability of entire countries upon their wombs. Yet the director's com-

mentary is not at its core levied at an eighteenth-century Versailles but rather at the contemporary period in which she resides and which she herself, through her films and public persona, has a hand in defining. Echoing a technique of the televised reality series—surely one of the most prominent media inventions of twenty-first-century modernity—Coppola encourages viewers to share in her character's deepest mortification while simultaneously using Dunst's direct appeal to the camera to remind the audience of its own indispensable role as voyeur. In response to the title character's mournful stare at the camera, viewers are encouraged to gaze back at the person located on the other side of the lens: the filmmaker herself. As Cook rightly suggests, it would be difficult for many filmgoers to miss the autobiographical undertones injected into Coppola's work, the "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."<sup>41</sup> One can further add "fashion designer" and "sartorial muse" to Cook's list of similarities between Marie Antoinette and Sofia Coppola. As Weber argues, the queen authored some of the most influential styles of her day and provided creative motivation to her dressmaker Rose Bertin and hairdresser Monsieur Léonard for outrageous coiffures and garments that were widely imitated.<sup>42</sup> For her part, Coppola serves as longtime inspiration for haute-couture designer Marc Jacobs,<sup>43</sup> and has also cocreated MilkFed, a clothing label of youthful garments sold exclusively in Japan.<sup>44</sup>

Although Coppola's detractors dismiss these "unmistakable parallels" between filmmaker and protagonist as mere narcissistic indulgences of a Hollywood princess, I wish instead to focus on the possibility that Coppola's intentional reference to herself is a technique by which she uses fashion to make her life an intertext for her films in an attempt to negotiate her position, one both privileged and decidedly vulnerable to critique, as a high-profile woman of power in a masculine domain. In so doing, she reinvents herself in ways that recall the eighteenth-century self-fashioning techniques of Marie Antoinette, techniques that Weber, who is fiercely critical of Coppola's film, convincingly demonstrates in *Queen of Fashion*.

Yet, unlike the queen, whose sartorial gestures were required to be grandiose to resonate, Coppola depends on a problematizing ambiguity both on the level of her aesthetic production and her related construction of self. Relying heavily on post-punk music and the contemporary California accents of her cast to distance *Marie Antoinette* from the genre of period costume drama that presents itself as a truthful account of history and, at the same time, incorporating two of its fundamental tropes—seemingly accurate costumes and settings—Coppola destabilizes attempts to categorize her film into this, or any, genre. By extension, her own public persona becomes similarly inscrutable. As one film critic professed, “Like licorice, *Marie Antoinette* is a confection you either love or hate, and both affects seem tied to your feeling about the director herself and her apparent identification with Louis XVI’s bride. For my part, I can definitely say that I love licorice and hate *Marie Antoinette*. But I’m still wrestling with the enigma of Sofia Coppola.”<sup>45</sup>

A comment made by the filmmaker herself during a press conference suggests that the label “enigma” is one of Coppola’s own making. Responding to a reporter’s query about the inclusion of the Converse sneakers shot in the “I Want Candy” scene, the filmmaker replies, “We decided to leave it in just, you know, to have a playful element, and it’s a teenage world, and for fun.”<sup>46</sup> As the moderator prepares to take the next question, Coppola, after a short pause, blurts out, “Because I could,” the room erupting into laughter at the punkish irreverence of her admission. The filmmaker’s vague references to playfulness and fun, which reinforce what critics deem the trivial side of her person and her aesthetic, are suddenly undercut by Coppola’s blunt recognition of her own agency as an artist and director. If detractors read her hasty remark as evidence of spoiled entitlement, one can (also) interpret it as an affirmation by a young woman filmmaker who is trying to assert herself from under her father’s impressive shadow in a highly competitive industry that is still largely dominated by men. Much as *Marie Antoinette* used clothing to construct an image of herself as, in Weber’s words, “a woman who could dress, spend, and *do exactly as she pleased*” (emphasis mine),<sup>47</sup> Sofia Coppola proclaims her own artistic will and identity through the deceptive frivolity of a shoe.

Thus, despite the similarities between director and her portrait of the dauphine, there exists at least one striking difference between them. While the complex political circumstances of eighteenth-century France, the deeply entrenched customs of the *ancien-régime* court, and the vagaries of historical interpretation have all converged to determine the past and present fate of Marie Antoinette, Coppola, a now successful, award-winning auteur, is taking control of fashioning her own celebrated path. An important sartorial scene in her film underscores the separation between filmmaker and protagonist. The dauphine and her friend the Princess de Lamballe are examining fans, feathers, and shoes in the manner reminiscent of twenty-first-century adolescents trying on accessories at the mall when Marie Antoinette's adviser, the Count Mercy, interrupts her dress fitting to explain that Russia and the Hapsburgs have invaded Poland, causing tensions between France—an ally of Poland—and Austria. Seemingly absorbed in the garment that her dressmaker adjusts, the young woman turns to Mercy and asks if he prefers her sleeves with ruffles or without. Exasperated, the ambassador chastises her for ignoring his important missive and states firmly that her mother expects the dauphine to smooth over the crisis (presumably by conceiving a son and thus bridging the two countries in a shared destiny). Dunst's immediate reply comes in the form of a question: "Where will I be if there is a rupture between our two families? Am I to be Austrian or the dauphine of France?"<sup>48</sup> The flippant query to Mercy about dress sleeves abruptly takes on a more serious dimension. Her sartorial dilemma, that cuffs can be ruffled or plain but cannot be both, seems now a cipher for the difficult choice she has known all along that she must make between an allegiance to her homeland or to the country of her husband's Bourbon dynasty. Mercy, taken aback that his charge has, in fact, well understood the delicate political situation in which she is placed, awkwardly informs Marie Antoinette of her quandary: "You must be both."

In the film, the task of adopting a fluid Franco-Austrian identity is portrayed as a difficulty to overcome, one that the queen never succeeds in surmounting.<sup>49</sup> Coppola, in contrast, seems to welcome ambiguity and constructs, with the help of the haute cou-

ture milieu that embraces her, an ambivalent persona that fluctuates between subverting and submitting to the still-patriarchal authority of today's film industry that her father, as an icon of cinematographic masculinity, represents.<sup>50</sup> In 2008, Coppola launched a collection of handbags and shoes that she designed for Louis Vuitton, stepping out of the role of muse and into that of creator for one of the world's most important luxury brands. That same year, however, she appeared in a high-profile luggage advertisement for the company that seemed to problematize her status as an autonomous creative force. In an image taken by famed celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz, Coppola lies worshipfully at the feet of her father, who appears to reign over his daughter from the throne of the director's chair, script notes in hand. Her bare legs and feet, both seductive and childlike, accentuate her gamine sensuality and her status as dutiful daughter who defers to the paternal influence that Francis enforces with an authoritative gesture of his right hand. The young woman's slender horizontal frame appears visually to confirm submission to the upright masculine domination of her father's stout mass, her slim body reclined and offered up for viewer objectification like so many fashion models in glossy magazines.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, in a subsequent interview, Sofia Coppola distances herself from this image, insisting that the advertisement's mise-en-scène should be attributed solely to Leibovitz, who made all creative decisions at the shoot.<sup>52</sup> She underscores her role not as model but as the eye behind the camera, stating, "On your own set you want it exactly your own way . . . I think there are people who want to be looked at. As a writer or observer, I'm more interested in looking." When the interviewer wonders how the director, with her "quiet, non-confrontational manner," achieves her goals while filming, Coppola answers that, in order to command respect on a set, "you have to be really clear and strong and stick to your guns."<sup>53</sup> When Coppola won the Academy Award for her script of *Lost in Translation* in 2003, she was only the third female writer in history to win an individual Oscar for Best Original Screenplay and the third woman to be nominated for the award for achievement in directing. The fact that she is a woman in a male-dominated



Francis Ford Coppola and Sofia Coppola for Louis Vuitton.  
Photograph © Annie Leibovitz. Contact Press Images for  
LVMH. Courtesy of the artist

industry does not factor explicitly into her above remarks, yet her references to authorship, ownership, strength, and gazing, and even the phrase “stick to your guns,” evoke traditional masculine attributes and symbols of authority, suggesting both that gender inequity is a troubling subtext of her filmmaking experience and that she engages in a degree of male posturing in order to thrive artistically. Echoing many (in)famous self-fashioning French women that came before her, including the real Marie Antoinette herself, Coppola appears to be combating sexist imbalances in her profession by bending gender in what she deems her “own way” and using fashion and the mass-circulating press to cultivate a stylishly mythic persona for herself.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the young protagonist of *Marie Antoinette*, who arrives in France only to be stripped naked by the French court as a performance of its ownership over her body, Coppola will not be made to remove the protective cloth of ambiguity



that her manipulation of fashion and its industry provides her and her work.

What is unsettling from a feminist perspective, then, is the way in which Coppola both skirts the line between reasserting her agency and objectifying herself, and reinforces this same trend in the female protagonists that she creates in her films. Amy Woodworth points out that Coppola has been accused of rejecting the politicized agenda of second-wave feminism and representing instead a postfeminist aesthetic that is "either uninterested in women's rights and gender equality or takes these for granted," while "embracing traditional forms of femininity and 'girly' activities such as shopping," although, as Woodworth argues in her discussion of form in Coppola's filmic trilogy, neither pronouncement is truly accurate.<sup>55</sup> For Woodworth, the filmmaker's strength lies in her ability to convey the affects of feminine subjectivity, and it is here that she pioneers a new brand of crossover-appeal cinema in which viewers are asked to inhabit, perhaps uncomfortably, the gendered emotions and point of view of today's young women.<sup>56</sup> Viewer discomfort, I would add, has been echoed in the critical disquietude vis-à-vis Sofia Coppola's works, which is evidenced by the volatile reaction to *Marie Antoinette* and which stems, I believe, from the anachronistic, ambivalently authoritative persona that she self-consciously creates of herself.

The "I Want Candy" scene is emblematic of these Coppolian characteristics. What starts as a trip through the shoe closet for Marie Antoinette and her ladies-in-waiting begins to give way, over the course of the three-minute song, to images of women consuming more literally, their appetites shifting back and forth from opulent garments to champagne and decadent pastries. As the young women enthusiastically examine yards of colorful fabrics, the scene degenerates into sartorial and gastronomic disarray: shoes fall out of their neat rows, a champagne glass spills, cream from a cake is smeared on a nose, an unfinished dress sleeve hangs down with its threads unraveling. Pictures of pastries shot from above begin to appear, their domed shape and pink hue echoing the contours and colors of women's breasts complete with raspberry nipples. These images of breasts served up on porcelain plates recall Benjamin's

argument that this type of dissection of the female body links it closer to its own death, a notion that Coppola complicates by using a series of jumps to intersperse lipsticked mouths tucking into petit fours with these sugary bosoms as if to suggest the voracious consumption of the female body by women themselves.

Should the filmmaker have wished it, the horrifying metaphors of female dissection and anthropophagy might have served to disturb notions of normative feminine decorum with their transgressive, even violent insinuation that the consumption of fashion is tantamount to women eating each other's—or their own—bodies.<sup>57</sup> Yet any subversive potential to disrupt is undercut by the montage's upbeat music, Coppola's mischievous suggestion that some pastries resemble breasts, and the scene's overall giddiness. Like Dunst, who claps with glee as her hairstylist puts the finishing touches on her colossal gravity-defying pouf, the viewer is encouraged to delight in, rather than deplore, the excesses of fashion as well as Marie Antoinette and, by extension, the irreverently chic Coppola herself. For, by rupturing the rhythm of the biopic with a sequence that reads as part music video and part fashion show, Coppola diverts the spectator from Marie Antoinette and cheekily repositions the viewer's attention to her and the indomitable position she enjoys as the director of this self-conscious scene. Like Benjamin's agile *Fashion*, Coppola titillates viewers with pop tunes and a dizzy succession of bright garments, infusing newness into the old costume drama format and blocking critics who seek to quash her by refusing to apologize for her chosen aesthetic.

Benjamin's writings on fashion help elucidate Coppola's use of garments in *Marie Antoinette* to express the modern through the transhistoricity of fashion. Indeed, fashion is a particularly valuable lens through which to view Coppola's work and the public face she creates, for she powerfully uses garments as an expression of self and character in her films and also relies on fashion and its industry to engineer her own complicated role in the public spotlight. Coppola's enigmatic stance on modern femininity, cultivated through her films and the intertext of her own life, has made her a problematic figure in contemporary women's cinema, for she refuses to create works that overtly disrupt the masculine-dominated cinema

industry and, furthermore, produces unabashedly self-referential, stylishly impressionistic films for which critics target her and her works as narcissistic and shallow. Yet it is imperative that Coppola and her work transcend the oversimplified label of postfeminist frivolity, for by aligning herself with the blast of now-time inherent to the transhistorical tensions of *Marie Antoinette*, she exploits her enigmatic status with the volatility of Benjamin's dialectical image and combats, even as she constructs, perceptions of her work and herself as mere commodities. Moreover, as the director of four internationally award-winning films since 1999, she has emerged as one of the most prominent woman filmmakers of the last decade, whether her detractors like it or not.<sup>58</sup> Coppola's multifaceted portrait of Marie Antoinette's life—a portrait of exuberance, condemnation, disquietude, and contemplation—should not be understood to exemplify the universality of modern womanhood, as if such a thing exists. Rather, *Marie Antoinette* might better be comprehended as Coppola's expression of her complicated experience as a leading woman filmmaker in cinema today.

### Notes

1. Pam Cook, "Sofia Coppola: Portrait of a Lady," *Sight and Sound* 16, no. 11 (2006): 38. Emphasis mine.
2. A. O. Scott, "A Lonely Petit Four of a Queen," *New York Times*, 13 October 2006. Emphasis mine.
3. Kristin Hohenadel, "French Royalty as Seen by Hollywood Royalty," *New York Times*, 10 September 2006. Emphasis mine.
4. See, for example, Alexander Zevin, "Marie Antoinette and the Ghosts of the French Revolution," *Cineaste*, no. 32 (2007): 32–35; and Judith Thurman, "Dressed for Excess: Marie Antoinette, Out of the Closet," *New Yorker*, 25 September 2006, [newyorker.com/archive/2006/09/25/060925crat\\_atlarge](http://newyorker.com/archive/2006/09/25/060925crat_atlarge).
5. I am using this term to refer to a style of music that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s following the initial explosion of punk in the early to mid-1970s as described by Dick Hebdige in his influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979). Much of the post-punk music featured in Coppola's

- film—by such bands as New Order, Gang of Four, and Bow Wow Wow—is informed by the attitudes of alienation and nihilism that characterized punk but expresses itself with a softer, melancholic wistfulness and also incorporates electronic instruments.
6. I have chosen to focus here on *Marie Antoinette* because of the obvious importance of costume to its eighteenth-century setting. However, all of Coppola's films reflect her preoccupation with dress and sartorial expression.
  7. Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2006).
  8. The Oscar was awarded to veteran costume designer Milena Canonero.
  9. The classic studies on Benjamin and film are by Miriam Bratu Hansen: "America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 362–402; "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,'" *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987): 179–224; "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 306–43; and "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October*, no. 109 (2004): 3–45.
  10. Peter Wollen, "The Concept of Fashion in *The Arcades Project*," *boundary 2* 30 (2003): 131.
  11. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 430, 367. My sincere thanks go to Johannes Endres for his help with the nuances of the original German text.
  12. Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 213–14.
  13. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 261. Lehmann's translation of this passage in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is slightly different from Zohn's translation; what Lehmann translates as "the 'tiger's leap in the open air of history,'" Zohn translates as "a tiger's leap into the past."
  14. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 62.

15. For more on representations of the nineteenth-century French prostitute, see Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
16. Arsène Houssaye, *Les confessions: Souvenirs d'un demi-siècle 1830–1880* (Geneva: Slatkin Reprints, 1971), 328.
17. "The Making of *Marie Antoinette*," *Marie Antoinette*, directed by Eleanor Coppola (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.
18. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 64.
19. Men of ostensible power are present in the film but are largely absent or inconsequential: Marie Antoinette's husband is insecure and inexperienced, Louis XV old and decaying, her lover Fersen a fleeting fantasy, her brother remote, her adviser Mercy moralizing but ineffectual.
20. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 63.
21. Caroline Weber, comment on "Let Them Eat Lace: Marie Antoinette's Fierce and Fearless Fashion," *Huffington Post*, 5 September 2006, [huffingtonpost.com/caroline-weber/let-them-eat-lace-marie-a\\_b\\_28701.html](http://huffingtonpost.com/caroline-weber/let-them-eat-lace-marie-a_b_28701.html).
22. Judith A. Miller, H-France, French History discussion group, 29 May 2006, [lists.uakron.edu/sympa/arc/h-france/2006-05/msg00095.html](http://lists.uakron.edu/sympa/arc/h-france/2006-05/msg00095.html).
23. Jacob Soll, H-France, French History discussion group, 30 May 2006, [lists.uakron.edu/sympa/arc/h-france/2006-05/msg00101.html](http://lists.uakron.edu/sympa/arc/h-france/2006-05/msg00101.html). Soll's disapproval exemplifies the ways in which negative evaluations of the film *Marie Antoinette* tend to extend, either explicitly or implicitly, to Coppola as well. Many critics, for example, take exception to the fact that the actors in the film deliver lines without adopting an accent, which is posited as particularly transgressive for the American-born cast members (as opposed to the actors who speak with their natural British accents, whose utterances are no more historically accurate than those of their American counterparts). Dunst, for example, is belittled for speaking with a so-called Valley-girl accent (although this is an erroneous description of her

speech patterns in the film), while Coppola, in turn, is derided because of her tendency to mumble falteringly and because of her occasional use in interviews of the (here accurately described) Valley-girl idiom *like*. Yet accents are but one example on a list that also includes criticisms levied at Coppola's failure to focus on the importance of Marie Antoinette as a political figure (or the politics of the French Revolution in general), the filmmaker's privileging of the opulence of Versailles, and the film's autobiographical undercurrent. In his provoking comparison of the demonization of two women of power—Marie Antoinette and Hillary Clinton—Pierre Saint-Amand notes that the queen was disparaged for what was viewed as her inappropriate “distancing of politics,” her penchant for ornamental indulgences, and her construction of herself as “an object to be looked at, an object of desire.” Pierre Saint-Amand, “Terrorizing Marie Antoinette,” trans. Jennifer Gage, *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 390. Thus, in a way, attacks against the actual Marie Antoinette have been transferred today to biting criticisms of Coppola.

24. Diana Diamond, “*Marie Antoinette*, or The Third Wave of Feminism Starts on the Runway,” [sunysb.edu/humanities/fashion.shtml](http://sunysb.edu/humanities/fashion.shtml) (accessed 28 September 2009; site discontinued).
25. Cook, “Sofia Coppola,” 39.
26. Amy Woodworth, in a reading that is slightly different from but not incompatible with my own, calls Dunst’s look to the viewer a “petulant glance” and interprets it as a message of defiance from Coppola to the detractors that she anticipates will criticize her and her film. Amy Woodworth, “A Feminist Theorization of Sofia Coppola’s Postfeminist Trilogy,” in *Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema*, ed. Marcelline Block (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 157.
27. Michael Jennings, “On the Banks of a New Lethe: Commodification and Experience in Benjamin’s Baudelaire Book,” *boundary 2* 30 (2003): 95.
28. Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 288.
29. The popularization of the term *Manolos* is largely due to the Emmy-award-winning television series *Sex and the City*, which, like Coppola’s film, highlights fashion both visually and narratively in a postfeminist framework. In the series, which ran from 1998

to 2004, and the two subsequent feature-length films it inspired (*Sex and the City*, dir. Michael Patrick King, US, 2008; and *Sex and the City 2*, dir. Michael Patrick King, US, 2010), shoes by Manolo Blahnik are a recurring theme. Protagonist Carrie Bradshaw (played by actress Sarah Jessica Parker) frequently refers to them simply as “Manolos.”

30. “The Making of *Marie Antoinette*.”
31. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 510.
32. Weber, comment on “Let Them Eat Lace.”
33. Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Random House, 2001).
34. Coppola cites the text for this voice-over from Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 98.
35. See, for example, Zevin, “Marie Antoinette,” 32–35; and Hohenadel, “French Royalty.”
36. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 70.
37. Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).
38. Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 232.
39. Weber, citing a biography of Marie Antoinette written by Carrolly Erickson, makes note of a morbid fashion that sprang up following the queen’s decapitation: “Shortly after the guillotine sliced its own bloody version of a necklace into the Queen’s throat, well-born women in Paris began tying ‘thin red ribbons around their necks as reminders of what they might soon suffer.’” Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 9.
40. A similar sartorial forecast of death occurs toward the end of the film when Marie Antoinette lays her neck upon a balcony rail before an angry French mob that has arrived at Versailles presumably to do her harm. The gesture of bowing down is a preview of the posture the queen will assume on the guillotine at the moment of her death, a moment that Coppola hints at here but does not include in her film. In the balcony scene Dunst wears a sheer white nightgown that recalls the immaculate chemise that Marie Antoinette wore on the scaffold, a garment that was

immortalized on the day of her beheading in a famous sketch drawn by the Romantic painter Jacques-Louis David. For more on the symbolically charged garments that Marie Antoinette wore to her death, see Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, chap. 11.

41. Cook, "Sofia Coppola," 40.
42. Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 104–7.
43. Of particular note is the "Sofia," a purse that Jacobs designed for Louis Vuitton in homage to Coppola. The "Sofia" bag puts Coppola in company with other fashionable royals—real and figurative—who have had haute-couture handbags named for them: the "Kelly" bag by Hermès, named after the Princess of Monaco; Gucci's "Jackie," in reference to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis; and Christian Dior's "Lady Dior," named for Princess Diana.
44. Mary G. Hurd, "Newcomers," *Women Directors and Their Films* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 130.
45. Dana Stevens, "Queen Bees," *Slate*, 19 October 2006, slate.com/id/2151855/.
46. Sofia Coppola, comment on "'Because I Could': Marie Antoinette Press Conference," *Jurgen and Marcy's Independent Film Blog*, 14 October 2006, worldfilm.about.com/b/2006/10/14/because-i-could-marie-antoinette-press-conference.htm.
47. Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 4.
48. Coppola borrows this passage from a letter written by Count Mercy, cited in Fraser, *Marie Antoinette*, 100.
49. As Weber notes, even at the end of her life the queen was never able to escape the presumption, well exploited by her enemies, that she had all along been more faithful to Austria than to France, despite the fact that, prior to her marriage, Marie Antoinette had officially pledged loyalty to her new Gallic homeland and simultaneously renounced allegiance to the Hapsburg family. Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, 244–45, 28.
50. As is well known, Francis Ford Coppola's iconic status is largely due to his highly successful portraits of ultramasculine characters in films such as the *Godfather* trilogy (*The Godfather*, US, 1972; *The Godfather: Part II*, US, 1974; and *The Godfather: Part III*, US, 1990) and *Apocalypse Now* (US, 1979).



51. Coppola has often placed herself in the role of fashion model, appearing on the cover of French *Vogue* magazine and in numerous print advertisements for Marc Jacobs and Louis Vuitton.
52. Leibovitz was also responsible for a sixteen-page *Vogue* magazine fashion spread anticipating the American release of Coppola's film; the spread was published in September 2006 and featured Dunst, Schwartzman, and other cast members as their characters on set at Versailles.
53. Lisa Armstrong, "Sofia Coppola: I'm More Interested in Looking Than Being Looked At," *Times* (London), 4 June 2008, Fashion section.
54. It is Weber who most thoroughly outlines the political self-fashioning at work in the queen's use of luxurious clothing. Following the days of Marie Antoinette, a number of prominent artistic women in France successfully marketed themselves by closely associating their public reputations with their artistic productions and by adopting masculinized—and therefore scandalous—attire and behavior. Such women included the writers George Sand, Rachilde, and Colette; the actress Sarah Bernhardt; and the couturiere Coco Chanel. (Although Coppola is not technically of Gallic parentage, she has married a French rock musician and currently lives part-time in Paris with him and their daughter.) For more on Marie Antoinette's play with gender through her forays into cross-dressing, see Weber, *Queen of Fashion*, chap. 4.
55. Woodworth, "A Feminist Theorization," 138. Coppola refers to her three debut films—*The Virgin Suicides* (US, 1999), *Lost in Translation*, and *Marie Antoinette*—as a trilogy concerned with the experience of adolescent girls becoming women.
56. Woodworth, "A Feminist Theorization," 159.
57. The homoerotic undertones of this scene wherein women's lips close around breast-shaped pastries also could have served as a disruption to the film's heterosocial norms. However, this destabilizing potential similarly dissolves as the song ends and the queen and her entourage resume interactions coded as strictly platonic friendships.
58. In 2010, veteran filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman to win the Academy Award for Achievement in Directing and the producer's award for Best Motion Picture for the film

*The Hurt Locker* (US, 2008). Although other women filmmakers, including Diablo Cody (who was the fourth woman to win an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for 2007's *Juno*, US), Patty Jenkins (*Monster*, US, 2003), Niki Caro (*Whale Rider*, New Zealand/Germany, 2002; and *North Country*, US, 2005), and Catherine Hardwicke (*Thirteen*, US, 2003; and *Twilight*, US, 2008), have also enjoyed varying degrees of success as directors and writers in recent years, Coppola's prominence has been the most sustained. Hardwicke's story is, perhaps, indicative of the problems faced by women filmmakers to maintain their positions of authority in film following an initial success: after directing 2008's *Twilight* and generating the greatest first-weekend profit for a movie directed by a woman, Hardwicke found herself replaced by Chris Weitz as director of the film's 2009 sequel, *New Moon* (US).

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Sofia Coppola and Kirsten Dunst on set at Versailles



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