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« She Looks Like a Little Piece of Cake » : Sofia Coppola and the Commerce of Auteurism

Abstract

Sofia Coppola, one of the most discussed female directors in recent years, is clearly embedded in the « commerce of auteurism » (Corrigan 1991), as she actively participates in constructing her authorial image. Building on existing scholarship on the filmmaker as illustrative of the new critical paradigm in the studies of women's film authorship, this article will look at the critical discourses surrounding her films to trace the various processes of authentication and de-authentication of Coppola as an auteur. In my exploration of Coppola's authorial status – how it is produced in the interaction of these multiple agencies – I will focus specifically on the case of *Marie Antoinette* (2006). The film, which arguably explores the nature of female celebrity in the early 21st century, was criticized because of its disregard for historical accuracy, its fascination with surfaces and materiality, and because it offers a highly stylized objectification of the female protagonist. In reference to these critical responses, I will delineate the manifold ways in which Coppola's authorship is expressed within the realm of material objects and spectacle. This analysis is enriched through a comparison to Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), which can also be understood as a self-conscious declaration of authorial agency in relation to image making. The web of the possible intertextual relations between both films and Virginia Woolf's source novel, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), points more broadly to the complex network of possibilities and constraints for female authorship, as well as suggesting a critical shift towards a postfeminist moment, informed by changing discourses on consumption and feminine agency.

Resumen

. Sofia Coppola, una de las cineastas más estudiadas en los últimos años, está claramente integrada en el « comercio del autorismo » (Corrigan 1991), en cuanto participa activamente en la construcción de su imagen autorial. Basándose en la producción académica existente sobre la directora, ilustrativa del nuevo paradigma crítico en los estudios sobre la autoría fílmica de mujeres, este artículo revisará los discursos críticos que circulan alrededor de sus películas para trazar diversos procesos de autenticación y desautenticación de Coppola como auteur. En mi análisis de la posición autorial de Coppola – de cómo se produce en la interacción con estas múltiples agencias – me voy a centrar específicamente en el caso de *Marie Antoinette* (2006). Este filme, que puede considerarse una exploración de la naturaleza de la celebridad femenina en el siglo XXI, fue criticado por su desatención a la exactitud histórica, su obsesión con las superficies y la materialidad, y porque ofrece una cosificación altamente estilizada del cuerpo de la protagonista. En relación con estas respuestas críticas, esbozaré los diversos modos en los cuales la autoría de Coppola se expresa en el reino de los objetos materiales y del espectáculo. Este análisis se extiende mediante una comparación con *Orlando* (1992), una película de Sally Potter, que también puede ser entendida como una declaración de la agencia autorial. La red de posibles relaciones intertextuales entre ambas películas y la novela de Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), apunta hacia un complejo entramado de posibilidades y constricciones para la autoría de mujeres, al mismo tiempo que sugiere un desplazamiento crítico hacia un momento postfeminista, atravesado por discursos cambiantes sobre el consumo y la agencia femenina.

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« She Looks Like a Little Piece of Cake »

Sofia Coppola and the Commerce of Auteurism

In his review of *Marie Antoinette* for *Independent on Sunday*, Jonathan Romney notes how many critics conflated Marie Antoinette and Sofia Coppola, dismissing the film as « a rich girl's fantasy about a rich girl »¹. His comment clearly points to Coppola's biographic legend², which remains intimately intertwined with the reception of her work, and to how this legend is often used in ways that belittle her credibility as a director. Coppola's public persona and her interest in representing the experiences of privileged young women has contributed to a critical alignment between the filmmaker and her films, frequently read as « obliquely autobiographical »³ and the director herself has not discouraged these interpretations. As Pam Cook observes, « there is a tension in her work between the observational distance of documentary and the intimacy of home movies – indeed she has claimed, perhaps disingenuously, that she makes her films primarily for her family and friends rather than for the outside world »⁴.

Coppola, one of the most discussed female directors in recent years, is clearly embedded in the « commerce of auteurism »⁵, as she actively participates in curating her public image and branding her films by providing them with a recognizable niche identity. Building on existing scholarship on the filmmaker as illustrative of the new critical paradigm in the studies of women's authorship, this article will look at the critical and scholarly discourses surrounding her films to trace the various processes of authentication and de-authentication of Coppola as an auteur. In my exploration of Coppola's authorial status – how it is produced in the interaction of these multiple agencies – I will focus specifically on the case of *Marie Antoi-*

1. Jonathan ROMNEY, « Marie Antoinette », *Independent on Sunday*, October 21, 2006. Web. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/marie-antoinette-12a-6230488.html>

2. David Bordwell's term, the « biographic legend », refers to the ways in which the filmmaker creates his or her public persona both in the movies and in the interaction with film institutions, for example through interviews, press declarations, etc. According to Bordwell: « Film journalism and criticism promote authors, as do film festivals, retrospectives, and academic film study. Directors' statements of intent guide comprehension of the film, while a body of work linked by an authorial signature encourages viewers to read each film as a chapter of an oeuvre. Thus the institutional 'author' is available as a source of the formal operation of the film. Sometimes the film asks to be taken as autobiography, the filmmakers' confession [...]. More broadly, the author becomes the real-world parallel to the narrational presence 'who' communicates (what is the filmmaker saying?) and 'who' expresses (what is the artist's personal vision?). The consistency of an authorial signature across an oeuvre constitutes an economically exploitable trademark » (David BORDWELL, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 211).

3. ROMNEY, *op. cit.*

4. Pam COOK, « Portrait of a Lady: Sofia Coppola », *Sight and Sound*, 16 (11), November, 2006, p. 36.

5. Timothy CORRIGAN, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1991, Kindle Edition.

nette (2006), loosely based on Lady Antonia Fraser's revisionist biography *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (2001)⁶. The film, which arguably scrutinizes the nature of female celebrity in the early 21st century, was criticized because of its disregard for historical accuracy, its overt fascination with surfaces and materiality, and because it offers a highly stylized objectification of the female protagonist. In reference to these critical responses, many of which take an unmistakably misogynistic tone, I will examine Coppola's « writing of a self » within the realm of commerce⁷, which draws directly upon the cultural assumptions that associate women's authorship with reproduction, corporality, spectacle and a feminised sphere of commodity cultures. This analysis is enriched through a comparison to Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), another woman-authored adaptation which, similarly to *Marie Antoinette*, can also be understood as a self-conscious declaration of authorial agency through image making. As I will try to demonstrate, the web of the possible intertextual relations between both films and Virginia Woolf's source novel, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), points more broadly to the complex network of possibilities and constraints for female authorship, as well as suggesting a critical shift towards a postfeminist moment, informed by changing discourses on consumption and female agency.

1. A gorgeous confection: Coppola's brand authorship

Coppola's career trajectory and her distinct position as a successful woman working within the masculinized realm of what has been defined as Indiewood⁸ – a status which is at the same time acknowledged and denied – has been attracting more and more critical attention⁹. In looking at Coppola's brand authorship in contemporary media industries, all of these scholars consider it within a web of texts, including fashion magazines, promotional materials or director's profiles – and in this sense they are illustrative of the new critical paradigm in studies of women's film authorship, as elucidated by Catherine Grant: « A reasonably confident return to considering various aspects of directorial 'authors' as agents: female subjects who have direct and reflexive, if obviously not completely 'intentional' or determining, relationships to the cultural products they help to produce, as well as to their reception »¹⁰. In order to address the interventions of women as cultural producers

6. Antonia FRASER, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, London, Phoenix, 2001.

7. CORRIGAN, *op cit.*

8. Yannis TZIOUMAKIS, « 'Independent', 'Indie' and 'Indiewood': Towards a Periodization of Contemporary (Post-1980) American Independent Cinema », Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (eds), *American Independent Cinema*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 28-40.

9. Christina LANE and Nicole RICHTER, « The Feminist Poetics of Sofia Coppola: Spectacle and Self-Consciousness in *Marie Antoinette* », Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (eds), *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 181-202; Pam COOK, *op. cit.* and « History in the Making: Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* and the New Auteurism », Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (eds), *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 212-16; Belinda SMAILL, « Sofia Coppola: Reading the Director », *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(1), 2013, pp. 148-162; Fiona HANDYSIDE, *Sofia Coppola: A Cinema of Girlhood*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2017. During the first decade of her career, Coppola seemed to constitute an uneasy figure for feminist criticism. More recently, however, she has been the subject of numerous detailed studies. Perhaps owing to this renewed interest in the filmmaker, *Marie Antoinette* has also undergone a process of academic reevaluation. While the film received a somewhat mixed reception on its initial release, time has been kind to it, and a decade on, it has generated scholarly reassessment and assertion of its feminist engagements, as well as the voluminous discussion of it in relation to the biopic genre. A number of scholars have acknowledged the significance of Coppola's personal style, her attention to emotion, feeling and the everyday, to material textures and clothing, as well as gender politics, seeking to rescue the film from its status as an underrated work.

10. Catherine GRANT, « Secret Agents: Feminist Theories of Women's Film Authorship », *Feminist Theory*, 2(1), 2001, p. 124. Needless to say, the issue of « female authorship » has long been debated in

and their sociocultural reception in wider terms, Grant considers agency through the optic of Judith Butler's positing of gender, as a « reiterative or re-articulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power »¹¹.

As the existing scholarship on Coppola shows, the close examination of promotional and critical discourses surrounding her films can be extremely useful to uncover a series of underlying assumptions and narratives that circulate around her agency and her performance as an auteur. The most prevailing discourse in the construction of her authorship is possibly the one which focuses on her family connections and her privileged position in the American film industry. Coppola's career has been more often than not attributed to her special status as the daughter of Hollywood royalty: as the offspring of Francis Ford Coppola, she was accorded both wealth and exposure to the dominant film industry, which contributed to her perceived lack of skills or « true » talent as a director¹². In fact, few critics can resist the temptation to emphasize that her father has executive-produced all of her features – « a luxury, it is fair to say, that many aspiring writers and directors would trade their proprietary screenwriting software for »¹³.

This dominant narrative has complicated Coppola's status as an auteur on many levels. In her recent book on Sofia Coppola, Fiona Handyside observes that the very name of the filmmaker « speaks to the contradictory nature of Coppola's particular authorship, placing her films literally as well as metaphorically under the name of the father, but also inviting them to be read as a part of the 'Coppola' brand »¹⁴. Handyside offers an evocative reading of Coppola's first appearance on screen at the end of *The Godfather* (1972), a film heavily indebted to European models of the male auteur, especially those forged by the creators of the *politique des auteurs*. The scene, in which Sofia is baptised as a baby boy, Michael, marks the importance of birth and the continuity of family not only within the story, but also « within the 'real world' of Coppolas »¹⁵. As Handyside convincingly argues in her analysis of the scene:

Her involuntary transvestite performance nicely captures the paradoxes and privileges of her position within global contemporary cinematic culture. On the one hand, she is welcomed, both on and off-screen, into a highly influential family, bound not only by ties of blood but also loyalty and business. On

feminist film theory. As Grant convincingly argues, « the benefits for feminist theory of asking authorial questions of women's interventions into filmmaking have never seemed as self-evident as they have with literary authorship; nor have they proved quite as resistant to post-structural critique » (*Ibid.*, p. 114). This reticence has to do with the collaborative and industrial nature of film production, but also with fear of what Judith Mayne has famously dubbed the « dreaded epithet » of essentialism (*The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 90). However, after the « decades of embarrassed deconstruction » that have bypassed almost completely the issue of female authorship, women's agency can finally « be subjected to analysis in the form of its textual, biographical traces, alongside more conventionally 'legitimate' activities for feminist cultural theorists, such as applying theories to 'primary' literary and film texts in formal 'readings' » (Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 123).

11. Judith BUTLER, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 15.

12. SMAILL, *op. cit.*

13. Nathan HELLER, « Sofia Coppola: You either love her or hate her. Here's why », *Slate*, December 28, 2010. Web: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/assessment/2010/12/sofia_coppola.html.

14. HANDYSIDE, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the other hand, she is marked from the very start as being from this family, contained by its meanings, and established firmly as a scion. The fact that she performs as a boy further complicates the meanings of her initial foray into the cinema, suggesting access to the power and agency of the image-making apparatus contains within it conflicts for women [...]. [She is] allowed access to the father's power and influence, but at the price of losing her own agency and becoming (like) a son.¹⁶

Coppola's authorship oscillates between two models, both of which are inseparable from the question of agency and gender: an institutional authorship – predicated on production values, and inviting readings in terms of a unified, coherent body of work – and a 21st century celebrity brand version of authorship¹⁷. While the first, traditional approach towards agency, understood as talent or genius, focuses on the production of films, the latter is constructed extra-textually: « the unity comes not from the films themselves but from the power and significance of the Coppola name as marketing and branding device »¹⁸.

Coppola's film authorship is widely acknowledged but at the same time (not so subtly) invalidated in both modes of reading auteurs. She is one of the most visible and critically acclaimed contemporary women filmmakers, winning an Academy award for Best Original Screenplay for *Lost in Translation* (2003) and becoming only the third woman ever to be nominated for an Oscar for Best Director (for the same film). She was the first ever American female director to win the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival for *Somewhere* (2010) and, at the time of writing, she has made Cannes Film Festival history becoming the second woman in seventy years to win best director for *The Beguiled* (2017). As Handyside observes, « the award recognition and critical commentary on Coppola's films clearly locate Coppola as an auteur in the 'romantic' and masculine sense of the director as presiding talent (genius?) whose personal, artistic vision is communicated to us via her or (much more usually) his films »¹⁹. However, while critically acclaimed, all of Coppola's projects have attracted accusations of nepotism, seriously undermining her status as an auteur. Todd Kennedy comments in reference to this discourse: « When critics have felt she has succeeded, it has often been partially attributed to her father [...]. When they feel she has failed, critics often act as if she was unworthy of even making the film, having (they imply) been given her money from – and, amazingly, I quote here (Peter Vonder Haar) – 'Daddy' »²⁰.

These sorts of comments, which reinforce the prevailing discourse of women succeeding through their family connections, are heavily marked in terms of social class and taste determinants. Drawing on Diane Negra, Belinda Smail²¹ sug-

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7. Equally revealing is the critical discourse on Coppola's « disastrous acting appearance » in *The Godfather 3* (1990). See Handyside (*ibid.*, p. 8).

17. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 20. Many scholars have shown how Coppola feminizes the figure of a « masculine » auteur – paying homage to films by Godard, Truffaut, Fellini and Antonioni, but strategically inverting the gendered tropes of the European art-house cinema. See, for example, Handyside (*op. cit.*) and Todd KENNEDY, « Off with Hollywood's Head: Sofia Coppola as Feminine Auteur », *Film Criticism*, 35(1), 2010. Web. <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Off+with+Hollywood's+head%3A+-Sofia+Coppola+as+feminine+auteur.-a0241514974>.

20. KENNEDY, *op. cit.*

21. SMAILL, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

gests that Coppola embodies the difficult balance between bourgeois and bohemian taste formations that is central to the marketability of independent cinema in general. However, the case of Coppola is particularly revealing, as her attunement to a culture of affluence is repeatedly linked to a lack of merit: « The ostensible problem or difficulty here is not with gender *per se*, but with high bourgeois femininity. Her cinema and her brand is deemed, by some, to be unworthy because it is too whimsical, too effortless, too much the product of an un-validated access to power »²². This interpretative framework, which loomed particularly large after *Marie Antoinette*, was later reinforced with the release of both *Somewhere*, a drama about a renowned actor and his 11-year-old daughter, and *The Bling Ring*, a satirical crime film about a real-life group of teenage thieves who burgled the homes of several celebrities. All three films, which deal heavily with the famous, were read as the extension of Coppola's public identity and criticized as excessively concerned with frivolity and superficiality.

The case of *Marie Antoinette* is particularly compelling, because it speaks volumes about the strategies that are used to disqualify Coppola as an auteur. The film covers the period in Queen's life from 1768, when the 14-year old Austrian archduchess arrived at the French court in Versailles to marry the Dauphin, to her escape at the height of The French Revolution just before the palace was raided by a rioting mob (and, significantly, before her execution in 1792 at the age of 37). The filmmaker asserted in many interviews that she took artistic liberties with the source material, insisting that the film is not a history lesson. The loose portrayal of historical events in 18th century France was met with mixed responses, from appreciation of its satiric tone and visual style to harsh criticism. Right after its opening in the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, the film was famously disparaged by some critics for its lack of historical integrity. As Manohla Dargis recounts in her piece covering the event: « Though no one called for the filmmaker's head, *Marie Antoinette*, Sofia Coppola's sympathetic account of the life and hard-partying times of the ill-fated Queen, filled the theater with lusty boos and smatterings of applause after its first press screening on Wednesday »²³. Shortly after its release, a number of French historians decried Coppola's film for its deficiencies in terms of authenticity and psychological development. For instance, writing for the magazine *L'Internaute* Évelyne Lever described the film as « far from historical reality », contrasting *Marie Antoinette* with « better historical films » including Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and Hytner's *The Madness of King George* (1994), which succeeded because their directors were « steeped in the culture of the time they evoked »²⁴. Coppola's film was perceived thus as somewhat inferior in comparison to these more « worthy » costume pieces.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

23. Manohla DARGIS, « *Marie Antoinette*: Best or Worst of Times? », *The New York Times*, May 25, 2006. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/25/movies/25fest.html>. The oft-quoted anecdote marked the early reception of the film, even if, as Robert Ebert later clarified in reference to the Cannes screening, as a matter of fact only a couple of journalists had disliked the film and the media had sensationalized the event (*Roger Ebert's Movie Yearbook 2007*, Kansas City, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2007, p. 885).

24. Évelyne LEVER, « Marie-Antoinette revue et corrigée par Hollywood », *L'Internaute*, May, 2006. Web. <http://www.linternaute.com/savoir/interview/evelyne-lever/chat-evelyne-lever.shtml>

The debate about authenticity, historical accuracy and the issues of representation or misrepresentation has always accompanied the historical film²⁵ and in this regard *Marie Antoinette* is not an exception. However, what is markedly different here is the gendered discourse that surrounded the film, in which the authorial persona of Coppola, and in particular her status as a *female* director, has had considerable influence on how her work has been read and evaluated. The strand of criticism that rejected *Marie Antoinette* for its historical inaccuracies relied heavily upon certain discourses around women and commodity cultures, reflecting what Tania Modleski has famously described as « a familiar double bind by which [women] are first assigned a restricted place in patriarchy and then condemned for occupying it »²⁶. Agnès Poirier, *Libération*'s film critic who dubbed the film « a scandal », chastised Coppola for making what she perceived as an « empty » film devoid of any political content: « History is merely decor and Versailles a boutique hotel for the jet set, past and present [...]. All we learn about *Marie Antoinette* is her love for Ladurée macarons and Manolo Blahnik shoes »²⁷. Similar comments appeared after the release of *The Bling Ring*, Coppola's second-lowest rated movie after *Marie Antoinette*²⁸ on the Rotten Tomatoes website, which includes mostly North American reviews. The site's consensus reads: « While it's certainly timely and beautifully filmed, *The Bling Ring* suffers from director Sofia Coppola's failure to delve beneath the surface of its shallow protagonists' real-life crimes »²⁹.

Needless to say, this sort of criticism feeds not only on the films themselves, but also on Coppola's brand image in a wider sense, deeply infused with ostentatious exhibition of commodity cultures. As Handyside argues³⁰, Coppola's public identity, both in her media image and film publicity, is moulded by notions of chic, girlish femininity. During her career, she has undertaken a wide range of activities which associate her with the world of fashion: as a teenager she was an intern at Chanel and later worked with the designers Louis Vuitton and Marc Jacobs (the latter named a bag after her and she was also the face of his perfume). She cofounded a clothing label called Milk Fed with her friend Stephanie Hayman, which still exists as a successful Japanese franchise. Apart from working on several music videos for groups such as The White Stripes and Air, she has directed a number of commercials for Dior, Gap and H&M, among others³¹. Handyside observes in her comprehensive account of Coppola's engagement with fashion as key to the management

25. See, for example, Dennis BINGHAM, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2010, p. 14.

26. Tania MODLESKI, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, New York and London, Routledge, 2016 [1988], p. 63.

27. Agnès POIRIER, « An Empty Hall of Mirrors », *The Guardian*, May 27, 2006. Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/may/27/comment.filmnews>

28. Todd Kennedy (*op. cit.*) makes a compelling point that the reason for the film's relatively poor box office was its insistence on making us identify with Marie Antoinette's abjection – forcing the audience to experience both empathy and disaffection with her flawed heroine – coupled with a wish to remove historical « accuracy ».

29. Cf. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_bling_ring_2013/.

30. HANDYSIDE, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

31. What is more, her father's lucrative winery sells a « Sofia » collection, which emphasises her status as a commodity even further. In this sense, it is interesting to note how Coppola's diverse and wide-ranging body of work defies traditional paradigms of auteurism. In Handyside's words: « Coppola offers us an image of authorship not so much as individual genius as a market-place positioning that draws together strands from fashion, music, travel, photography and film to offer a vision of a certain highly desirable, aspirational lifestyle » (*op. cit.*, p. 17).

of her auteur identity that « fragrance adverts are [...] more easily associated with film stars and supermodels than film directors, but Coppola straddles between the worlds of film and couture fashion [...]. This is a very obvious reason her face would be rather more known than that of many directors »³². Such visibility grants her a status as a celebrity director, who – in contrast to « stars » who usually navigate between on-screen and off-screen personas – connotes a « representational structure », framed by a person's « private life or lifestyle »³³. Drawing on Diane Negra and Sue Holmes, Handyside usefully reminds us that « given that the celebrity is structured through an emphasis on lifestyle, and it is women who are primarily associated with the domestic and the private, celebrity culture is itself gendered »³⁴.

Coppola's enduring fascination, and playful engagement, with the feminized spheres of fashion and celebrity culture is nowhere better manifested in *Marie Antoinette* than in an iconic scene in which the Queen and her friends enjoy a shopping spree and feast on luxurious goods [fig.1]. The sequence is edited rhythmically to « I Want Candy » by the band The Bow Wow Wow and is composed of various shots of sumptuous fabrics, luscious cupcakes, champagne glasses filled with strawberries and pastel-coloured shoes, with a controversial brief glimpse of a blue Converse sneaker among traditional period footwear. The montage culminates with Marie's stylist arranging an enormous, ridiculous wig, while the Queen asks: « It's not too much, is it? ».



Fig.1 Luxurious footwear in «Marie Antoinette».

32. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

34. *Ibid.* On the stardom of Sofia Coppola see also Caitlin YUNEUN LEWIS, « Cool Postfeminism: The Celebrity Stardom of Sofia Coppola », Diane Negra and Su Holmes (eds), *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, New York, Continuum, 2011, pp. 174-198.



Fig.2 The abundance of shoes and accessories in «The Bling Ring».

This method of filming, which clearly evokes the vivid MTV style of video editing, is later echoed in similar scenes in *The Bling Ring*, especially the one that depicts the teenagers marvelling at an abundance of shoes, bags, dresses and jewellery [fig.2]. The fetishistic focus on the feminized world of material objects was in the discursive circulation of the film. Calling *The Bling Ring* « narratively static and morally banal », Joe Neumaier from *New York Daily News* complains that « half the movie is spent watching shallow kids try on other people's clothes »³⁵. The complex grid of references between *Marie Antoinette* and *The Bling Ring* is particularly ripe with significance in regard to Coppola's take on the world of fame and privilege. In fact, both films can be read as a self-reflexive comment on celebrity youth culture. Coppola received criticism that her *Marie Antoinette* cast seemed like « spoilt 5th Avenue New Yorkers », to which the filmmaker responded by saying that she wanted « to emphasize that they are teenagers and to mark the difference between their world and the stuffy court world »³⁶. It is not a coincidence that Coppola's version of the Queen was routinely referred to as an 18th century Paris Hilton³⁷. The infamous American socialite, who was one of the victims during the actual Bling Ring robberies, made a cameo in the latter film, appearing as herself, and some scenes were shot in her own home in Los Angeles – and these decisions suggest Coppola's playful appropriation of contemporary celebrity culture, in which she also actively participates.

For Handyside, *Marie Antoinette* and *The Bling Ring* can be read as self-consciously reflexive variants of the fashion film genre, as well as « metaphorical com-

35. JOE NEUMAIER, « *The Bling Ring*: Movie Review », *New York Daily News*, June 13, 2013. Web. <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/bling-ring-movie-review-article-1.1371518>.

36. Quoted in Ellen CHESHIRE, *Bio-pics: A Life in Pictures*, London and New York, Wallflower, 2015, p. 119.

37. See *Ibid.*

ments on [Coppola's] own authorial persona: its complex accommodation with the worlds of cool celebrity, commodity forms and girlish frivolities »³⁸. She further argues: « It is through fashion that Coppola expresses most clearly and competently the paradox of her auteur persona. It is through fashion that Coppola retools the idea(l)s of image dominating script and flourishes of personal style that dominate classical film theory, giving them a feminine makeover »³⁹. Interestingly, while the notions of « style » and « look » have always informed the basis of the « masculine » auteur theory and its focus on *mise-en-scène* – for example as manifested in Éric Rohmer's belief in the « profundity of the superficial »⁴⁰ – none of these male filmmakers suffered from the crisis of credibility that has haunted Coppola in her career.

Ultimately, Coppola's gender does matter when it comes to the critical evaluation of her films, seen consistently as frivolous, superficial and not *distanced* enough⁴¹. The common perception that her work is unworthy, because it lacks depth or substance, is inevitably intertwined with her (authorial) performance of bourgeois femininity. Coppola's films have been described as being centred on the « look » at the expense of the « deeper » meanings supposedly produced by plot and narrative. These features can be taken to connote superficiality and emptiness, also in terms of (feminist) politics, qualities that have been paralleled with Coppola's privileged lifestyle. Not only in critical circulation, but also in scholarly writings about her films, discussions of Coppola's celebration of girl culture and its neoliberal discourse on empowerment through consumption are abundant and easy to find⁴². Nevertheless, as I seek to demonstrate in the following section, her attention to commodity cultures and *mise-en-scène* surface details foregrounds Coppola's self-conscious attitude to her authorship, which reconciles the terms of production and reproduction, creation and consumption, and which may be in fact read as political and feminist.

By establishing dialogue with earlier woman-authored texts, I will show how *Marie Antoinette* poses challenges to discourses of exceptionality and authenticity which underlie the traditional paradigms of film authorship, while simultaneously dramatizing Coppola's own agency and authority as a woman filmmaker. I contend that the film becomes a metaphor not only for Coppola's authorial status within the US film culture, but also for the tensions that exist at the intersection between women's authorship and mass culture in a broader sense. As Nattie Golubov ob-

38. HANDYSIDE, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

39. *Ibid.* Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Heidi Brevik-Zender offers another useful insight into Coppola's feminist deployment of fashion. The scholar reads Coppola's interpretation of the life of the Queen as a commentary on her own experience as a contemporary woman filmmaker (« Let Them Wear Manolos: Fashion, Walter Benjamin, and Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* », *Camera Obscura*, 26(3), 2011, pp. 1-33).

40. HANDYSIDE, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

41. Much of the invective regularly directed at Coppola has been acutely gendered in nature. See also Katarzyna PASZKIEWICZ, *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming.

42. As Smaill astutely observes: « Her female protagonists embody 'coolness' [...], individualism and youthful allure », associated with a postfeminist rejection of second-wave feminism (*op. cit.*, p. 156). Coppola's films do not appear to be explicitly feminist in their message, although they do make themselves « available to feminist readings » (*Ibid.*, p. 152).

serves⁴³ in her analysis of women's literary authorship in the neoliberal context, « the masses » are possibly less threatening than in the 19th century, but the claim that women's greater visibility has debilitated the association between mass culture and the feminine seems too hasty. Golubov demonstrates that not only female-authored popular genre texts, such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but also the works of more « renowned » writers, and The Nobel Prize winners, such as Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Nadine Gordimer, Wisława Szymborska, Herta Müller or Alice Munro, have been critically dismissed on the grounds of being too closely associated with mass culture, passivity, consumerism and reproduction, rather than artistic creation⁴⁴. These examples highlight acute social resistance to women's intensified involvement in mainstream industries and the « commerce of auteurism », specifically on turf traditionally seen as masculine – obstacles staged, but at the same time subtly confronted, in Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*.

2. Authorship, (in)authenticity and image making

Marie Antoinette opens with a shot that makes the spectator aware of his/her gaze. In this much discussed scene⁴⁵, the title character (Kirsten Dunst) reclines on a luxurious settee against a pastel blue background, while a maid pampers her extended leg. Framed in long shot, she dips her finger into the top of an exquisite pink pastry, licks it and suddenly she turns her head towards the camera and stares directly back at us with a knowing smile, as if to ask « What? » [fig.3].



Fig. 3 Marie Antoinette's direct mode of address.

The Queen's direct look at the camera at the beginning of *Marie Antoinette* echoes Orlando's similarly enigmatic mode of address in Sally Potter's adaptation of

43. Nattie GOLUBOV, « Del anonimato a la celebridad literaria: la figura autorial en la teoría literaria feminista », *Mundo Nuevo. Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos*, 16, 2015, p. 37.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

45. See, for example, Dennis Bingham (*op. cit.*, pp. 361-362) and Heidi Brevik-Zender (*op. cit.*, pp. 1-33).

Virginia Woolf's novel, which – as many scholars have argued – offers a humorous commentary in key moments of the film. Orlando's intermittent direct address to the audience, both verbal and non-verbal, is a constant feature throughout the film and it has often been interpreted as a self-conscious rejection of the conventional notions of authenticity in favour of a dialogic retelling of the past, as well as foregrounding authorship in terms of revision and collaboration, instead of the more traditional, gender-based rhetoric of production and paternity in which the (male) author seeks to establish his authority over the text and reinforce his authorial originality⁴⁶. These readings of the film should be contextualized and considered in connection with the wider paradigm shifts in both authorship and adaptation studies. Referring to a number of costume dramas directed by women in the 1990s and early 2000s, Belén Vidal points to the rebirth of the author as the figure of the adapter/rewriter, as an alternative to an earlier rejection of the masculinized discourses of authority, most notably in feminist film studies: « Whereas, traditionally, the construction of the author as adapter has had to be negotiated through the dominant discourses on fidelity and authenticity, these films provide an avenue to rethink authorship in terms of the gestures of feminist revision »⁴⁷. Shelley Cobb, who centres specifically on the intersection of female authorship, the practice of adaptation and self-authorizing strategies for the woman filmmaker, offers precisely such feminist rethinking, arguing that in many contemporary films directed by women « the female author on screen represents both the woman writer of the novel and the woman filmmaker of the adaptation »⁴⁸. In reference to Potter's adaptation of *Orlando*, she contends: « At the centre of this self-authorizing project is the figure of the woman author, who appears in various forms: Orlando, her daughter, Potter, Woolf, and, though Potter does not use her name, generations of Judiths »⁴⁹. The often discussed closing sequence of the film, in which Potter extends the timeline of Woolf's novel, introducing the daughter and the « Birth » section, illustrates this idea. In her metacinematic comment on the process of adapting, and « a none-too-subtle symbol of feminist self-representation »⁵⁰, Potter replaces Woolf's words with camera work: the pen Orlando holds in the opening scene is transformed in the film's ending into a handheld video camera operated by the child-artist, who has been read to stand for Potter and women filmmakers in general. The future is in the hands of Orlando's heir and Orlando herself becomes the object of the look of her daughter's camera: the close-up of the protagonist, staring coolly at us, is seen from the girl's point of view mediated through her video recorder, while Orlando's last words to her, « Look. Look up there », direct our attention to the visual.

Through an analysis of its ending, Cobb reads the film « as a cinematic vision of matrilineal legacy that not only connects women authors across time and history but also across media and disciplines »⁵¹. Cobb's adoption of the mother-daughter

46. Belén VIDAL, « Playing in a Minor Key: The Literary Past through the Feminist Imagination », Mireia Aragay (ed.), *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2005, pp. 263-284; and Shelley COBB, *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, London, Palgrave, 2015.

47. VIDAL, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

48. COBB, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

50. Julianne PIDDUCK, « Travels with Sally Potter's *Orlando*: Gender, Narrative, Movement », *Screen*, 38, 1997, p. 184.

51. COBB, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

metaphor, a thorny issue for feminist criticism in debates too lengthy to precis here, might be questioned in many ways, but her take on the representation of women's agency and the authority of the woman filmmaker, as well as on women authorship across different art forms, is particularly germane to the analysis of Coppola's film authorship. Even though, at first sight, *Marie Antoinette* does not seem to deal explicitly with female authorship, the figure of the woman author comes to the fore in the film as the key site for the representation of women's (lack of) agency and the authority of the woman filmmaker.

As Handyside discusses in her analysis of Coppola's oeuvre as a cinema of girlhood, the filmmaker's authorship is often materialized in her « girlish » signature: in curlicued hand-written type scripts or bright pink lettering used in credit sequences of her films, which unmistakably point to the bourgeois, chic femininity she embodies in her authorial performance. These signatures suggest, however, that her name is both « advantage and limiting, forever placing her as a scion of the Coppola family »⁵². In *Marie Antoinette*, in particular, the significance of the girlish signature is reinforced in a scene showing the marriage contract, notably signed by both Louis – Marie Antoinette's father-in-law – and Louis Auguste, her future husband. A close-up shot shows us the document and Marie Antoinette's hand signing her own name in the bottom of the frame:

As she draws a line across the two 't's of her name to complete her signature, a large ink blot appears, dripping down the velum [...]. The childish writing and the ink blot, replicating as they do the historical original [...], speak to us of the *historic* Marie Antoinette's relative lack of education, trepidation and youth. However, the very fact of its repetition across films and its girlish style makes the *cinematic* Marie Antoinette another Coppola girl and adds to the paradoxes of the signature within a reading that sees it as a comment on more contemporary cultural problematics.⁵³

This self-conscious comment on (lack of) agency – « recognizing the self as subject and bringing a certain kind of legal subjectivity into existence » while being framed by male adult others (for « the signature is not really an operation of free-will ») – envisages not only the paradoxes of the postfeminist moment⁵⁴, but also the webs of constraint and possibility for women's film authorship in a wider sense: the « elitist » and « masculine » conceptualisations of the auteur, on the one hand, and the continuous risk of erasure, or marginalization, of women's names and women's discursive input from film histories on the other, before and after post-structuralists famously announced the death of the author⁵⁵. Although restrained and framed by male others, Coppola's « demonstrable moment of agency »⁵⁶ is relevant, because – in Nancy Miller's words, responding to Foucault's « What is an

52. HANDYSIDE, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

55. Roland BARTHES, « La mort de l'auteur », *Le Bruissement de la langue*, Paris, Seuil, 1984 [1967], pp. 61-67.

56. HANDYSIDE, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

Author? », in which the French philosopher imagines a world « without need for an author »⁵⁷ – « only those who have it can play with not having it »⁵⁸.

Bringing together Woolf's, Potter's and Coppola's texts in a discussion of the female author sheds light on a remarkable communality, for example with regards to their authorial relationships with the historical and (auto)biographical material they adapt. Penny Florence asserts in reference to Potter's *Orlando*: « as Virginia Woolf took a step away from her source material, which is really what Vita was, and transformed Vita's life into a novel, the film takes several steps away from the book »⁵⁹. In this sense, Coppola's infidelity to both the source novel, and history in general, resonates deeply with Woolf's own infidelity to the « facts » of Vita Sackville West's life and Potter's imaginative rewriting of Woolf's novel. Similarly to Potter's adaptation, at the centre of Coppola's project is not only an alternative memory which questions the master narrative of History and the myth of the « objective » view⁶⁰, but also the complex terrain of possibility and constraint for female authorship in a broader sense. Arguably, in their foregrounding of a fascination with material culture and exploration of female authorship through deliberately feminized space, both films play with self-representation, using culturally sanctioned meanings to create spaces for resistance.

The web of the potential intertextual relations between *Marie Antoinette* and *Orlando* is particularly rich in reference to their constant fluctuation between physical mobility and gendered restraints. Julianne Pidduck's analysis of the deliberately slow pacing in *Orlando* – « dilatory, languorous pattern of sequential segments of (in)action »⁶¹ – is especially revealing. Potter's lethargic hero « becomes, almost in spite of her/himself, *mobile*, as she/he moves through different historical circumstances. But hers/his is a fickle quality of agency, reliant on the whims of chance »⁶². *Marie Antoinette* can be similarly characterized by an extended aesthetic « being », rather than a narrative drive or heroic « doing ».⁶³ This attenuated narrative movement, which reflects the constraints on white bourgeois femininity, is developed in both films in intensely claustrophobic domestic spaces. In *Marie Antoinette*, the composition of the shots often stresses such rigidity and entrapment. When the Queen is represented in the open scenarios, the

57. Michel FOUCAULT, « What is an Author? », Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York, Pantheon, 1984, pp. 118-120.

58. Nancy K. MILLER, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 75.

59. Quoted in COBB, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

60. Pam Cook (« History in the Making », *op. cit.*), for instance, examines the multifarious ways in which the film engages with its historical subject matter, in terms of both its narrative and style, paying particular attention to the artifice of the biographic project that Coppola undertakes. Handyside, in turn, argues that Coppola's postmodern approach privileges « emotion, interiority and femininity over objectivity, exteriority and masculinity » (*op. cit.*, p. 152). See also Garrett's broader discussion of the fictionalising process underlying Western grand narratives and her analysis of *Orlando* and *The Piano* as examples of both self-consciously politicised feminist film practice and cinematic versions of historiographic metafiction (*Postmodern Chick-Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

61. PIDDUCK, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

63. Several scholars have pointed to Coppola's specific treatment of time and the haptic quality of her images. See, for example, Anna Rogers on Deleuzian time-images (« Sofia Coppola », *Senses of Cinema*, 45, 2007, web: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/great-directors/sofia-coppola/>) and Elise Wortel and Anneke Smelik on « textures of time » in *Marie Antoinette* (« Textures of Time. A Becoming-Memory of History in Costume Film », Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (eds), *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, New York, Routledge, 2013, pp. 185-200).

framing and camera pullbacks highlight the size of Versailles, completely overwhelming the protagonist and sinisterly detaching her from the public realm [fig. 4].



Fig. 4 Marie Antoinette overwhelmed by the size of Versailles.

For Christina Lane and Nicole Richter, these ongoing tensions between interior and exterior spaces speak to the difficulties of Coppola's own position within the American and global film industry – « as a filmmaker who is both on the inside looking out and on the outside looking in »⁶⁴. In their insightful analysis of Coppola's brand image, the scholars demonstrate how her films simultaneously mobilize and resist the mystique surrounding the romantic cult of the (male) director and how the filmmaker herself struggles to assert her creative, professional and authorial agency in the contemporary cinematic field⁶⁵. *Marie Antoinette* dwells on the effort and costs in the attainment of this position.

The limits on physical (and social) mobility are visually materialised in *Orlando* and *Marie Antoinette* not only through spaces but also through the suffocating, laced corsets and exaggerated gowns, which make it hard to breathe and move⁶⁶. As Pidduck observes in reference to *Orlando*, « the awkwardness of these overblown costumes is reinforced through a consistent use of perfectly orchestrated balanced visual compositions and long static shots which create a luscious stage on which to observe the actors going through their painstakingly choreographed, if meaningless, paces »⁶⁷. Not only this, but there is also a visual blending between the newly-corseted Orlando and the world of material objects, for example when

64. LANE and RICHTER, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

65. Lane and Richter convincingly argue that Coppola's complex strategies of financing and distribution enabled her to actively participate in the fashioning of herself as a filmmaker.

66. Clothing may also be read as a way to assert agency, identity and authority. On historical, philosophical and film feminist scholarship on women and fashion, see HANDYSIDE (*op. cit.*, pp. 140-146).

67. PIDDUCK, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

she has to dodge awkwardly and with considerable difficulty between the equally heavily-dressed items of furniture down the long gallery [fig.5]. Significantly, in Potter's and Coppola's films the costumes chromatically rhyme, echo or blend into the mise-en-scène, for example the blue-on-blue colours which predominate just after Orlando's transition to a woman and Marie's transition to the Dauphine of France during her journey from Austria to Versailles. In the « Society » parlour scene « Orlando is immobilized like one elaborate, frosted blue cake on a love seat »⁶⁸. Marie Antoinette and the lavish pastries, abundantly displayed throughout the film, are likewise drawn in parallel; as the Duchesse de Polignac remarks at one point, « she looks like a little piece of cake ».



Fig. 5 Orlando among furniture. The dust sheets parallel Orlando's voluminous stiff skirts.

It is evident that both films highlight commodity cultures, although Coppola seems to be far more engaged with surfaces and the materiality of what is represented on screen. The visual alliance of decorative objects with the female body recurs throughout. This is immediately clear when Coppola exploits the texture of the image, dissolving the Queen's figure and rendering it almost indistinguishable from the material objects in the palace which are constantly brought into focus. This happens, for instance, when Marie receives a scolding letter from her mother, reiterating to the young woman that she has a true purpose beyond the superficial play in which she indulges, namely to produce an heir to the throne. Maria Theresa's voice-over fills the room, while her daughter, dressed in a floral gown, practically blends in with the ornate wallpaper with a similar floral pattern [fig.6]. The letter falls out of her hands and she slowly sinks to the floor, pressed against the wall, almost becoming one with it.

68. *Ibid.*

While both *Orlando* and *Marie Antoinette* seem to be firmly anchored in space and in their bodies, which is emphasized visually by their exuberant dresses, the mimesis with the textured world of material objects, and their frequent immobilization in the frame, they also are, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, caught in transition. The films toy incessantly with gender performativity and they both stage the « make-over » moments: when Orlando changes sex from man to woman or when the fourteen-year-old Marie Antoinette is stripped naked and dressed in the image of a French Dauphine during the handover ceremony. The excess of the costumes and ridiculousness of the rituals they undergo highlight the artificiality of these transformations. Arguably, the emphasis on fashion in these scenes might also point to issues of authorial self-representation and image production within the contemporary cinematic field, which would correspond to « the commercial dramatization of self », in Corrigan's terms⁶⁹. Here, nevertheless, such dramatizations are clearly marked by gendered constraints.



Fig. 6 The Queen's figure is rendered almost indistinguishable from the material objects in the palace.

It is not coincidental that both films display a visual tension between seeing and being seen: Orlando and Marie Antoinette appear to be not only participants but also spectators of their respective stories. They are clearly aware of their objectification, but with their knowing look they co-create themselves as images and

69. CORRIGAN, *op. cit.* As Handyside observes, « costume is understood as transparent and authentic; and attempt to transcribe the past into the present without comment or opinion, whereas fashion deliberately introduces concepts of style, individuality, subjectivity and modernity » (*op. cit.*, p. 150).

material objects to be looked at. « Marie looks *like* cake while she looks *at* the camera », observe Lane and Richter⁷⁰ in reference to the opening sequence. Interestingly, the composition of the frame and the colours of the mise-en-scène of this self-conscious moment are later mirrored in another shot, reproduced in the marketing materials for *Marie Antoinette*: the protagonist is lying naked on her bed, looking at us from behind a big fan, as if posing for a picture [fig. 7]⁷¹.



Fig. 7 The Queen returns the gaze.

Ultimately, Marie Antoinette, perhaps more than Orlando, is defined by her status as a commodity to be looked at. Interestingly, the two films create friction between images and sound, albeit in a different way. Orlando is a bearer of the look and a bearer of the voice. In the opening scene, we see the protagonist, as a male poet, reading literature. He walks from right to left while the camera moves from left to right. When he changes the direction and walks from left to right, the camera moves from right to left. Cristina Degli-Esposti argues that from its very beginning the film implies that « the camera will not follow the character », but « it will be there for the character to find, to address »⁷². The initial words of the novel (« There can

70. LANE and RICHTER, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

71. Much has been written about Coppola's predilection for women in repose – conventionally beautiful, white, young – which often reference high art conceptions of the female form (Amy WOODWORTH, « A Feminist Theorization of Sofia Coppola's Postfeminist Trilogy », Marcelline Block (ed.), *Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2008, p. 145). As Vidal rightly observes, posing signifies « the objectification of woman into image, yet at the same time it connects with the terms 'play', 'performance' and 'masquerade', resisting essentialist or 'fixed' notions of gender » (*op. cit.*, p. 280).

72. Cristina DEGLI-ESPOSTI, « Sally Potter's *Orlando* and the Neo-Baroque Scopic Regime », *Cinema Journal*, 36(1), 1996, p. 84.

be no doubt about his sex... »)⁷³ enunciated by the biographer's voiceover are interrupted by the character onscreen. The close-up shows him leaning against the oak, his face framed in profile, but he turns to the camera and proudly states « That is, I », as soon as the voiceover refers to him as « he ». Hence, the cinematic Orlando establishes ownership of his story and forcefully appropriates the identification of the self, disrupting the textual and visual objectification.

Marie Antoinette's strategic stillness at the beginning of the film reveals that, in comparison to Orlando, she has less mobility and almost no voice in the story. As Lane and Richter observe, « the only character-voice that the audience is given the privilege to hear is Marie's mother, who repeatedly interrupts the life Marie pursues to remind her of her duty to bear children »⁷⁴. Coppola's protagonist appears to be entrapped in her femininity; Orlando, in turn, is allowed to adopt a myriad of gender identities, even though, in the end, as Roberta Garrett has shown, the protagonist fully embraces strategic female subjectivity⁷⁵. The deliberately feminist mode in which Potter's film engages is perhaps less evident in Coppola's work, whose heroine is not explicitly feminist, or at least she has not been read as such in most of the scholarly writings about the film. As many critics have argued, with its distinct use of visual pleasure Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* seems to be more easily aligned with the pleasures of postfeminist consumerism and leisure than with feminist politics. These interpretations dwell on Coppola's underscoring of « girlness » and « girl culture », which, after all, epitomize postfeminist values⁷⁶. Indeed, it may be argued that in foregrounding the lifestyle of an affluent young, white woman – which, as previously argued, is frequently intertwined with the reception of Coppola as a female auteur, working in a bubble of fame and privilege disconnected from harsh reality – *Marie Antoinette* rejoices in versions of femininity empowered by consumer and celebrity cultures. In reference to this aspect, Handyside comments that Coppola's view of girlhood is, nonetheless, removed from the celebratory rhetoric of « girl-power », as her films stage contradictions and paradoxes of women's position in popular culture without necessarily seeking to resolve them. In a similar vein, Anna Rebecca Backman Rogers convincingly argues that, although scholars « are not mistaken in identifying a post-feminist strain in the film's mise-en-scène, [...] the film enacts a critique rather than an outright endorsement of such a de-politicisation »⁷⁷.

De-politicized or not, Coppola does seem to participate in a postfeminist moment, as she is perfectly aware of the importance of image making within the

73. Woolf's words are counterbalanced by the visual code. There can be, indeed, some doubts about his sex, as Orlando is played by a woman, Tilda Swinton (even though she is androgynous in appearance).

74. LANE and RICHTER, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

75. In contrast to Woolf's gender indeterminacy, according to Roberta Garrett (« Costume Drama and Counter Memory: Sally Potter's *Orlando* », Jane Dowson and Steven Earnshaw (eds), *Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Texts*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1995, p. 94).

76. Sarah PROJANSKY, « Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters », Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (eds), *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 45. Broadly defined, « postfeminism » encompasses, according to Tasker and Negra, a set of assumptions that feminism has accomplished its goals, and is characterised by phenomena ranging from action films featuring sexualized violent heroines to the « girling » of femininity.

77. Anna BACKMAN ROGERS, « 'A Market of The Senses; Your Relations Are of Power': The Female Body as Decorative Object and Commodity in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006) », Film-Philosophy Conference, 2016. Web. <http://www.film-philosophy.com/conference/index.php/conf/FP2016/paper/view/1276>.

« commerce of auteurism » and she is self-consciously performing cinematic authorship through markedly feminized space. Lane and Richter observe that she has succeeded by fashioning herself as a celebrity, presenting herself « as image »⁷⁸; similar to Marie Antoinette's, Coppola's apparent « consumption without production – consumption for the sake of consumption » is, in fact, the source of artistic freedom, because she « achieves creativity and artistry in the way that she consumes, through her fashioning of her body, hair and wardrobe »⁷⁹. If we regard the film as something more than an authorial performance of girly frivolity, and connect « women authors across time and history and also across media and disciplines », as Cobb suggested⁸⁰, it is possible to read the emphasis on image making and consumer culture, and its simultaneous imbrication in the artifice of the (auto)biographic project, as precisely the location of its political intervention. According to the scholar, in contrast to the first scene in *Orlando*, in which the male solitary artist-figure is seen in profile and in which he reclaims his agency over the presumed biographer, in the final sequence « Orlando as woman looks straight at us without a word, subverting the traditional gender-based notions of self-assertion, needing no affirmation from the voiceover and no clarification from herself »⁸¹. Coppola's similar focus on the image, and not on the identification of a unified self, might be seen as a continuation of Woolf's and Potter's intricate (auto)biographic endeavours. Woolf's famous selection of tampered photographs and historical paintings – inserted into *Orlando* in the service of the fake biography she was writing – mirrors the protagonist's chameleon-like personality and questions the veracity of the story. The use of paintings is also important in *Marie Antoinette*: towards the end of the film, we learn of the birth and death of Marie's third child through a series of portraits shown in a still frame. In the same sequence, we see different portraits of the Queen with tabloid-like text imposed on her figure: « beware of deficit », « Queen of debt! » and « spending France into ruin! », which point to her lack of popularity due to her spending habits. Here, and in other moments throughout the film, we don't get to know the « real » Marie, but the myriad identities imposed on her both by her society and by the film itself. And Coppola is determined to make the audience aware of this: the protagonist is all image, simultaneously defined and constrained by it.

Instead of exploring the historical depth of Marie Antoinette, the filmmaker pays attention to the outward details, subtly undermining the iconography associated with the genre, which tends to « foreground its production values via sustained focus on objects that have been painstakingly re-created for the sake of authenticity »⁸². Coppola employs what Cook defies as « travesty », a common device in literature and theatre which « irreverently wrests its source material from its historical context, producing blatantly fake fabrications that challenge accepted notions of authenticity and value. It brazenly mixes high and low culture, and does not disguise its impulse to sweep away tradition »⁸³. Paul Byrnes once shrewdly observed that

78. LANE and RICHTER, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

79. *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

80. COBB, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

82. Anna BACKMAN ROGERS, « The Historical Threshold: Crisis, Ritual and Liminality in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006) », *Relief: Revue Électronique de Littérature Française*, 6(1), 2012, pp. 80-97.

83. Pam COOK, « Portrait of a Lady: Sofia Coppola », *op. cit.*, p. 38.

« the biopic is a discredited and disreputable genre, because so many bio-pics tell lies about their subjects »⁸⁴, but Coppola is even more radical than this: not simply because she is not particularly interested in securing an « accurate » depiction of Marie Antoinette as an historical figure, but also because she never attempts to look past her iconicity, being more concerned with how she was portrayed for centuries⁸⁵. To return, momentarily, to the opening shot in *Marie Antoinette*, it is significant that the first image of the protagonist is accompanied by the Gang of Four song entitled « Natural Is Not In It », which constitutes a fitting leitmotiv in a film that questions the stability of the narratives of the self and fetishistically exhibits the world of pure and extravagant artifice. It is also, quite aptly, a film about images: both historically and culturally engraved images of women, closely intertwined with a broad range of commodity cultures.

Conclusions

Coppola's concern with the mechanics of consumption and her indulgent exploration of material culture has often sparked critical backlash. Her films, described at times as « pretty », « decorative » or « delectable », tend to be perceived as lacking political engagement and dismissed as supposedly too concerned with frivolity and superficiality. However, and drawing on Rosalind Galt's considerations of gender and decorative image, I want to conclude that, even though *Marie Antoinette* is mainly concerned with surface and appearances, it is not superficial in its politics. According to Galt:

Marie Antoinette stages the fetishistic status of the royal body as a question of production design. The film connects a feminized world of objects (for instance, a deliberately anachronistic discourse on the shoe as commodity fetish) with the class and gender politics within which Marie's body can be owned first by the state and then violently by the people. [...] [This] discourse on the historical objecthood of the female body strikingly refuses to blame the woman for her out-of-control consumption.⁸⁶

The « out-of-control consumption » reveals a series of discourses on women's association with mass culture, but it also constitutes a key feature in Coppola's self-authorising project. Lane and Richter observe in their reading of the film that, just like *Marie Antoinette* empowers herself through a logic of consumerism, Coppola's star persona also achieves « modes of self-representation within the realm of material objects and spectacle »⁸⁷. The scholars' thought-provoking take on Coppola's production through consumption can be particularly useful as a means to reconfigure traditional paradigms of authorship in a wider sense, as these rest firmly on such cultural binaries as « production-interiority-masculinity » *vs.* « con-

84. In CHESHIRE, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

85. In this respect, it is interesting to observe how Coppola purposely avoids key « historical » moments traditionally conceived as essential to the myth of the Queen, such as The Affair of the Diamond Necklace, but at the same time she does show the offending piece of jewellery on Marie Antoinette's cleavage when the protagonist is relaxing in her luxurious bathtub. This is one of the many examples of how we are encouraged to read (and consume) Marie Antoinette as an icon, rather than as a real historical figure.

86. Rosalind GALT, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011. See also: BACKMAN, « The Historical Threshold », *op. cit.*

87. LANE and RICHTER, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

sumption-corporality-femininity ». As many feminist critics have shown, women have historically been identified as property or objects of exchange between men, as responsible for reproducing their legacy and their name. In authorial discourses, a woman embodies repetition, homogeneity or banality against which the « authentic » artistic exception is constructed. Forever stuck in her body or associated with the space of the *domus* – a space that is not her own, that is always shared and linked with corporeal and repetitive rituals (nurturing, hygiene, nutrition, rest, sexuality and reproduction, etc.) – a woman is too close to the world of material objects to gain broader perspective and, thus, engender proper critique⁸⁸.

Coppola inhabits and crosses these boundaries in a number of fascinating ways. Rather than simply reversing these poles, Coppola's tactical paring of the ethos of « authentic authorship » – cultivated in the *politique des auteurs* and resurrected in the « commercial dramatization of self as the motivating agent of textuality »⁸⁹ – with its « fake » equivalent – closely bound up with stereotypically « feminine » interest in fashion and domesticity – demands reading in terms of a move to blur boundaries between these always gendered discursive categories (indeed, « natural is not in it »)⁹⁰. As Lane and Richter put it: « It is certainly true that the filmmaker's perspective is rooted in 'production' in the sense that she is committed to creativity and artistry. But just like Marie, Coppola exploits elements of consumption in her efforts to say something productive about her creative position within the world of commerce »⁹¹. However, rather than asserting her authority in a traditional sense, the filmmaker stages both the opportunities and constraints of this creative position. It is through *Marie Antoinette's* focus on the surface and materiality, which aligns « decorative » objects with the female body and with female authorship, to be owned, reclaimed or to be traded, that the film articulates its politics.

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88. Aina PÉREZ FONTDEVILA and Meri TORRAS FRANCÉS (eds), *Los papeles del autor/a. Marcos teóricos sobre la autoría literaria*, Madrid, Arco/Libros, 2016, p. 49.

89. CORRIGAN, *op. cit.*

90. I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who offered this useful insight.

91. LANE and RICHTER, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

