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## **Spectacular Queens and the Morals of Excessive Femininity: A Feminist Approach to Public History**

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Popular history is the stuff of connection, belonging and citizenship. It offers us imagined community (Anderson 1983), and more precisely, a shared historical imaginary (Dawson 1994; Elsaesser 2000). Through new and old media, imagined communities stretch beyond national borders and provide us with both opportunities for understanding ourselves, for mirroring and critical reflection, as well as for creative interventions. As expressed in for instance film, books, journals and websites, popular history seems increasingly popular in the North European context. In this paper I will tentatively approach a select range of popular versions of historical queens, like Queen Christina of Sweden and Marie Antoinette of France. Both are in the historical imaginary connected with excessive life styles, with arbitrary and wasteful ways that came to abrupt ends (abdication and decapitation). But their distinct and well-known personas have also provided a source of pleasure as they have echoed powerfully throughout contemporary popular culture as well as within a feminist imaginary of alternatives. In magnified proportions these queens, in two different ways of doing their gender, open up a space for consumerist, ruthless, exaggerated and anything but natural versions of femininity. In this paper I will explore the appeal of such performances today in relation to issues of cultural citizenship and subject positioning, history in public and the morals of excessive femininity.

## **Spectacular Queens and the Morals of Excessive Femininity: A Feminist Approach to Public History**

I would contend that in this new era of women's history we need to look for history in unexpected places. I mean this in two senses: one, literally thinking about where we find historical documents pertaining to women's history or what we might categorize as historical documents of women's history, and two, locating women's history in interdisciplinarity. In other words, perhaps it is time we looked outside the field and its organizations for additional places for acceptance of women's history.

Black women's movement historiographer Kimberly Springer, *Journal of Women's History* 2004, issue 16, p.28.

Many feminist historians share a reflex, motivated by sheer necessity, of looking for history in unexpected places. Sharing that inclination, but, as Springer suggests, "located in interdisciplinarity" as a cultural scholar rather than as a historian, I am in this paper interested in historical manifestations produced by and for *non-historians*. Also outside the scholarly field of history and historiography, and by non-historians, is history used, practiced and produced. The assumption here is that historians not necessarily are the drivers of historical assessments. That public production and consumption of history by a much wider and more heterogeneous cultural collective of non-historians, significantly marks current political and cultural shifts, consistencies and conditions and thus are crucial to study in order to get at understandings of the past in the present. This is such a cultural study. More precisely, it is a partial mapping exercise of public history as displayed in cinematographic media, in film as this medium is embedded in a context of other popular history expressions. I am in this paper, yet very much work in progress, zooming in on the cinematic life of *historical queens* with analytical instruments from the interdisciplinary toolbox of feminist cultural studies (cf. Franklin, Lury & Stacey 2000; Jones 2003). In particular I draw on feminist inter- or rather transdisciplinary sensitivities towards the relation seeing and knowing, power and subjectivity, vision and visibility.

One of the most debated tenets of feminist film theory and other critical and creative studies of visual cultures suggests that there is a certain collapse of woman and image (Mulvey 1975; Doane 1991; Stacey 1994). There is a troublesome merge of female identity and the image of herself as seen by herself and others. As suggested by such visual approaches, this creates a spectacular implosion – early on referred to as the masquerade of femininity. Echoing Judith Butler's (1990) influential insistence on sexual difference as embodied performance without essence, this was theorized already in 1929 by psychoanalyst Joan Rivière. However, after Laura Mulvey's work on the dominance of the male gaze in classic Hollywood film and later discussions of female agency, on the frank possibility of female spectator positions as seer and knower within such a frame of "to-be-looked-at-ness" feminist takes on visual culture has dovetailed into a complex and rich field with many creative and critical intersections on power and subjectivity (cf. Smelik 1999). Gendered looking relations have further been joined analytically with racialized ways of looking, for instance with what has become known as the imperial gaze (McClintock 1995; Bloom 1999). Masculinities have further also been theorized as masquerade and spectacular performance (Stacey 2005). Of relevance for my argument here is but excessive femininity and the public masquerade of womanliness in historical cinema. Important for this argument is how feminist film scholar Mary Ann Doane (1991) took up "the excess of femininity" and recuperated Rivière's notion. The feminine masquerade was for Rivière a woman's (pathological) psychic defence, an identity forming coping strategy that in the end works to make genuine womanliness and masquerade the same claustrophobic thing. Doane saw however in the masquerade also as a potential site of resistance. Implying a certain awareness and distance of

the Self with its assumed and worn mask, the masquerade exposes femininity as a non-stable construction rather than a permanent essence. Like how Butler's heteronormativity generates "psychic excess", the mismatch between the woman and her femininity works as a potent destabilization of dominant gender discourse (where women are the carriers of gender and men signals neutral and unmarked humanity). Critiques of ways of looking and becoming subject in a visually dominated culture are thus in my argument paired with an emphasis on the potential for resistance.

The early feminist film studies focus on representations (of women) and the social impact of the medium of cinema, on semiotics and psychoanalysis, clashed to some extent with Marxist critiques of the film industry. The representationalist approach (sometimes referred to as cinepsychoanalysis) emphasised film as an influential system of cultural signification while socialist (feminist) approaches singled out the material conditions of film production and consumption. Following feminist theorists like Donna Haraway from the field of science studies as a form of cultural studies, I see no reason to analytically continue or sustain such a modern wedge between meaning and materiality (Haraway 1991). Both feminist film studies strands conjoin namely in a fruitful manner in an emphasis on audiences, processes of subject positioning and publics. This means for me an approach that does not interpret films as individual, self-contained and independent works. Rather it is an attempt at understanding their changing intelligibility by noticing the codes, cultural sign posts and interpretative assumptions that imbue them with different meaning for different audiences in different situations. It signifies moreover an extended attention towards more than "the text" and the materialization of the same. It is an sensitivity towards intertextual and interpretative relations and material-semiotic contexts. Such an entangled analytical strand underlines further the importance of engaging with the all-encompassing visual cultures that are creating and sustaining embodied subjectivities and knowledges as allocated along intersecting axes of significant power differentials such as class, gender, ethnicity, age etc. It is in the vein of such feminist cultural approaches and along such analytical tenets that the cinematic figuration of the historical queen can be read as a tell-tale marker of how contemporary cultures involved with history-making assess public femininity and womanliness as spectacle and masquerade.

### The Queen as Analytical Prism: Approaching Public History Differently

If historians in their work generate questions, "public history" is more often about producing answers (Black 2005). But that is not an exhaustive public history definition. Public history is here seen as officially manifested products of larger patterns of sociocultural experience, collective memory – of the historical imaginary. It is the fruit of a "public" that is simultaneously consumer and producer of discursively shaped landscapes of historical pasts. Actually just the very noun "public" is a slippery customer. Cultural scholar Michael Warner (2005) calls the very idea of a public one of the central fictions of modernity, but shows how this fiction nonetheless has had powerful implications on the organisation of social life in the USA. (And, I assume, wider.) On the one hand, in everyday language the term "public" often signals the social totality of "people in general". On the other, there can be several publics as more or less official cultural communities. However, as Warner shows in his case studies, as one of them gets addressed as *the* public it clearly precludes the existence of others.

Then there is also the understanding of a public as a kind of audience or a crowd witnessing an event, like a theatrical play, a concert or football match. Here drawing on Michel Warner's and Lauren Berlant's work on cultural citizenship, publics and counterpublics, these two understanding of publics are in practice slightly overlapping and analytically they can also be merged with a third understanding of publics, namely the social communities of readers of different texts, or as in this case, movie-watchers (cf. Berlant 1997). This kind of interpretative community, to use Stanley Fish's term, comes into being

only in relation to texts (in the wide sense of the term text, as “cultural text”, so films can be included) and their circulation, which implicates the here addressed publics of Hollywood costume dramas. Public history is thus approached in the sense where these three meanings of “public” overlap, impact collective world views and creates a background for identity formations. But, I approach narrowly only one, however expressive, slice of the many possible expressions of public history, namely the cinematic production of public history. Even more narrowly, I only discuss films with the motif of past queens as such a genre relates to an interpretative community – and in particular I will engage with Sofia Coppola’s 2006 movie *Marie Antoinette*. My argument consists of close readings and an investigation of how this particular film signals a gendered shift in attention and a slightly altered *modus operandi* of public history more widely.

Most often public history takes the shape of past individuals or events that are iconic manifestations of a national History with a capital H, i.e. a canonized rendition of a discursively contained and widely agreed upon chronologically ordered past (cf. Åsberg & Axelsson 2007). Seldom is history in public settings about sketching long-term economical dynamics, imperial geopolitics or sociocultural processes. Importantly however, I argue that the distinction between historians and non-historians renditions of the past are a tricky one to make against the analytical horizon of “the historical imaginary” as a more inclusive, collective and psycho-social source limiting worlds in the making (Dawson 1994). Such expert-amateur distinctions become even fuzzier when an analysis of public history entails the uses of museums and professional historiographers, historical art and spectacular media technologies for both educational and revisionary purposes. In this piece I am however foremost interested in the parts of the public historical landscape that has defied scholarly attention due to its low status and association with vulgar, feminized and popular media cultures.

For long not quite regarded as worthy of proper study, the uses of history and public history as the cultural concerns and interrogations of history are nowadays emerging as a rich and various topic for interdisciplinary scholars apprehensive of gender and sexuality, race/ethnicity and nationality, age and ableness and other power differentials (Dawson 1994; Bal et al 1999; Aronsson et al 2000; Boym 2001; Burke 2001; 2004). Studies of public history can cover statues in urban settings, popular history journals, historical films as well as the commitments and work of living history societies. Such variations on public or popular history in the widest possible understanding of the term popular (as liked by many, as engaging people on a wide social scale and as entailing commercial, often visual, media cultures), takes in reality place in both public and private settings, in print and digital media and not always, as in Hollywood productions, with outlandish resources and the full assistance of contemporary imaging technologies at hand.

### The Queen’s Popular Reign

The cinematic motif of the historical queen – struggling with dignity and conflicting social demands on her royal Self – has for a century occupied an enthralling position in mainstream film productions. A Hollywood classic is the romantic film *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) where Greta Garbo (who had an exceptional influence over the final production and casting procedures) stars as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Swedish queen. I will in the following use the Swedish name Kristina when providing a synopsis of the historical figure and Christina when dealing with her many popular apparitions. However, both figures are the material-semiotic product of story telling practices, myth, and fiction, and effectuate embodied subjects. The historical Kristina deserves further elaboration in order for me to discuss her appearance and appeal in digital, print and celluloid form.



*Garbo as Queen Christina (1933).*

The daughter of queen Maria Eleonora and king Gustavus Adolphus (who died in the religiously connoted battlefield in the Thirty Years War) was born into the imperial power struggles of Europe and lived an exceptional life that has appealed to many recent popular historians (see for instance Veronica Buckley's novel *Christina – Queen of Sweden*, 2004 or award-winning book *Silvermasken* by historian Peter Englund, 2006). However, the choice of the androgynous and exocentric Garbo for the classical Hollywood romance cannot be seen as merely a matter of a commonality of national belonging through birth. Gender being an issue right away with Kristina, the myth much spread not least by the real queen herself, says she was delivered from her mother with the birth signs of a great leader and fact is that throughout her childhood she was, against the gender conventions, raised as a true Machiavellian prince with education and training in hunting, philosophy, theology, and in several languages. In her time, Kristina gathered Descartes and many other famous European intellectuals for tutorials and debates at the Swedish court. At the age of six, when her father died in 1632, Kristina became queen and ruler of Sweden. Rumours were quickly spread throughout Europe about this intelligent and well educated young queen that hosted such generous love for arts, science and books. She shocked the European world when she, at the age of 26 denounced the Swedish throne and converted from Protestantism to the Catholic faith. The reasons for this conversion have been much debated.

The quest for her motif has also been the narrative drive in many contemporary Swedish popular history novels about her multidimensional life that I draw on her in my Kristina-depiction. Of course the spectacular abdication was a triumph for the Pope that welcomed her with great splendour in Rome. She was at this time, writes Peter Englund (2006), the most famous, despised, celebrated and slandered woman in Europe. Kristina was very active in the cultural and intellectual life both in Sweden, on her journeys through Europe and in Rome. As Englund points out, the European world was a stage where she performed as peace maker, cultural radical, diplomat, queen without country and finally as pious woman buried with great catholic honours. She refused throughout her life to subordinate herself both to a

husband (she never married) and also, as it seems, to the rules of the Pope in Rome (cf. Englund 2006). In Kristina's own biography she prides herself of having a female bedfellow and emphasised, in dressing and words, the masculine features she saw fit for herself as a European ruler. Now century-old, sexist historical debates and investigations of whether the queen was born a hermaphrodite, whether she was a nymphomaniac or a lesbian, and further, the rumours of her intimate relations with other women – has made her a full-blown figure of unsettled sexual discourses (cf. Borgström 2002). In recent years the queen's performance of masculine femininity (in contemporary terms) and of sexual undecidability has on the one hand made her something of a queer feminist icon. Appealing to many European women scholars, Christina is nowadays a multifaceted feminist icon mirroring ideals of independency, struggle, agency, will to power and breaking with gender protocol. On the other hand, young male Swedish bloggers writing about national royal history condemn her consumption habits as detrimental for the Swedish finances due to her investments in art and science.<sup>1</sup> The sexual struggles imbuing the mythic-historical figure of queen Christina is thus not lost on an audience interested in women's history and the subversion of hierarchical gender conventions. Conversely, it generates less excitement with a young, predominantly male, audience, who automatically connects reckless consumption with femininity (an assumption I will belabour further) and who are eagerly interested in royal Swedish history but less informed by feminist scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

The sexual politics of consumption is however not an explicit theme in the 1933's Hollywood drama where Garbo's Christina rather struggles with dignified ruling and a heterosexual femininity in the disguise of masculine clothing. In the strictly choreographed romantic love scene, Garbo's Christina comes out rather as red-blooded heterosexual woman otherwise confined by strict royal protocol. In the final scenes of the film, Christina famously resigns from her throne in order to "see the world" after that her secret lover, a Spanish diplomat, has died in her arms duelling for her honour. Thus, today this film can be read as tragic romance, depicting a strong woman bereft of her (heterosexual) love and thus forced

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1 See for instance "The full list of Swedish rulers", written in Swedish, at the portal Passagen Debatt where the rulers are ranked by their contribution to the nation by the pseudonym "btt" March 25, 2006. Here Kristina is ranked very low with the motivation that she was intelligent and educated, but did nothing of historical value. Further, she is said to have difficulties separating her own and state property, and to have recklessly given away large possessions to the aristocracy and left the state finances in ruin for her successor. At:

<http://debatt.passagen.se/show.fcgi?category=350000000000014&conference=600000000000081&posting=19500000003305778> (last accessed 2007-09-19).

2 Commenting on works which have investigated women's role as consumers, feminist cultural scholar Angela McRobbie (1999:38) observes that women's place in present society have changed and that such changes need to be accounted for. She exemplifies with British statistics from 1996; 25 per cent of the labour force works part-time, and 65 per cent of these workers are women. 42 percent of the births are to unmarried women, and half of all marriages fail. More than 20 per cent of the households are headed by unsupported single mothers and a majority of the part-time workers need to rely on income support to come up to a so called living wage – then talk in uncomplicated terms about women constituting the bulk of consumers without taken such factors in consideration is not politically or scholarly viable. Instead, concludes McRobbie, such figures suggest that women in Britain are making sacrifices and struggling hard to make ends meet. Further, Dutch scholar Joke Hermes makes a powerful analogy (2005). She points to a paradox, while men consume more due to their larger incomes, consumption is feminized – regarded as vulgar. It works through the same double standard gendered logic that makes soccer/football an honest, working class game while shopping is the insignificant, shallow activities of silly women with nothing better to do.

into independency and life as a queen without both country and spouse. In the time and Western context of this movie, this take must have sustained a discourse of the necessity of women's burgeoning emancipation, independence and freedom of movement.

Importantly, this is but one among many films about powerful past European queens. With mainstream film productions such as *The Queen* (Stephen Frears, 2006) – about the now ruling Queen Elisabeth II (brilliantly played by Helen Mirren) who struggles with her royal duties in a media-saturated world after the death of Princess Diana – the motif of the historical queen gained further acknowledgement among critics. In the Dutch, German and Austrian context the empress Elisabeth of Bavaria, Austria and queen of Hungary, nicknamed Sissi, has often been compared with Princess Diana. As a successor Diana is very similar to Sissi, the 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture icon, regarding her mythical heritage. Sissi, popularly known as a “free spirit” with liberal ideals and a sensitivity towards the socially disadvantaged, gained mythic status after her tragic marriage to the Emperor Franz Joseph and discomfort at the strict Hapsburg court in Vienna where she was denied any influence over her own children. She embarked on journeys around the Mediterranean to ease her depression and illness to later return with enhanced confidence and a political mission.<sup>3</sup> She was a skilled classicist and spoke several languages – among them Greek and Hungarian. She consolidated the Austrian-Hungarian relation and became a much loved queen of Hungary – the country she openly preferred over Austria. So the popular story goes. It is of course also foremost her renowned, and much attended to, beauty; her distinguished lovers; her attempts at leading a Garbo-like (pre-Garbo) secluded late life (to hide her aging: she refused to have any photographs or paintings done after the age of thirty) – and not least, her dramatic death at the hand of an Italian assassin that further has made her the object of Sissi-tourism, popular history books (Hamann 1986), operas, musicals and not least a renowned televé series (showed every Christmas on Dutch, German and Austrian television), a Hollywood film with Ava Gardner and a German cinematic trilogy starring a teenage Romy Schneider in the title role from the mid 1950s. Injecting the historical imaginary with another tragic woman figure defined by death by fame and beauty, Elisabeth of Austria functions thus in many ways as an iconic precursor to Princess Diana – as testified to by the numerous websites dedicated to the memory of “Sissi”. In that vein, the dimensions of drama and romance, spectacular death and how female audiences seem to partially identify with or feel empowered by the bombastic fate of past women royalty remain the most compelling feature of the queen figure. Most often they are publicly enunciated as belonging to such an audience, being the “people's princess” (Diana) or “the people's empress” (Sissi) – really being “every woman” in the Chaka Kahn-sense of the famous pop tune, and further inspiring something good, free and beautiful that can be found in every woman. At one of these websites, selling the film *Sissi – Forever My Love* (Ernst Marischka, 1962), this appeal of the queen film is vividly described in a manner useful to my argument:

What a wonderful movie it is. ....Sissi was “the people's empress.” She lived in the country, loved the simple life, loved animals, horses, was not pretentious (sic). It's that aliveness, that free spirit in her that the prince falls in love with. This movie has so much to offer. It's such a priceless gem! I can so wax eloquent for I don't believe it'll let you down. It's got romance, drama, life lessons...it's a family movie, a chick-flick, a couples' movie. As you walk with Sissi through the various stages in her life you love and embrace her and, by so doing, you love and embrace life itself. The power of Sissi is that she's you...all women long to be Sissi...and all of us, in our own way, can and should aspire to the greatest and loftiest ideals that Sissi did in her lifetime. Regardless of your actual life situation, this movie will empower you to release the hidden “Sissi” in you.

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3 See further the website Austrian Culture Personalities; “Sissi - Elisabeth of Wittelsbach (1837 - 1898)” at <http://www.aboutaustria.org/personalities/wittelsbach.htm> (last accessed 2007-09-20).

(Anonymous, at VideoMediaOnline.com)



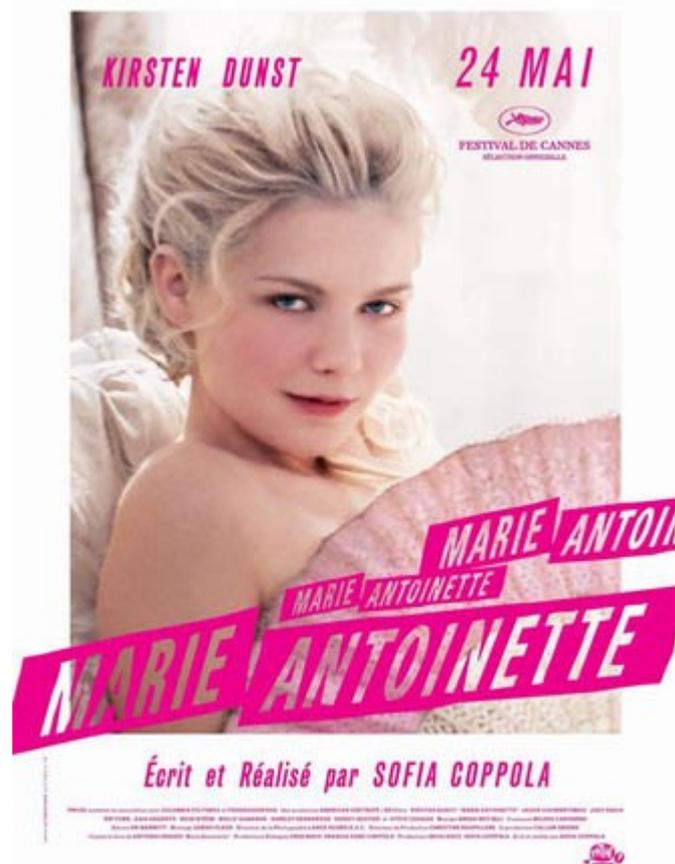
“Sissi” of Austria (1830-1916),  
by Franz Winterhalter

The most celebrated monarch, measured by the sheer number of portrayals in historical costume dramas and novels, is however without a doubt Elizabeth I of England, i.e. “The Virgin Queen”. Sarah Bernhardt (1912), Bette Davis (1939), Miranda Richardsson (1986 in a comical portrait in the BBC production *Black Adder*), Cate Blanchett (1998 in *Shakespeare in Love*), Helen Mirren (2005) and Anne-Marie Duff (2006) are a few of the many actresses that have played Elisabeth I. Among the many novels inspiring recent cinematic renditions of this queen are *I, Elizabeth* by Rosalind Miles and the block-busters *The Virgin’s Lover* and *The Queen’s Fool* by Philippa Gregory (also translated to Swedish in 2006 and 2007). In the Swedish setting, popular history articles, novels (such as Veronica Buckley’s best-seller *Christina – Queen of Sweden*, 2004 and translated to Swedish the same year) or award-winning Swedish books such as *Silvermasken* by historian Peter Englund (2006), or *Historien om alla Sveriges Drottningar* (2006) by the controversial popular history writer and journalist Herman Lindquist, has similarly propelled the popularity and wide interest in the figure of the historical queen. So, the cinematic motif of historical queen seems not merely well established in wider cultural layers. It seems especially pertinent and protruding today with an exponential growth of the number of films featuring such past royalty. The figure of the past queen has not lost her power to mediate struggling femininity under constraints, but she has changed her looks and takes on history.

### Marie Antoinette – The Queen of Excessive Femininity

Further in my paper I aim to explore the drives and cultural effects that such a popular interest in historical queens seems to engender with regard to the recent film *Marie Antoinette* and the less attended to areas of the imaginary landscapes of public history often regarded as decadent and low, vulgar and feminine. It is here a matter of how past queens, gets imagined and visualized as mythic and historical figures while simultaneously mirroring contemporary concerns with power and subjectivity, beauty and public femininity. In that sense the cinematic queen works as my analytical prism of such entangled relations without

any pretence on covering all of what public history entails. For the reader not so informed by women's history, a blunt historical reminder is perhaps overdue about the loaded modern relation where "public" plus "woman" spelled whore. Similarly, the connection between reckless consumption and femininity needs revision in the light of the historical, yet prevailing, gendered differences in income and patterns of expenditure. Today the figure of the historical queen spells many complicated and heavily gendered transgressions between the private and the public, but also between wealth and poverty. For sure, the historical queen is a figure of certain discursive unease as seen already with the case of Swedish Queen Christina. Cultural concerns about class, sexuality and beauty – but also with race, ethnicity and national belonging – intersect with such mass-mediated portrayals. In my feminist quest for alternative worlds, past and future, and other, alternative subject positions on the verge of emerging in such settings, the cinematic figure of the queen thus becomes important as a site of both historical retention and transgression. This I hope to show further with the case of Sofia Coppola's film *Marie-Antoinette* (2006).



*Kirsten Dunst as Marie Antoinette.*

Directed and produced by Sofia Coppola (previous productions include the widely acclaimed independent film *Lost in translation*, 2003 and *The Virgin Suicides*, 1999), this, her third feature film, was released for cinema in Europe in 2006. Coppola wrote the film manuscript inspired by the sympathetic biography *Marie Antoinette. The Journey* by Lady Antonia Fraser (2001). Fraser has previously written other popular history books, many of them oriented towards women's history and queen-themes like, *Mary Queen of Scots* (1969), *The Warrior Queens* (1988) and *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1992). The film won several prizes

and awards and became available on DVD in most European countries in 2007.<sup>4</sup> Further, it led to a renewed interest in Fraser's book and in the queen's historical life in general. The starring actress Kirstin Dunst has moreover featured in several Marie Antoinette-period inspired fashion articles in glossy women's magazines. This puts light on how the different media formats, like the print, the celluloid and the digital (DVD) versions are commercially tightly linked as intermingled and co-dependent media on a market of popular history in the widest possible sense of the term as history in public. The film itself is hard to label genre wise, it plays out and mixes the biography, the period film, the costume drama and the music video. It definitely puts pop in popular history.

Providing a synopsis to this film – heavily themed on the figure of the misunderstood girl queen – I can start with saying that it can roughly be divided into three parts based on aesthetical differences signalling three stages in the queen's life. These are first, her arrival from the Austrian court and her introduction to the behaviour codes of Versailles; secondly, her socially squeezed royal situation and escape into excessive consumerism, and thirdly, her maturing as young woman and mother while taking up a more "natural life" and lastly her majestic farewell to Versailles as the film ends. The main middle part of the film engages thus in the frivolous life of the unhappily married queen after her king's coronation. (Marie Antoinette, I learn from the official film site, was never crowned herself due to the strained French finances and not least her yet at the time unstable status with a marriage that eventually took seven years to consummate. Hence, this brings further light to how her position at the court was never anything but highly insecure.)

The 14 year old archduchess of Austria (starring a blond and pale-skinned Dunst with a US accent) is introduced together with her mother, the sturdy empress of Austria (embodied by actress and rock legend Marianne Faithful) in the austere Hapsburg court of Vienna. Throughout this film the aesthetics and visual display of colours and looks are of the uttermost significance. It is however not authentic historical colours, like royal blue or burgundy that is used, but pastels. Most characteristic is the use of cold hot, "chock" pink – a colour never used until the 1950's. No attempts what so ever are made of bringing accurate historical colours to the set; brown and sepia, as colours signalling crusty historical layers, are instead completely banned. It is here a matter of bringing the past alive in the present through contemporary recognition of popular culture references. Most famously, in one of the extravagant shoe shopping scenes a pair of 21<sup>st</sup> century light blue Converse sneakers is placed to evoke teenage pop culture. The film is further driven by a 1980's new romance aesthetics in both choice of music and graphic design.

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4 enting or buying the DVD version of Sofia Coppola's Marie Antoinette provides ample material for an analysis of how public history usage, however much part of commercial mainstream culture, can take unexpected shapes. In contrast to going to the cinema and see that particular film in the public space of the movie theatre, watching the DVD at home (or at work) supplies the viewer with an abundance of extra material. The special features meny includes "The Making of Marie Antoinette", Deleted scenes, Marie Antoinette Theatrical Trailer, Marie Antoinette Teaser Trailer and "Cribs with Louis XVI" – the latter being an ironical paraphrase to MTV Cribs where celebrities – most often black male hip hop stars – show off their luxurious homes. The fully costumed actor playing the king of revolutionary France (Jason Schwartzman) welcomes the viewer with the obligatory "Yo MTV, welcome to my home" and proceeds with showing the Versaille's Hall of Mirrors and other facilities, pointing to the chandeliers, barock paintings, flamboyant marble works, the expensive fabrics and the outdoor fountains with ironic mimicking comments about how this is "Hundred percent velvet", "not `cristall´, but hundred percent real crystal". Further, the king points to portraits and statues of royal family members and refer to them as his family, his "dogs" that in the midst of abundant wealth and success "keeps me sane". All these phrases are scripted from MTV Cribs. This special feature is in a sense typical of the production's iconoclastic take on the past and the historical monument of wealth and luxury that is the Chateau de Versaille – today a museum that the film team gained unprecedented access to for the making of the film. Meanwhile filming Versailles was kept open to the public.

Marie Antoinette, in a girlish light-blue dress, white apron and a black hair ribbon, is introduced symbolically as a naïve Alice in Wonderland-look-alike, unaware of the spectacular future awaiting her. Further, the ill-fated, childish queen-to-be is brutally uprooted and enters her new country literally stripped of everything Austrian. She meets her father-in-law, the aging satyr king (played by Texan actor Rip Torn) - later on she also encounters his lavish mistress Madame Du Barry (played by Italian director, writer and actress Asia Argento) – and her future husband, Louis XVI (embodied by Jason Schartzman). Continuously, she is initiated into the rigorous court protocol by a starched Comtesse de Noilles (Australian film star Judy Davis). The latter figure was, according to the historical biography that inspired the film script, secretly referred to as Madame Etiquette by Marie Antoinette (Frasier 2001:92).

The admonitory address of the empress's voice, telling the teenaged Marie Antoinette how all eyes will be on her and how the future of the bond between the two nations is in her hands continues in the film from the first scenes as a voice-over reading disciplining letters to the new Dauphine of France. This articulates several evocative takes on mother-daughter relationships, where for instance an actress like Marianne Faithful might signal the popular yet derogatory take on the disciplining motherhood of second wave feminism versus the glossier third wave feminism of both Coppola and Dunst celebrating the power and rights of girlhood (cf. *The Virgin Suicides*, 1999). Nevertheless, the mother-daughter relation theme woven into the film opens up for many interpretations, but it is done sympathetically from the view point of the daughter.

Eager to avoid the so called fallacy of internalism, as the assumption that the effects on consumers of media texts simply can be deduced from a semiotic analysis of the texts themselves, I want yet to point out some further instances of sympathetic recognition constructed between the viewer and the historical figure. This (historiographical) shift in sympathies (for Marie Antoinette) works from exposing the details of her private life. Further, it functions also through a closing off of the already know historical fact of her grim death which further enhances the ability for the viewer to at least temporary identify with, and sustain sympathy for, the young queen. It is also effectuated with several references to other media, to music genres, romantic stories and their intended audiences.

As the film engages with her personal passions and development from a teenager to a mature young woman it seems to partly follow cultural scripts from short novels in glossy women's magazines and the Harlequin romance as Janice Radway delineated it in her classical reception study *Reading the Romance* (1987). Such typical features of the romance that can be detected include the drastic removing of the heroine from her familiar surroundings, meeting an aristocratic man and dealing with sexual tensions that in the end, by the display of unexpected tenderness from the part of the hero, reconciles the heterosexual couple. Such characteristics of the romance have been interpreted to ideologically reconcile also heterosexist patriarchy. That is, if an audience univocally simply were to take the dominant discourse to heart and never elaborated on interpretations – which, taking my own reading here as example, clearly is not the case. Further, there are several mismatching narrative themes of the romance and this film.

While the romance script makes the heroine initially antagonistic towards the hero due to his early sexual advances, this film works quite contrary through the hero's sexual indifference, catastrophic for Marie Antoinette's status as queen. Unlike the romance heroine, she needs desperately instead to be sexually confirmed (in a public manner) if not to loose her position and power. Perhaps this cinematic turn away from the romance script as analysed by Radway in the mid 1980's, resonates with a contemporary awareness of the heterosexual demands on public femininity (to be married or in a long term relation for instance). I hope to now have added light to a mode of attention to the historical queen that is relating to other

women's genres. This implies that this film is targeting a predominately female audience – rarely addressed otherwise in dominant popular history media such as popular science journals (Åsberg 2005).

The “lever”, the ceremonial rising and dressing of the royalties, and the “grand couvert”, the public dinner, are together with views from the failed marital bed, repeated scenes that display the queen’s psychological development under such simultaneous abundance and exquisite scrutiny. Constantly watched by all, not least her mother (the Austrian empress who from afar carefully monitored each detail of the French court), yet simultaneously in a situation empowering her to satisfy her every whim, the teenage queen is depicted as growing up under extraordinary circumstances. She was mistrusted as potential Austrian spy and thus never allowed any political influence by her husband. Further, confined by a court life where the most intimate parts of her life from menses and make-up, to sex and child birth (the aristocratic spectacle of the royal accouchement) is publicly witnessed she flees into decadence, shopping and extravagant consumption of cakes and candy, clothes and shoes, fashion and gambling. Apparently ill-prepared for the Versailles court, steeped in scandal, gossip and conspiracy – and not least the complex system of privileges jealously guarded by strict rules of precedence, the kind-hearted, young Marie Antoinette rebels thus like a teenager in Coppola’s film through decadence and indulgence – but also through excessive charity and breaks of the royal protocol by improper gestures of direct kindness towards poor commoners.

The massive, official website accompanying the film – in itself a small digital archive of film-contextualizing popular history, describes useful historical facts on how she early on in her reign was lauded as “an example of compassion”.<sup>5</sup> The irony is emphasised in the whole production (film, website and extra material) with the infamous phrase, falsely accredited to the queen (and previously to other historical queens), “Let them eat cake”. This is played out by a wicked, dark-lipped, queen in a fantasmic dream scene in the film which is directly countered by the rosy scene of the “real” queen’s comment on the mean propaganda pamphlets: “I would never say that”. On a grand scale, this wicked queen image is what the film sets out to debunk as ahistorical and the mere product of monumental, revolutionary propaganda machine. In commentaries the director and actresses (like Judy Davis) explain the project of investigating if anything can move the image of the queen as an historical villainess produced by the powerful new media of the time.



*“I want candy”, The Queen of Excess.*

Pamphleteers and libellants were a major agent in bringing on the fall of the queen, rather than her mythic extravagance or the political ideas and movements of the revolution. According to the website, her spending was but a drop in the ocean compared to the king’s

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5 The official site for Marie Antoinette The Movie:  
<http://www.sonypictures.com/homevideo/marieantoinette/index.html> (last accessed 2007-09-21).

coronation costs, his catastrophic decisions straining further the impoverished by the 7 Years War French finances with supports to The American War of Independence. According to Fraser and the complete Marie Antoinette production, the queen, as both a woman and foreigner, became the convenient scapegoat in a war of public relations. The massive amount of graphic and demeaning descriptions of the queen's conspicuous consumption (she became known as Madame Deficit) and illegitimate relations created the infamous image of the wickedly excessive queen with direct sexual and gendered overtones. Where the film avoids to repeat such imagery, the website introduces historical material such as the 1775 pamphlet *Les Nouvelles de la Cour* who started the trend. While the king was portrayed as inadequate and impotent, the queen was imaged relieving her sexual frustrations with her friend Princess de Lamballe (later assaulted and killed by a mob). The lesbian motif of the period pamphlets, intended as derogatory, became later paired with orgiastic sceneries where the queen have sex and off-spring with all kinds of court and family members or showing off her royal "bijoux" (genitals). This resonates to some extent with the historical treatment of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Queen Christina of Sweden who also was depicted in both celebratory and denigrating manners in period media. Queen figures like Christina and Marie Antoinette, but also Sissi and Diana, have gone through history as great spenders, leading wasteful and consumerist and not least sexually unwarranted lives. Hence their historical legacy is very much one of sexual difference.

There were radically different accounts of the queen within 1790s feminisms, that is, already in Marie Antoinette's days. Madame de Staël published (1793) a defence of the queen. Olympe de Gouges dedicated her 1791 feminist tract, "Declaration of the Rights of Woman" to Marie Antoinette. In so doing, they appealed to the Queen's ability to place gender before rank. British feminist oriented contemporaries, like Mary Robinson, argued that Marie Antoinette was "one of us," a woman like "us" whose essential femininity was the basis for sympathetic mourning after the public decapitation. Yet, for others like Mary Wollstonecraft, Marie Antoinette was rather "one of them," a woman whose essential femininity aligned her, instead, with a decadent and corrupt female sexual power. However, many of the entangled themes, contrasting takes and evoked sympathy for this icon of victimized womanhood, martyred royalty and motherly sacrifice have an uncanny resemblance to the later treatments of queen figures such as Sissi and Diana. Clearly Marie Antoinette was a figure of unsettled discourse over excessive femininity, as she is yet today. Media-savvy and knowledge invested young women of today are not passively observing the struggle over to whom the historical queen belongs.

Rose, a Swedish woman blogger in her 20s, living in Australia, at her site, "Pajama Empress", expressed not just her excitement about the film, but also her well-informed interest in the historical figure as a controversial woman reverberating in her own lifeworld:

### ***Saturday, May 5 (2007) Antoinette and Other Things***

Less than two weeks until Marie Antoinette comes out at Blockbuster. It's embarrassing how excited I am.

The film had mixed reactions when it came out, as did Antonia Fraser's take on the Austrian Queen of France when she wrote her biography. The people who disliked the film attacked the lack of narrative and dialogue, the unusual and sudden ending point, the endless scenes of frivolity, and the modern soundtrack. Usually I would try to be diplomatic and at least consider their collective point of view, but it just seems so petty for them to criticize Fraser's opinion on Antoinette and indirectly Sofia Coppola's film making abilities just because they don't agree with what is being said.

Last year I wrote an essay on Antoinette, taking a rather sympathetic view – the main conflict of the essay was about the reality of her character versus public opinion. It was a

great essay, but I definitely took a softer view on her than did most historians. I suppose I know a little bit of what it feels like to be young, naive and impressionable, and thrust into unforgiving circumstances far away from the people who have previously been your everything.<sup>6</sup>

Like this well-articulated viewer, the cinematic production, the website and Fraser's foundational book, are continuously subscribing to a sympathetic image of Marie Antoinette. The book and the film depicts her as graceful and young, slightly naïve and definitely heterosexual – and further, sexually rather inexperienced (until she meets Count Fersen). But this is not innocent or unambiguous on a cultural scale signification. Marie Antoinette is through the choice of actress and historical sources publicly “white-washed”, a term with both racial and sexual implications, and presented as “pure” and “German” in the hegemonic heterosexual and clearly racialized sense. This even as she, on the posters and in seduction scenes of her extra-marital affair – which also are reproduced in the teaser trailer – is represented as a full-blown, pin-up-ish seductress hiding her sexualized body behind a conveniently arranged fan. With the recognizable visual conventions of soft porn the Queen is here presented as a classical nude, but simultaneously also as a mature sexual woman. Seductively she looks directly into the camera and hence establishes a relation of desire between the film character and the viewer. Interestingly enough, this looking relation cannot in any simple sense be framed as the classical voyeurism of the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey. The audience, the publics intended for this piece of pop history, are instead positioned as woman-identified-women, heterosexually oriented or even queer (perhaps as queen-identified-queens), but distinctly woman-friendly.

The intended audience is called upon, not with historical accuracy, but with teenage pop culture references and signs of recognition, hailing young adult women and perhaps also (unhappily) married, middle class women sympathetic to the misunderstood queen figure. The appeal of the film is also created through a kind of historical revisionary politics where the intimate, personal and private life of the young queen is used to counter the dominant historical image of Marie Antoinette as the villain queen of decadence. This is an ambivalent move. To some extent it repeats the public trauma of being deprived of privacy and personal integrity intrinsic to contemporary fandom. Since it concerns a no longer living, most often denigrated, public figure, I would see it as a move of democratization of historical heritage. The queen is made the queen of everybody – an historical “people's queen”, in many ways both pioneering and renewing the tradition of empress Sissi and Princess Diana. In that sense Coppola follows the period feminist treatment of Marie Antoinette as “one of us”, but the film has by its large audience of fans further been interpreted through contemporary stars. Marie Antoinette is for instance repeatedly likened to pop star Paris Hilton, another excessively rich and scandalous daughter of a (business) empire, at various websites.<sup>7</sup> The movie posters play also with the motifs of rumour, scandal and fame; “At 15 she became a bride. At 19 she became a queen. By 20 she was a legend”. A creative fan has further made and published on You Tube a new music video of Marie Antoinette film scenes to Madonna's song Material

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6 See: Pajama Empress, “Antoinette and other things” at <http://pajama-empress.blogspot.com/2007/05/antoinette-and-other-things.html> (last accessed 2007-09-24).

7 See, for instance, the website [www.untfredag.se](http://www.untfredag.se): All tom nöjesliv i Uppsala, the article “Frossa och froter” by Paola Langdal, at [http://www.untfredag.se/avd/1,1786,MC=15-cat=248-AV\\_ID=575616,00.html](http://www.untfredag.se/avd/1,1786,MC=15-cat=248-AV_ID=575616,00.html) (last accessed 2007-09-24); Alexander Dunefors' film review “Kostymdrama för 2000-talets publik” at [http://www.moviezine.se/filmsidor/marie\\_antoinette.shtml](http://www.moviezine.se/filmsidor/marie_antoinette.shtml) (last accessed 2007-09-24); Mick La Sallés blog page “Paris Hilton and Marie Antoinette” at [http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/mlasalle/detail?blogid=38&entry\\_id=17267](http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/mlasalle/detail?blogid=38&entry_id=17267) (last accessed 2007-09-24). Entering “Marie Antoinette + Paris Hilton” in a Google search generates however 534 000 hits within ten seconds.

Girl and made the picked scenes correlate with the lyrics.<sup>8</sup> All this, since the examples are manifold if just looking at You Tube, signals how the historical figure of the queen seem to resonate with female publics not otherwise connected to historical assessment. Further, it is a movie in line with the second wave feminist slogan “the personal is political”. Deprived of political status, the queen’s recognizable private situation is implicitly imbued with political relevance. So however, sexually modest and innocent Marie Antoinette is presented there are underlying themes of feminist politics, of women-identified-women relations in the production and of revising the ingrained androcentric mode of historiography.

As the film moves into the final stages of her life at Versailles, when she has matured and become a loving mother of two surviving children (the oldest child, a seemingly feminist-trained daughter of five responds to flattery “I am beautiful if I think so”) and changed style from excessive consumption to amateur theatre, harp virtuosity and a “natural life” at Petite Trianon and her Hameau, a complete, model country village. Of course, this still excessive and frolic life is commented by the electric guitar chords of the song with the significant title “Natural’s Not in It” by Gang of Four. The glamorous and excessive bright, pink and pastel colours of the flower arrangements, and her lavish outfits matching the salon draperies turn towards the end of the film to more somber and austere colours as the threats of the revolution becomes tangible. The character scene par excellence, when the queen shows exquisite courage, is when the Paris mob, thirsty for the blood of the sexually defamed queen of deficit and decadence, finally reaches Versailles at night time. The cinematic epitome thus when the queen bravely and alone steps out on the balcony and greets the people with a deep bow of respect to the subjects she aimed to serve but was so sadly out of touch with. The film too never engages with the details of the people. The mob remains a dark and threatening mass with torches but without individual characteristics. The French revolution is rather thus depicted through the empty and trashed scenes of Versailles interiors demolished. Further, the film never shows the humiliating years in prison nor the queen’s famous death – explicitly staged to publicly debase her. The movie ends with the queen’s goodbye to a morning misty Versailles through the window glass of the carriage taking her to Paris.

I would contend that this film *par excellence* depicts womanliness as masquerade. Through biographical introspection from the point of view of the young queen and through a combination of the excessive style and fashion borrowed from both the queen’s period and the late modern pop genres, the construction of queenhood, as the symbolic epitome of public femininity, becomes apparent. More importantly, the constraints and confinements of such public femininity are embellished with the tragic queen figure. The isolation of Marie Antoinette in the midst of a gargantuan court culture is constantly emphasised as is her unhappiness in the midst of material abundance. Her extravagant consumption does not hide but highlight the inauthenticity and mismatch of the masquerade. Through abundance the masquerading queen becomes a spectacle of excessive femininity. What is taken to heart is however not the fatal lesson of her historical example, but the intensity and rebellious power of excessive femininity as a site of shared resistance towards claustrophobic conventions. Sadly, this cannot easily be concluded into a celebration of cultural resistance. I see rather this recent film and the many other previous expressions of royal femininity discussed as an indication of how the mythical figure of the historical queen not at all has played out her role in our contemporary cultures. She seems in fact more needed and desired than ever.

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8 See “Marie Antoinette-MaterialGirl” by director “mpavsweet” at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z\\_Un-kxjBCw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_Un-kxjBCw) (last accessed 2007-09-23).

## History in Unexpected Places: Concluding Comments for Further Work

Past queens stir public emotions. Christina, Marie Antoinette and Sissi – as well as the more contemporary version of scandalous royalty, Diana of Wales, have all oxymoronicly been called upon as the Princess, Empress or Queen of the People. While Diana's image in all its complex cultural work was not touched upon in detail here, her kind of cultural iconicity is easily comparative to that of Christina, Sissi and Marie-Antoinette. All of them are in the historical imaginary connected with excessive life styles, with arbitrary and wasteful ways, abrupt ends and intense public interest. They were privileged women whose charity work never in their time entailed the prospect of social change, but who in our time can be turned into signs of a potential shift in the politics, aesthetics and rhetorics of public history. As signifiers loaded with cultural meaning and fraught with both instructing gender protocol and transgression, they embody the undescidable nature of historical femininities constantly subjected to social constraints and morals and simultaneously escaping final exhaustion. Their distinct and well-known personas have also lingered and provided a source of pleasure as they have echoed powerfully throughout recent renditions as well as within a two century old feminist imaginary of alternatives. In magnified proportions these queens, like popular history Kristina and pop history Marie-Antoinette, in two different ways of doing the femininities available to them, signals a space for consumerist, knowledge thirsty, ruthless, exaggerated and anything but natural or given embodiments of femininity. They burst open the engaging masquerade of ideal femininity and becomes cultural figures of spectacular excess – and of unease. Christina shares another cultural legacy with Marie Antoinette as iconic historical queen from more than a century later: being the target of malicious propaganda that to a large extent has survived to present day. They were early victims of bad PR and unforgiving historiography; in that sense media stars between satire and excess.

Given, the costume drama is of course not a particularly high regarded source for historians. But for someone interested in understanding history in the present, this kind of material – however ahistorical and faux – tells a lot about the present, the intended audience, about emerging or lingering cultural anxieties, projections or motifs in need of processing. That is, about the discursive formations of the cultural fantasy landscapes that surrounds and permeates and connects both historians and non-historians with the past in the present. What can be called our collective historical imaginary hinges to a large extent on key events and battles, individual kings and warlords – but also on the occasional woman ruler. Such occasional woman rulers – troubling the conventions of connecting femininity with the private, intimate and powerless, and, masculinity with the public and powerful – works as historical icons overloaded with, sometimes conflicting, meaning. However, the various annunciations of the historical queen, the prismatic figure I worked with here, seem particularly imbued with cultural morals, lessons for the afterworld and hindsight evaluations, devaluations and re-evaluations regarding ways of combining power and femininity. Clearly, the case of the Swedish queen Christina seem to support this argument. In that sense the queen figure carries morals of excessive femininity. The history lesson can however be learnt in different ways. I believe this is particularly true regarding a recent cinematic version of Queen Marie Antoinette if compared to previous Elizabeths, Sissis or queen Christinas.

This paper started with a quote by Black women's movement historian Kimberly Springer that inspires reflection on what counts as history proper and where women's history today is found and accepted. In line with Springer's suggestion to look for history in unexpected places – and further, with interdisciplinary tools, I argued here that historical assessment is taking place in the midst of mainstream popular culture. And further, that such public history – as the asymmetrical production and reception of Sofia Coppola's Hollywood film *Marie Antoinette* – is an additional site where women's history is even lovingly dealt with, revisioned and renegotiated. Such scattered women audiences might even be theorized with

Michael Warner's term counterpublics, as they in many ways seem to lack the power to transpose themselves to the level of generality as the official public of public history. They seem to be random fans that share a love for the historical queen figure and form an interpretative community but not a coherent public.

With the humour and pop cultural references used both in and outside the film, the strong discursive currents of unease that is propelling the queen figure are strongly put forward. For instance in the film *Marie Antoinette*, it is visually exposed how the queen excels in candy and cake, flowers and fashion, parties and shopping to the New Romantics, post-punk music of Siouxsie and The Banshees, Radio Dept. and not least the well-themed Bow wow wow song "I want candy". Also, she encounters her lover, the Swedish count Axel von Fersen, at a masquerade ball, styled on the 1980's star Adam from *Adam and the Ants*. The impressionistic rather than painted style of the photo, the exaggerated pastel colours and embellished interiors together with the retro-music, mixed with classical and contemporary pop music (Air, Aphex Twin and Strokes) creates an iconoclastic take on dominant image of Queen Marie Antoinette, but also on the genre conventions of the period piece and the historical costume drama. The product addresses teenage angst, rebellious and bubbly youth, beauty regimes as well as the unhappy yet desperate to please married woman with an indifferent husband. And such unsettled expressions connected to excessive femininity are merely some of the features imbued into the queen figure.

My argument concerned further how historical queens in popular history books or Hollywood film sustain femininity as masquerade. Apparently, theirs is a masquerade that is highly cherished for its imperfections, cracks and fissures. The culturally much belaboured figure of the past queen exhibits the claustrophobia of constrained womanliness as public masquerade. The cultural iconicity of the queen lies foremost in her ability to make the female masquerade into a spectacle of rebellious, excessive femininity. It is as such a potential site of indirect resistance towards the confinements of femininity that the historical queen can become a highly desired figure for large, yet unofficial, publics that only can dream of the reckless consumption and extravagant living such royalty enjoyed. The popular feedback, such as the aggressive male blogger's condescending comparisons between Paris Hilton and Marie Antoinette – or the many fan-creations made of Marie Antoinette clips on You Tube, tells how such mass text moves through and touches upon the informal space of women's lifeworlds. This indicates further that the therapeutic need for such excessive queens is not fading. Quite the contrary. Perhaps is it here however that the promises of past queens can be realized. With the growing interest in vulgar history, in women's historical lives and even individual destinies public history found in unexpected places might become a site of social change and revision for the future.

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