
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Like a Ribbon of Dreams
New York Film Festival 2006 Report (Part One)

Martha P. Nochimson

Associate Editor, *Cineaste*

Inland Empire

Directed, written and edited by David Lynch;
starring Laura Dern, Justin Theroux, Jeremy Irons,
Harry Dean Stanton. Color. 172 mins. (USA)

Pan's Labyrinth

Directed and written by Guillermo Del Toro; written by ;
edited by Bernat Vilaplana; starring Ivana Baquero, Ariadna Gil,
Sergi Lopez, Maribel Verdu,
and Doug Jones. Color. 112 mins. (MEXICO)

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen

Directed and written by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn;
edited by Norman Cohn; starring Leah Angutimarik, Pakak Innuksuk,
and Neeve Irngaut uttak, Jens Jorn Spottag Color. 112 mins. (CANADA)

Paprika (anime)

Directed and written by Satoshi Kon,
based on the novel by Yasutaka Tsutsui;
starring the voices of Megumi Hayashibara, Toru Furuya,
Akio Ohtsuka. Color. 90 mins. (JAPAN)

Volver

Directed and written by Pedro Almadovar;
edited by Jose Salcedo;
starring Penelope Cruz, Carmen Maura,
Lola Duenas, Blanca Portillo, Yohana Cobo. Color. 121 mins. (SPAIN)

Marie Antoinette

Directed and written by Sofia Coppola; edited by Sarah Flack;
starring Kirstin Dunst, Jason Schwartzman; Rip torn; Steve Coogan;
Judy Davis, Asia Argento. Color. 123 minutes. (USA)

Although Francois Truffaut famously likened film to a ribbon of dreams, movie audiences have responded most positively to the phrase “based on a true story.” So strong is the understanding in the American film industry that audiences “want to believe,” in the simplest possible sense of the word, that Joel and Ethan Coen made an in-joke of it by claiming, in the main title of *Fargo*, that the film was inspired by a real event, although the story they told was pure fiction. As we know, however, film confounds any simple polar opposition between these two. It has an unlimited capacity for varying proportional mixtures of dreamlike flow and fragments of “true” sources. Everything depends on which aspect of the medium a filmmaker chooses to emphasize. Part Two of my communique from the New York Film Festival will deal with films that emphasize their mimesis of external reality. Herewith Part One, the dream contingent at the 44th New York Film Festival, 2006, which displayed the persistence of the Truffaut’s ribbon through their very diverse melds of the mythological and the subconscious with shards of history, personal and social, and sociology.

Hands down, nobody does it better than David Lynch, whose new film *Inland Empire*, confronts us with both how blazingly incandescent and how truly threatening the filmic encounter with the processing of information on the dream level can be. Like Lynch’s immediately previous film, *Mulholland Drive*, *Inland Empire* is the story of an actress in Hollywood; however, where the former was the story of the destruction of Betty (Naomi Watts), a hopeful starlet, and her transition into a nightmare version of her identity, Diane, the new film narrates a much more optimistic journey. Nikki (Laura Dern) also has multiple identities, but at the end of the day she is anything but destroyed by tinseltown. Both films use the vehicle of a woman’s career struggles on the American pop culture scene to articulate the fate of creative impulses and drives in the commercial media, but *Inland Empire* dazzles or infuriates, depending, by freighting its narrative with an increased and optimistic cinematic complexity that takes almost three hours to negotiate. To date, this is Lynch’s longest film.

What most crucially distinguishes the two films is the contrast between Betty’s subjugation to the Hollywood power structure and Nikki’s transcendence of Hollywood values, circumstances, and rewards. (Yes, I do think that Nikki, in some way, is Lynch’s alter ego.) Betty’s life disintegrates as she is devoured by the system that financially controls Hollywood. In contrast, Nikki’s life

undergoes a sublime transfiguration as she uses the creativity unleashed by her job as an actress for larger, spiritual purposes. Lynch begins the film by steering us toward images that evoke tone, anxiety, and enigma exceeding the limits of the narrative to come. We are greeted with sounds from a scratched, old style vinyl record, which speaks of an experience of fear in a foreign country, whose experience we do not know. We then are treated to a series of scenes alternating among a seedy, dark hotel somewhere in Poland and a highly ornate, old world drawing room, in which fragments of human scenes of fear and anger are played out by characters we do not know; indeed the faces of the human figures in the hotel room are blurred, as in videos in which anonymity is necessary. Contrasting with and interpenetrating with these seemingly inscrutable images is a minimalist, patently artificial television set, a flat depiction of a working class home in which three human sized rabbits exchange non-sequiturs while an invisible audience applauds and laughs for no discernible reason. This kind of exposition is not calculated to easily win a warm reception from Hollywood trained audiences. But it does set the scene for the competing forces in the film: the depth of human passion and the shallowness of the mass media which might just as well be portraying rabbits so inane and lacking in affect are its images of human life.

When Nikki appears, inaugurating the film's narrative, she receives a visit from a mysterious and darkly comical neighbor (Graze Zabriskie), in a much more conventional, realistic setting, and briefly reassures the spectator. But, as the neighbor takes advantage of Nikki's good nature by barging into her home, as Nikki is waiting to hear whether she will be cast in a plum movie role she has auditioned for, the neighbor's preternatural knowledge of her situation and babble about "bloody, fucking murder" alarm her and the audience. Nikki wants to throw the intruder out, as perhaps some members of the audience wish to be delivered from the complexities and premonitions that are being set in play. The neighbor is Polish, with a peculiarly accented speaking voice and bizarre mannerisms. Why Polish? That's not the point; something foreign is being introduced. Nikki's first reaction and ours is that the foreign disruption is sinister. But ultimately the unwelcome intrusion becomes visible as a force that will bring more joy and satisfaction than the industry acclaim Nikki's participation in the movie is expected to deliver. These initial scenes inaugurate a difficult and eminently productive cinematic journey for Nikki and the audience, as she simultaneously begins work on the film and takes the first steps toward things deeply buried within her past and her memory.

As we see Nikki rehearsing and performing her coveted role, the story of the film being made appears to change in front of our eyes. Sue, the character Nikki plays, begins as a radiant, soft, pretty woman in a milieu of Southern grace and affluence but as production continues, without explanation, she becomes a housewife in a gritty apartment, and finally ends as a hardbitten, desperate, nameless drudge wandering through the haunts of the homeless and dispossessed. Nikki herself changes: the scenes she plays are sometimes recognizable as part of the film-within-the-film, and sometimes appear to be visions of her life seen through the lens of the character(s) that Nikki is creating. As Lynch's film winds down, a couple of hours later, after completing the film-within-the-film, Nikki drifts away from the director (Jeremy Irons) and other well-wishers showering her with compliments in order to complete her more enduring triumph, self knowledge. *Inland Empire*: it's about the distinction between the kingdom within and the surface realm of worldly achievements, but also about their connections. As one of my colleagues at the press screening said, on exiting, the film forces on one the knowledge of the number of levels in every human being. "You can never look at people again in the same way."

Needless to say, the above only scratches the surface of Lynch's portrait of Nikki's rich encounter with her buried erotic impulses and angers, time past, her husband, gender clashes, and her urges for freedom and knowledge as she dives into the vortex of her creative capacities. Nor does it begin to address Laura Dern's virtuoso performance, which some have called a career defining turn, or the revolutionary use Lynch has made of digital technology, which at times gives his images the look of film and at others the aura of insubstantiality called for by the scene. (Lynch said repeatedly during the press conferences after the NYFF screenings of *Inland Empire* that he would never work in film again now that he has had a taste of the digital revolution.) And all the film asks, as another colleague noted, is that we open ourselves to the experience of Lynch's riveting, ground breaking use of cinema instead of imposing old expectations and conventions on it. That way lies misperception and its children: outrage, and boredom.

A much less demanding mining of the dreamlike aspect of film, but one that moderately expands the cinematic experience, can be found in Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, a work that employs the fantastic to energize a very rigorously controlled historical statement that will leave only unreconstructed Franco supporters outraged. *Pan's Labyrinth* takes place in Spain in 1944, a time little understood outside Spain, during which, while the members of the Resistance hoped in vain for aid from the United States and Western Europe, the Franco Fascists were hunting

down and unceremoniously killing them. Much like Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny And Alexander*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, while it engages larger social issues, explores them through a story about the effects of an unfortunate second marriage between an affectionate but naive woman and a cruel and controlling man on her children. Here, however, the political not the religious is in play. The mother in Del Toro's film, Carmen (Ariadna Gil), marries not a life denying, puritanical clergyman, as in Bergman's film, but Vidal (Sergi Lopez), a Fascist officer. (I am somewhat startled by the name Del Toro chose for his villain, as it means "life.") As in *Fanny and Alexander*, magic filtered through the imagination of a child offers what salvation is possible.

As Del Toro explained in his press conference, *Pan's Labyrinth* was generated by the influences on him of "The Little Match Girl," by Hans Christian Anderson, *Alice in Wonderland*, and Grimm's Fairy Tales. As their inheritors, it plays with contrasts between external and inner realities, the former of which is defined as austere, masculine, cruel, and visualized in cold colors; the latter of which is imagined as lush, feminine, loving, and visualized in warm colors. However, Del Toro has intentionally structured the film so that it is only at first that there is a clean polarity between the two; by the end of the film these seemingly disparate realities interpenetrate each other. The blending of inner and outer occurs as Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), Carmen's ten year-old daughter, bravely accepts her destiny as a heroine on the personal and political levels, a destiny that is prefigured in numerous ways by magical encounters she has with ancient statuary, insect-like fairies, and Pan (Doug Jones), a strange, ancient master of wizardry.

This very accessible film pits Ofelia and her magic allies against the murderous Vidal, as she attempts to save her mother and her newly born brother from being swallowed up by the evil Vidal embodies; at the same time her actions impact on the partisans of the Resistance. As in many films of this type, no one is who he or she initially seems and despite the fact that Del Toro uses very familiar fairy tale conventions, the outcome is not easily predictable, which is why I will give no more plot details. *Pan's Labyrinth* offers a message of hope in the face of political oppression, a message that resonates today, at the same time that it does justice to the memory of the mid 20th century Anti-Fascists in Spain, whose plight at the end of World War II, according to Del Toro, has never been acknowledged in the Spanish cinema.

Despite its unpromising title, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, this film is a beautiful, if elegiac, cinematic poem about the passing of indigenous Inuit culture in Northern Canada. In its process, *The Journals* was as adventurous and fresh as it is in its content, telling the story of real

events from a real journal of an adventurer/explorer named Knud Rasmussen, who was half Danish and half Inuit, as he recorded his life in 1922-23 by transmuting it into a dreamlike vision in the mind of Shaman Avva (Patak Innuksuk), of Iglulik, an Inuit community. In the story, Rasmussen witnesses Avva's family being starved out of their 4,000 year old traditions; the group accepts conversion to Christianity in exchange for food, a desperate recourse because of their bad luck with the hunt. By chance, only the converted Christian Inuits have food at this particular point in time, and although Avva holds out as long as he can, finally he gives up his "spirits" and assumes a Christian identity.

The Journals was created and executed by Norman Cohen, a Canadian of European heritage, and Zacharias Kunuk, a Christianized Inuit, in communal collaboration with a Christianized Inuit community with whom they have previously collaborated on numerous film projects. Although the actors are technically non-professionals, they have worked for so many years with Cohen and Kunuk, that they are, nevertheless, seasoned filmmakers and performers. Indeed, the narrative of the film evolved organically out of the participation of Cohen and Kunuk's community of filmmakers, as an encounter with their own personal histories; the actors played their ancestors, evoking a time of great loss, the time when their traditions were, in Cohen's words, steamrolled by the 20th century, making for an emotionally charged artistic experience.

There is nothing dry about this account; historically anchored though it is. The film is a tapestry of light and texture, suffused with music, both Inuit and European. In a memorable scene in which Rasmussen and Avva's family first encounter each other, the Inuits fill the white igloo with their songs and then ask Rasmussen to sing, clearly as a kind of test and initiation. The multi-talented Rasmussen, also a trained opera singer, sings for them an aria from *Martha*, which Avva's family receives with amazement and delight. There is promise here of immense gain from the intersection of two cultures.

Loss follows when Avva is forced to literally send his "spirits" from his home. It is at this point that the audience makes a startling discovery, that of an alternate reality. Three of the "people" in Avva's igloo turn out to be spirits. The scene in which they are forced to leave is heartbreaking and may resonate with European and American audiences as filters through which we can come to terms with losses of all kinds in our own modern, technological cultures. At the same time, the story of Avva is rendered a window into Inuit culture as a precise, and different worldview, and thereby into non-materialist cultures of all sorts. For the Western observer will immediately

assume that once the hunting is better, Avva's family can separate from the Christian society that is now feeding them and rejoin with the spirit world of their fathers and grandfathers. But not so. Through *The Journals of Rasmussen*, it becomes clear, and in some emotional if not rational way understandable that the banishment of spirits is irrevocable. Though they wail as they depart, they will never come again.

What is this relationship that has been broken? Everything in our materialist culture is deemed replaceable. The irony of the current epidemic of religious extremism is that it too, believing that it represents spiritual rebirth, is only another version of the mechanistic attitude toward things sacred. Lost your faith? You can be born again. All you have to do is allow yourself to be manipulated into becoming hysterical on cue, and voila, you're hooked into the divine. The daring new documentary *Jesus Camp* gives us chilling insight into this recipe-oriented attitude toward the spirit. It documents how the drama of mass produced inspiration fits the capitalist language of manufacturing with which we are so comfortable. By contrast, we are hard pressed to understand by means of our pragmatic language a vision that mandates the finality of the rupture with the spirit world once a materialist compact has been accepted (ie. food for conversion). It is the visual and aural tones of *The Journals* that have the power to strike beneath the surfaces of our cultivated body of knowledge, traditions, and stock responses and begin to open up a wedge for Western audiences into this bygone, once organic and vital way of seeing and living in the world.

The big screen becomes a venue for dreams in a more conventional yet still innovative way in *Paprika*, an anime created by Satoshi Kon, not as well known in the West as Hayao Miyazake of *Spirited Away* fame but still a favorite of the aficionados. Like *Inland Empire* and *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Paprika* mines its dreamscape through a feminine sensibility inundated by the tidal waves of the subconscious though not to arrive at either spiritual or political discovery. Rather, *Paprika* has a sociological edge. It is a brilliantly reflexive, complexly hopeful look at the recourses that are possible for societies being infantilized by popular culture in general and film in particular. The story of *Paprika* is predicated on a science fiction premise that a new device in the development stage called a DC Mini (which has not yet been approved for general use) will enable psychotherapists to enter into the dreaming minds of their patients and facilitate improved therapeutic techniques. However, the narrative quickly explodes into a dystopian nightmare once one of four prototype DC Minis is stolen and used to arm the darker side of human nature

with a greater opportunity to destroy individuality from the inside of the subconscious, in the name of that staple of science fiction, world conquest.

Racing against the clock to save humanity are three protagonists. First, there is Dr. Atsuko Chiba (Megumi Hayashibara), an attractive, acclaimed but repressed, young woman, who is part of the scientific team that developed the DC Mini. She is accompanied in her adventures by Dr. Kosaka Tokita (Toru Foruya), an obese young man, the inventor of the device; and Toshimi Konakawa (Akio Ahtsuka) an older police detective, an action hero type who has had some therapeutic treatment with the radical procedures made possible by the DC Mini prototype. As some scientists connected with the DC Mini project disappear and/or lose their minds Chiba, Tokita and Konakawa take separate and then collaborative measures to find out who is behind the trouble by using the remaining prototypes to enter into dreamworlds, both their own and those of the afflicted, to find evidence and cure. Racing through all the dreamworlds is Paprika, the dream alter ego of Dr. Chiba, an 18 year old secret agent (who looks more like a 10 year old girl.) A figure of both allure and power for the men, as well as for Dr. Chiba herself, the childlike Paprika is ultimately the figure on whose shoulders rests the solution to the crimes, and the salvation of the world. Her Peter Panish eternal youth is, however, a homeopathic remedy for a world unable to recover from its childhood.

The dream adventures of these three are bursting, literally, with the images of childhood, dolls and toys which are rendered animate and menacing. They are also shaped by movies and painting, particularly Gustave Moreau's eerie painting "Oedipus and the Sphinx," in which the Sphinx appears as a succubus climbing the chest of the transfixed King of Thebes, which appropriately enough swirls through the dreamscape of the man of action in the film, detective Konakawa, both in still and animated form. The dreams of the macho Konakawa, the police detective, are also saturated with references to generic movie plots, Tarzan films and the like, in which he and his "dream girl" Paprika play central roles. These films fill Konakawa with fears that point back to his childhood. Finding out what these images mean, particularly the sinister image of a Russian doll, to the adult psyches of the psycho-detectives is crucial to the unravelling of the plot. As *Paprika* progresses, the dreams of the various characters interpenetrate each other until they explode into what has previously been a clearly demarcated "real" world. The confusion between the two is the moment of greatest peril for the characters and for humanity in general.

Paprika renders, by means of explosions of brilliant color and fantastic images, a new way of thinking about the collective unconscious, which is depicted not only as a well of creative matter but also a battleground of competing and conflicting images and fantasies that are compromised by both high and low art, which threaten to devour humankind. But a cure for the potential evil also inheres in movies and art. On the trail of the evil prospective ruler of the universe, Chiba, Tokita, and Konakawa learn much about their erotic drives, inner secrets, and hidden strengths and potentials. Their ordeals result in images that bespeak an evolving human ability to use film and art to evolve, rather than to regress, and to establish control over the DC Mini. The last frames of the film show Konakawa purchasing a ticket to a film called "Dreaming Kids". Having freed himself of his early traumas, and having come to grips with his adolescent desires, through his travels with Paprika in the abode of dreams, he speaks the last words of the film to the ticket seller: "One adult."

Yet another strand of Truffaut's ribbon is available to us in *Volver*, Pedro Almadovar's meditation on female communities, perhaps even on the feminine nature of community itself, which has recalled for many critics *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988). However, the women in *Volver* are not approaching a crisis; they have passed through and dealt with it as best they can, if not to their perfect satisfaction. The crisis? Heterosexual masculinity. The solution? Apologies for this unavoidable spoiler: murder.

Volver could be titled *Women in Possession of a Big Secret*, or *Noisy Kisses*. The film is saturated with the affection a community of women feels for each other which is expressed ritually by tiny little kisses on the cheek during greeting and leave-taking, for which a sound effect has been devised that amps up the volume of the kiss noises. These punctuate the film at every departure and reunion, of which there are many. *Volver* is also filled with a revulsion against heterosexual masculinity that is made palatable, at least for some, by the film's comic tone, kicked off by a darkly comic joke that is told as the film opens, which will not be recognized as such until the film is almost over. In the initial images of *Volver* a large group of women is shown cleaning headstones in the cemetery; the visual rhythms of this scene are wonderful as arms fly about polishing marble. "The men in this town all die before the women," someone observes with no sense of irony. (The irony comes later.) Raimunda (Penelope Cruz) replies that wasn't true of her father, who died at the same time as her mother in a fire. She has much to learn, and so do we.

Little by little, as the film reveals how impossible husbands and fathers are, it becomes clear that the initiation into maturity of the women in this town occurs through their inevitable discoveries that only death can stop abuse men (heterosexual) create. All these lessons are oblique in character; and a sense of the supernatural permeates the landscape as Raimunda, her daughter Paula (Yohana Cobo) and a neighbor and friend Augustina (Blanca Portillo) deal with some necessary discoveries about life, death, and gender roles. Part of the discovery causes Raimunda and Paula to revise their understanding of how Raimunda's father and mother (Paula's grandparents) died. Central to this revelation is the sudden appearance to Paula of her grandmother, Irene, played by the magnificent Carmen Maura. Along the way, Paula's aunt, Sole (Lola Duenas), who runs an illegal hairdressing business from her home, is hooked into the comedy of errors in some very funny scenes. The endearing adventures of grandmother and granddaughter lull us into a complicity with the town's superstitious belief in ghosts, and even begin to convince us of how important they are to the living; but this too is revised as the film reaches closure. Ultimately, and I hope I am not giving away too much here, we realize that Almodovar is playing with our acculturation to accept film as a ribbon of dreams. The joke is on us, but the way the film is skewed toward a serious hatred of heterosexual men may taint the humor for some viewers.

Finally, there is Sofia Coppola's dreamy, or perhaps hallucinatory, *Marie Antoinette*, which has been acclaimed by some critics as a passionate defense of a historically defamed woman. This somewhat parroted opinion may be hard to understand for some, as Coppola's film is neither passionate nor a defense in any sense of the word, as I understand it. Nor is this film historical as most people understand it, since *Marie Antoinette* imaginatively deforms the rhetoric of its narrative with such verve, that it makes of history an American dream, in perhaps not the most elevated way.

Certainly *Marie Antoinette* asks for sympathy, and perhaps empathy, for the doomed Austrian-born consort of Louis XVI, played by Kirsten Dunst in the Coppola version, but it is not the first American film to do so, as few seem to remember—perhaps because most have never seen the Norma Shearer vehicle of the same name directed by W. S. Van Dyke II in 1938, a film suffused with a great deal more passion about Marie (hereafter MA), manacled though it is by the old Production Code Administration (hereafter PCA). However, where the Van Dyke film made a fetish of period authenticity, with the exception of a whitewash of MA's dalliance with a Swedish army officer in

order to accommodate the PCA, Coppola has turned the lady's biography into an impressionistic dreamscape that flows to the tunes of 21st century rock, evokes the 18th century court in the guise of the Rodeo Drive lifestyle, and exploits the surreal qualities of color that were not available to Van Dyke in 1938. Coppola's film has been booed; it has been cheered. I am going to argue for it as a brave failure that deserves a look if you are interested in supporting evolving women directors, or if you are curious about Coppola's much discussed, studied use of anachronism.

Marie Antoinette begins with a flash forward tableau that encapsulates the destiny toward which the young MA was heading. MA is discovered briefly in a site of decadent, scrumptious affluence—The Court of Versailles—lying supine as she is cared for by servants and surrounded by exquisite, creamy desserts. She turns to face the camera directly with a provocative expression, open to interpretation. I would vote for, "My life; what the Hell?" as she seems to sink into and distance herself from the excesses of the Court at the same time. Never again is Dunst this complex. Immediately, we are released into the story, beginning with MA's journey to the French court at the age of 14 and ending with her flight with Louis XVI from Versailles in a vain attempt to save her life. From start to finish, Marie Antoinette is portrayed as nothing if not a go-with-the-flow-girl. Life keeps dumping things into her lap, sometimes quite literally, and she takes it as it comes. And if it doesn't come, she takes that too; her husband took years to dare a sexual relationship with her. (Here there is a bit of *sturm und drang*, as her one experience in her life of a serious commission is producing children for the French throne.) Kirsten Dunst is delightfully, and good naturedly shallow as a leaf in the wind who acquires what we are supposed to perceive as depth when she finally comes face to face with the French mob at the end of the film.

The infantile wailing on the soundtrack of the refrain of Bow Wow Wow's, "I Want Candy" once MA arrives at Versailles positions her hedonism for a modern audience. She's almost literally a kid in a candy store, although she is being groomed for a very serious political position in the ruling class of one of the major powers of her time. But the song also describes the rest of the Court, most notably the reigning monarch Louis XIV (Rip Torn), her husband's grandfather, who is shown to be besotted with Madame Du Barry (Asia Argento), a slatternly girl toy. There are no men and women here; everyone adolescently opts for the lust of the moment, presumably except the never-to-be-seen chefs whose fabulously, crafted edible delicacies appear relentlessly on French, royal tables as the film rocks on. You don't achieve such splendor without advance planning and a lot of work. But, aside from them, the romantic revolution which countered the

proportional, decorous classical vision of life seems to be proven unnecessary by Coppola. Unless...this is a parable of (and a number of my compadres in the audience seemed to think this was the case) the director's life as a Hollywood child.

Hard to believe, for unlike the woman played by Norma Shearer in 1938, who aspires to be "the Queen of France," this MA seems to want nothing more than to love and to please. Not exactly the road Coppola herself has taken. Dunst's MA is a retro figure, woman as creature of reactive animal sensuality, whose life is a non-stop materialist orgy of eating, shopping, and having sex. She emerges from her scenes as something like a sweet lapdog; hardly the woman Norma Shearer presented who wanted to matter and be significant. And here is a major problem with this arguably demeaning post-feminist project. Coppola's daring use of "I Want Candy" and a lilting, almost galloping version of "Fools Rush In" when MA first encounters the dashing Swedish officer who sets her heart aflame (this MA has a lot more fun than did Shearer's), as well as an anachronistic shot of some high top sneakers during a marvelously colorful and beautifully crafted shopping montage, does make us feel much closer to MA's emotions than does the mock classical music that surrounds Shearer. But this MA doesn't seem worthwhile. What is the rationale for making this lightweight Barbie doll the center of a film? And speaking of passion, she neither seems to feel or command it. How can we care about her story?

The problem is compounded by the complete absence from the film of the suffering masses of the French underclass until they pop up at the end, convenient foils to propel a closure which allows Marie to sense that she must appear to them on the balcony and bow low before them. During the press conference, Dunst ventured the opinion that it is at this point her character becomes a real queen. Does she? Doesn't this sudden revelation of the mob give MA just one more population on which she can exercise her characteristic desperation to be liked? Moreover, if Coppola constructed her film to screen out the seething rage and despair of the most of France until this point in order to make us experience the bubble in which MA lived, what has she achieved by her filtered portrait of the French court? Unhappily, one may say that the effect is more of a shallow queen in a shallow film than a serious, profound insight into the nature of willfully blind ruling classes, an insight that might have had some resonance for today's world.

Where Lynch, Del Toro, Cohen and Kanuk, Kon, and Almodovar invoke the dreamlike subconscious, they add layers of dimension to what otherwise would be a less articulated, possibly flat picture of the world. In contrast, Coppola uses a dreamlike impressionism to burn away the

alienating surface details of a historically distant world in the name of accessibility. She succeeds in transforming the Court of the Capets into a whirl of modern dysfunctionality—at the price of narrative anorexia. Based on a true story, Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* loses both the gravitas of history and its raison d'être as it becomes a pastel, modernized confection for all its purported reliance on Antonia Fraser's historical research in *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (Anchor: 2002). It is as though Coppola, on being told that the people are starving for truth, replied, "I WANT CANDY!" and brought forth a fantasy that precisely avoids the lower depths and opts for escapism. I would rather not say "Off with her head"; but instead hope that in her next film she will use her talent, technical virtuosity, and quite enviable position as a legacy member of the Hollywood community with more insight, and, yes, passion.

Next: New York Film Festival 2006, Part Two, "Based on a True Story", available at <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2006v10n3/nochimson2.pdf>>.