

## **Cavell and the Politics of Cinema: On *Marie Antoinette***

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In his writings, does Stanley Cavell propose something which might be called a ‘politics of cinema’? If the answer to such a question is ‘yes’, then I take it that a politics of cinema from Cavell’s perspective is one which downplays the question of cinematic techniques. For Cavell, a film’s ‘reflexivity’ or its foregrounding of the apparatus are not the grounds for defining a politics of cinema. Rather, Cavell asks questions like: How does a film articulate the stakes of a social or communal world? or: How does a film come to define the ways in which a group of people can live together? A political analysis of a film for Cavell would examine any film’s ways of articulating and defining a political society or framework. That is, a politics of cinema from Cavell’s perspective is one in which the stakes are to define a society or community.

What is a ‘community’ or ‘society’? In a straightforward sense, a society is any group of people that is organised in such a way that its organisation persists over time, or that it *might* persist over time. A community or society therefore must be relatively stable, otherwise it could not be called a community or society. And yet, at the same time, any community will also be the product of its own continually changing processes of making and remaking itself. A political community therefore will only ever be *relatively* stable, so that change, disruption and transformation will be integral to any social formation.

These are processes central for conceptions of democracy, for democracy offers the only political model that makes change and transformation integral to its very form. Cornelius Castoriadis once described the practice of democracy as ‘a collective activity whose object is the institution of society as such’ (Castoriadis 1991, 102). He argued very convincingly that it is in ancient Greece generally and with the invention of democracy specifically that the question of what is right and what is wrong first emerged (Castoriadis 1991, 101), which is to say that questions like, ‘What is a just society?’ or ‘How do we create a society that is just?’ are ones that first emerged in tandem with the invention of democracy. At stake for democracy is the continued reflection on and asking of questions such as these. A democratic politics is one that pursues a stable society while at the same time always leaving that society open to change. Alongside stability, therefore, is a sense of continual negotiation and change over time. These democratic models are difficult ones to work with. To theorise something

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that is at once both relatively stable but also subject to sometimes radical disruption and change is not an easy thing to do. Democracy means this: every aspect of society is negotiable and subject to change, while at the same time society can still be organised in various ways.

What senses of Cavell's politics might be able to emerge from all of this? Perhaps a place to set out from is to declare that societies have found throughout history a range of various ways of functioning, but that what democracy demands is a constant questioning, negotiation and redefinition of those ways and processes by means of which a society functions. These might at first appear to be very vague parameters to draw around a theory of politics or a philosophy of democracy, but in Stanley Cavell's approaches to cinema (and elsewhere) something like a theory of democracy can be said to be present. *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) and *Contesting Tears* (1994) can even be seen as much works of a 'politics of cinema' as they are works laying out genres or cycles of films.

On explicit matters of politics, Cavell contends that most modern theories of political constitution – John Locke and John Rawls are explicitly invoked – involve various ways of trying to consider how the members of a society consent to 'being' a society. What agreements, procedures, legal and moral frameworks are necessary in order for any member of a society to declare that he or she 'consents' to being a member of that society? On the back of such questions, Cavell tries to envisage what is called 'taking one's place' in a society. What can such a thing mean, to 'take one's place' in a society? Might it be the case that, Cavell asks, when I find myself placed in a society I might also be somewhat dismayed by that society, to discover that, in fact, even though I may find myself in this society, I don't necessarily consent to such a thing. Cavell conjectures that taking one's place might not be such an easy thing to do:

And let's suppose that you do not see the place, or do not like the places you see. You may of course take on the experience of accepting the choices, and this may present itself to you as your having adopted a state of fraudulence, a perpetual sense of some false position you have assumed, without anyone's exactly having placed you there. A mark of this stage is a sense of obscurity, to yourself as well as to others, one expression of which is a sense of compromise, of being asked to settle too soon for the world as it is, a perplexity in relating yourself to what you find unacceptable in your world, without knowing what you can be held responsible for. Do I, for example, consent to the degree of injustice we all live with? Do I know how to define my position with respect to it? (Cavell 2004, 23).

How do I define my position? How do I consent to the world in which I am

placed? These are founding questions for Cavell's approach to politics. I can find myself in a 'place' in a society which bamboozles me, which contains a sense of no longer knowing how this society got to be the way it is and therefore of how I got to be here, and thus, to an extent I can feel as though I know longer know who I am, to wonder whether I can confidently declare that, in a Cartesian manner, 'I am, I exist'.

### *On Cinema*

These considerations allow Cavell to formulate a 'two worlds' thesis which he teases out of the writings of Emerson. In his understanding of Emerson, Cavell invokes the Kantian split between the sensible and the intelligible, to the extent that he conceives of this split as being a way of defining different kinds of worlds – one a sensible world, the other an intelligible one. From one perspective Kant named these two worlds the phenomenal and the noumenal, but these worlds are also related to the further distinction between a world that is determined by the conditions of the Understanding on the one hand, and that which is rather more open to the freedom of Reason on the other. While these Kantian distinctions serve as a conceptual background, it is nevertheless with Emerson, on Cavell's reading, that the distinction between 'worlds' takes an innovative turn, even as Cavell sees such inspirations going back at least as far as Plato. For Cavell's Emerson, the division between the sensible and the intelligible becomes a division between *the way the world is now* and some future vision or fantasy of *what we would like the world to become*. Such distinctions can certainly be discerned in Kant – that the world of phenomena is the world of our experience which sets limits upon our knowledge, while the world of noumena hearkens us towards a beyond in which we might truly know 'things-in-themselves'. For Plato, that other world is the world of Ideas, a world of essential forms beyond those degraded sensible forms with which we come into contact in our everyday lives in *this* world. In Emerson, Cavell finds this notion of two worlds – of the world *as it is* and of the world *as it might become* – to be a central inspiration. The two worlds thesis most explicitly finds its stake if we find ourselves confronted with in an especially problematic condition of the way the world is now. This is another way of saying that I do not like my place in the society in which I find myself; that I am 'out of place'.

Readers familiar with Cavell will surely have noted the cinematic gestures already in play here. We could begin by demonstrating the ways in which *The World Viewed* (1979) is framed around a distinction between two worlds: a first which we inhabit in the here and now and another world which is screened for us by the film being projected before our eyes and ears. And those familiar with Cavell will know that he takes this distinction in the direction of subjectivity in so far as my subjectivity in the here and

now is definitively separated from that other world which is screened by movies. And one of the main tasks of *The World Viewed* is to discover the ways in which a connection might be forged between the isolation of my subjectivity and that other world which the movies project for me, with the conclusion that, if the modern condition is one of being ‘trapped’ behind my subjectivity, then perhaps the movies can show us how to get out of that entrapment, to discover a world beyond the confines of subjectivity, to discover the world as such.

The ‘two worlds’ thesis continues in various ways in *Pursuits of Happiness*. Perhaps it is most evocatively summoned in Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934), in which Cavell takes the famously divisive blanket hung between the beds of the film’s protagonists to indicate precisely a division of worlds, between a world of subjective entrapment and illusion on the one hand, and another world of enlightened and married (or remarried) understanding. Furthermore, the couples in these films typically discover their enlightenment by way of their entry into another world – the ‘green world’, a conception borrowed from Shakespeare’s late comedies – so that it is only by crossing from one world to another that one eventually ‘finds one’s place’ in the world.

But it is in *Contesting Tears* that the political stakes of the ‘two worlds’ thesis makes its particular mark. In *Contesting Tears*, Cavell invokes arguments derived from John Locke to point out that, in the films he examines – *Now Voyager* (1942), *Gaslight* (1944), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), and *Stella Dallas* (1937) – the women who are the heroes of these films are forging, in their own ways, condemnations of the social orders in which they are currently living (1994, 147). For these women, the world as they know it has been ruined, and it has been ruined more than anything by the men who fail to understand the desires or needs of these women. These women reach a point at which their stake in this world can no longer be mended by conversation – certainly not by way of conversation with the men with whom each of them has fallen in love, and then out of love – no longer by a sharing of language, by ‘speaking together’. This loss of an ability to speak together is, if we trust Cavell’s version of Emerson, a loss of the world as such.

The women in these films are unhappy with the world, and the world needs to change in order that these women might somehow discover happiness or, at the very least, a sense of their own validity (and an ability to declare ‘I am’). A call to politics, in this sense, is one in which a change of the state of things as they currently are is gestured towards. And so these women are on a journey as though wishing to pass from one world to another in ways that appeal to Cavell and to the Emersonianism he invokes. Thus Cavell will argue that the women in these films are on ‘a journey from what [Emerson]

means by conformity to what he means by self-reliance'. Cavell adds that this is a matter of going on 'a journey, or path, or step, from haunting the world to existing in it' (Cavell 1994, 220), as though the women in these films have been living in such ways as to forego their own existence in this world, but who discover, by the ends of these films, various ways of being able to declare their existences in the worlds where their journeys end. Cavell further expresses the importance of this sense of existing in the world by declaring it a matter of the 'asserting of one's *cogito ergo sum*, one's own "I think therefore I am"' (Cavell 1994, 220). The aim of these women's choices and actions is to seek a state of society in which they could exist and perhaps even one in which their desires would be fulfilled or in which some kind of reinvention of the world would be possible. One might, therefore, first of all, call these films political ones, and Cavell does indeed go so far as to do so. The quest for these women, then, is to find out what kind of society might be suitable for them, and to also discover what kinds of societies have denied them their wishes and left their desires unfulfilled.

### *Marie Antoinette*

Having set out from these themes discovered in Cavell's writings, I want to turn my attention more directly to a particular film: Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006). A considered approach to a specific film should, I hope, make clearer the stakes of using Cavell's writings to understand a politics of cinema. The action of this film unfolds in the very political context of the background of the French Revolution. One social order, one 'world', the *ancien régime*, moves towards its disintegration, while hints of another world begin to take its place. The course of the film provides us with a variety of episodes in which Marie Antoinette (Kirsten Dunst) attempts to discover herself, to discover for herself what the articulation or enactment of her own desires and life projects might be like. The film's aim is that Marie might 'explore herself', hence placing her in the orbit of the heroines of the 'melodramas of the unknown woman'. At the end of the film, as she and King Louis XVI (Jason Schwartzman) are escorted from the Palace of Versailles, Marie has fully realised that this world is not for her, that, very much like the women Cavell describes in the unknown woman melodramas, her world is a world of 'moral catastrophe', a world that cannot be mended by conversation or argument, not by 'speaking together', a world which cannot be mended by champagne and parties or shoes or chocolates, which cannot be mended by heated, illicit, adulterous passions or Rousseauian returns to nature. Instead, that world must be destroyed, and by the end of the film it is not just the audience or the historians who beckon forth the coming revolution, I think the film explicitly acknowledges that this is precisely what is at stake for the character of Marie Antoinette too: that the world she has been forced to inhabit must give way to a new kind of world, a world in which there is no *ancien régime*, a world in which the chocolate-

box privileges Marie Antoinette and her court have enjoyed must all be swept away. There is no place for Marie in this world; she does not consent to this world. She discovers by the end of the film that the only way to deal with it is to say 'good-bye' to it.

Marie is thus a descendent of Nora, the heroine of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who figures as a dramatic precursor to the cinematic heroines of the melodramas Cavell analyses in *Contesting Tears* (Cavell 1994, 85). Nora too says 'good-bye' at the end of Ibsen's play. Like Nora, Marie is saying good-bye to the world she has known. How can her 'good-bye' be interpreted except as a way of declaring that she no longer belongs in this world, that she has no place in it, that she refuses to consent to it, and probably that she has never found a place in this world and has never consented to it?

### *The World of Versailles*

The first half and hour or more of the film stages what life is like at the court of Versailles. Even before Marie arrives at Versailles, during the ceremony in which she crosses from the foreign territory of Austria to her new homeland of France, she must leave all her possessions behind, right down to her clothing, so as to be re-born as she enters France. This ceremony therefore indicates at least one thing: that the film will be a matter of establishing Marie's identity – in effect, her identity is here stripped to zero so that she can be re-made as a French princess. What becomes apparent here is that any of Marie's thoughts, desires and ambitions, any of those things which she might wish to call 'mine', must take second place to those thoughts, desires and ambitions of the French court, of the protocol, tradition and guidance of her advisors. This process whereby she loses any investment in her own project of building a life or 'becoming a self', intensifies over the course of the film's first half an hour as Marie learns what is expected of her and what has become of her life as the dauphine of France.

Once married, it is Marie's chief duty to become pregnant and to have a child, a male child, who will thus secure the destiny of the French succession. Marie's function in her marriage seems to be very little more than that of producing an heir. The film makes this pressure to bear a child a major theme of the first half of its duration. Alongside this major duty, Marie must also learn to play her role in other courtly rituals. The morning dressing ceremony, in which Marie awakens from her bed and is dressed by a series of courtiers and maids who are present, sees her confronted with some of the most arcane rituals that help to solidify the hierarchies of courtly life: strict codes, rules and regulations which seem to have no function other than to demonstrate rank and importance on the basis of the superiority of birth.

Such ceremonies demonstrate a world of functionaries. No-one here can be said to be a subject in the sense of Descartes' declaration of 'I am', or in the sense of Emerson's 'I think, therefore I am free' (on this, see Cavell 2003, 209). Rather, the rules and protocols of the court determine who does what and how one is supposed to act. There is no self-determination or autonomy – no 'subjectivity', as it were – and there is no desire for such things. Rather, those who follow the rules of court most appropriately, those who follow rules that have been laid down by others (and we know that the procedures of court were refined and encoded by Louis XIV), those who are most adept at obeying external authorities of conformity instead of acting upon self-reliance (as Emerson would say), those are the people who are granted the highest awards and privileges. It is also clear that Marie herself is stupefied by the inanity of such procedures and it is clear furthermore that we are supposed to adopt her attitude: when she declares, following the kerfuffle of her morning dressing ceremony in which she stands nakedly shivering while awaiting the highest ranking member of the court in the room to dress her, that 'This is ridiculous', then we too are presumed to agree with her.

*An unknown woman?*

Might I be on the way to declaring that *Marie Antoinette* is an unknown woman melodrama? The film might be a distant relation of those examined by Cavell in *Contesting Tears*, for what is at stake for much of the film is the question of what constitutes a marriage, and much of the response of the courts of both Vienna and Versailles is that the begetting of an heir amounts to a proper consummation of a marriage from the woman's perspective. There is no necessity for conversation ('meet and happy conversation', to invoke Cavell's own evocation of Milton; Cavell 1981, 87) or education, and certainly no sense in which a married couple might construct and discover a world together.

One of the very few indicators in the film of a union that does entail some kind of mutual recognition and conversation is that between Louis XV (Rip Torn) and his mistress, Madame Du Barry (Asia Argento). And yet, of course, that relationship is not a marriage and, furthermore, it is a relationship that is frowned upon by many of those at Versailles, as though this kind of relationship cannot be condoned, especially given Du Barry's comparatively lowly birth. As he lay dying, protocol demands that Du Barry leave Versailles so that Louis might be absolved of his sins and enter the kingdom above. Marie's predicament is allied with Du Barry's in significant ways. Marie is 'foreign' to the court in ways that Du Barry also is (neither of them might be said to 'belong' there). But it might be possible to suggest that Du Barry has a relationship with the king of the type to which Marie herself aspires to have with her husband. In simple terms, she desires her

husband's friendship and companionship (and this would be one way of accounting for Marie's clear antagonism towards Du Barry: that she envies Du Barry's relationship with the King).

The film foregrounds Marie's attempts to converse with her husband, and it also provides us with an episode in which Marie joins the dauphin while he is hunting in order that she can share lunch with him and his hunting party. This behaviour is sternly frowned upon by the other patrons of the court, a fact of which Marie is informed by her advisor, Ambassador Mercy (Steve Coogan). Marie tries to buck the conventions and rules of courtly life with which she disagrees. In other words, instead of being constrained by external rules and pre-written protocols, the film tries to persuade us that Marie has a mind of her own, and that she wants her mind to be capable of making its own decisions.

Marie's desire to go against conventions in such ways is additionally pointed to when she attends the Paris Opera. Whereas most of the other courtiers, including her husband, seem very content to live their lives from within the walls of Versailles – and to stay cocooned from events beyond those walls – Marie on the contrary is rather keen to explore what exists on the outside. While at the opera, she even manages to inadvertently break with conventions there by enthusiastically applauding the performance – such activities are not condoned at royal performances. Again, therefore, as with her joining the hunting party, Marie goes against convention, not in deliberate ways, but in ways that seem 'natural' or at the very least 'understandable' to her. This society, of Versailles and the *ancien régime*, it appears, is 'unnatural' to her; Marie's responses, attitudes and instincts seem to be at odds with it (and so the film constantly reminds us of the Gang of Four's 'Natural is Not in it', the song which runs over the opening credits).

### *Three Letters*

During this first half an hour or so of the film, Marie receives three letters from her mother, the Empress of Austria (Marianne Faithful). The first of these insists on the importance of Marie's ability to inspire her husband sexually so that she might fall pregnant. As she reads this letter she looks at herself in a full-length mirror as though measuring herself up. I think we are supposed to imagine that she is asking herself something in the order of 'Is this what I have become?' Whenever she tries to do something that is motivated by herself, she is told *not* to do it; and here, from everywhere, even from her mother, she is told all of things she *must* do and which she has no choice but to do. And even then, we know she has tried to inspire her husband, but that he is clearly too dim-witted, too young, or too interested in other things – keys and hunting – to apply himself to sexual duties. It might be that, as she examines herself in that mirror, evocative perhaps of Lacan's



famous thesis on the mirror stage of infant development, that this woman has been made to skip this stage which brings about the development of the 'ego' and is, under the weight of the demands and imperatives she is bound to perform, constrained merely to produce a 'superego', an agency guided by the commandments of external authorities (see Lacan 2006a; cf Lacan 2006b). Of course, for Lacan, the development of the ego is at one and the same time the development of the child's ability to think to itself that it is an 'I' – the *je* of Lacan's French as much as the *Ich* of Freud's German being translated as 'ego' for the English – which for Lacan is both an affirmation of and challenge to Descartes' *cogito*. It is an affirmation in so far as, by realising itself as an 'I', the child is coming to an establishment of its own existence ('I am, I exist'). But that affirmation will be undermined by the separateness that will now plague this human being for the rest of his or her days: that she is separated from other beings (especially from the mother) and that she is likewise separated from that other foreign body within: the unconscious. The point being stressed here is that Marie, as she examines herself in the mirror, exacerbated by the separation from her mother that she feels, is unable to refer to herself as an 'I', unable to affirm to herself that 'I am'.<sup>2</sup>

There are two further letters from her mother. The most impactful of these again features Marie's mother stridently demanding that she produce an heir to the throne. The camera slowly closes in on Marie as she examines the letter and, as the nature of her mother's message sinks in, she collapses as though crushed by this burden she has been made to bear and which, so far as she can see, is no fault of her own. (There are echoes here, then, of Cavell's questioning of political consent, as he puts it, 'a perplexity is relating yourself to what you find unacceptable in your world, without knowing what you can be held responsible for'; Cavell 2004, 23). By the time we reach the end of the letter, Marie is staring directly at the camera once again, her eyes filled with tears.

As if this were not enough, she then hears news of the birth of her sister-in-law's child: for this woman to have given birth to a son before Marie is a severe blow, for now this young boy is officially the next in line to the throne after Louis, Marie's husband. Here, Marie is pushed as though to the limit of what she can bear. She has failed miserably to fulfill the expectations placed on her by others. Having seen her sister-in-law and the newborn son, Marie tracks her way back through the many corridors of Versailles to her bedroom chamber, and all along her walk she is met with glances and insinuations from various courtiers haunting those hallways.

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<sup>2</sup> Political philosopher Claude Lefort has remarked that the invention of psychoanalysis and its split between a conscious and an unconscious, could not have been imagined without the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century; see Lefort (1986).

The most prominent barb directed towards Marie is the loudly whispered ‘Give us an heir!’ of one of the courtiers, whispered loudly enough so that Marie cannot fail to hear it. Finally, back in her chamber, she collapses to the floor, awash with tears, devastated, as if ruined, a failure.

It is precisely here, then, that Marie finally decides she is ‘out of place’ in this society, as Cavell himself might put it. Marie has tried in various ways to put herself in a position of ‘meet and happy conversation’ as a way in which she might construct a society or world in which she has a stake – most prominently this has involved the fruitless attempts to engage her husband in conversation. But her society, the society defined by Versailles, is one which Marie’s own decisions or projects have already been pre-defined, if not by the customs of courtly life, then by directives issued by her mother or her advisor, Ambassador Mercy. A good indicator of the discourse which Marie is surrounded by is given by the whispered ‘give us an heir’ which I have already mentioned. There is here no sense of ‘speaking together’. It is instead a manner of being *spoken to* or *spoken of*, and it is certainly not going too far to intimate that Marie has effectively lost her voice, that if and when she speaks, no-one listens to her. She is certainly in no position to make the declaration ‘I am’. One essay on *Marie Antoinette* has noted as much: ‘The heroines of [Coppola’s] films’, it is suggested, ‘exist mostly in their inner minds, unable to connect to the world that surrounds them. Having no equals in the world with whom to share themselves, they are severed from an intellectual life that would allow them to speak themselves into existence’ (Lane and Richter 2011, 197).

By this stage of the film, Marie has encountered an utter mismatch between her subjective aspiration towards selfhood and the social imprisonment which seems to make that selfhood impossible. The court rituals she is made to endure are confusing at the very least, and they do not seem to produce much, if anything, that might meet with her own senses of understanding. We might see this as a matter of what she sees and feels failing to match up with what it is possible for her to think – that is, as a mis-match between the sensible and the intellectual, between *the way the world is now* and *what she would like the world to become*. Her earlier exclamation during the morning dressing ceremony that ‘This is ridiculous’ would be one indication of the way in which what she sees about her does not much up with her own modes of understanding; her applauding at the Opera might be another: her senses indicate one thing, while her society tells her another. Such instances might make Marie – or anyone – wonder if she is in some way descending into madness.

Marie thus finds herself in a position familiar to the heroines of what Cavell call the unknown woman melodramas. In the words Cavell uses of the films he studies, we might consider that, along with them, Marie is ‘confined or

concentrated to a state of isolation so extreme as to portray and partake of madness, a state of utter incommunicability, as if before the possession of speech' (1994, 16). Cavell then goes on to argue that this isolation is, in fact, where the women discover their own strength. In a manner similar to Descartes in his *Meditations* (or the Thoreau of *Walden*), the forced withdrawal into themselves of these women – and we can place Marie here too – allows them to construct their thoughts anew. Central for the women of the unknown woman melodramas, as much for Marie of *Marie Antoinette*, is that they discover at one point that the world they thought might be right for them has become inordinately wrong. One way to deal with such a consequence that is made manifest by the unknown woman melodramas is for these women to pass out of the world that has come to them in the hope that they will find another. Cavell makes this a matter of the woman's 'transfiguration' (1994, 219-20).

### *I Want Candy*

Marie finds herself at a point at which she quite simply does not know what she should do. The film here reaches a crossroads at which certain questions I raised earlier come to the fore: How does the film articulate the stakes of a social or communal world? And additionally there is the question of how Marie Antoinette happened to find herself in a place in society that bamboozles her, so much so that she feels entirely 'out of place'? Needless to say that Marie is certainly finding it difficult to find a place in this society which seems designed entirely by way of rules, protocols and traditions that are almost completely at odds with the expectations she has of a world or society. Of such states Cavell will ask, that 'if the world is disappointing and the world is malleable and hence we feel ourselves called upon for change, where does change begin, with the individual (with myself) or with the collection of those who make up my (social, political) world?' (2004, 3). As a starting point at trying to find a new world or new relation to the world which might better satisfy her, Marie Antoinette decides to change herself.

Marie turns to pleasure, the kinds of pleasures hinted at by the opening vignette image of her that appears during the film's opening titles. She has tried to please others to no avail, so her passage to another world might therefore be made by way of following what she thinks might be her own pleasure. Thus, immediately after Marie's near breakdown upon hearing the news of the birth of her sister-in-law's baby, the film cuts abruptly to scenes of exotic and expensive shoes, cakes, jewels, hairdos, champagne and other luxury goods. And all of this luxurious excess is promenaded before our eyes to the tune of 'I Want Candy' (a New Wave pop song from the 1980s), with the implication that Marie wants fun, pleasure, 'things'.

This whole sequence of enjoyed luxury goods seems to have imprinted itself on the minds and tastes of many of the film's commentators. One critical

essay (to which I have already referred) claims the following:

Marie conceives of herself, and styles herself, in the image of the objects she enjoys consuming. The developing overabundance of her desire might be viewed as an indication of a superficial nature, but it can also be seen as a rejection of the repressed and joyless life at Versailles. Marie experiences an erotic relationship with the objects she consumes, which ultimately affirms her sense of living for enjoyment, a will to enjoy.... Marie's consumption can be understood as a radical act, a protest against the repression and denial of life that the protocol of Versailles demands. (Lane and Nichols 2011, 198)

These claims are followed later in the essay with the statement that Marie 'achieves creativity and artistry in the way that she consumes, through her fashioning of her body, hair, and wardrobe. For Marie, consumption plays a central role and she endeavors to produce her own image' (Lane and Nichols 2011, 200). These affirmations of Marie's abundant consumption strike me as being somewhat misplaced, as though the entire film can be reduced to a few short party and cake sequences. And perhaps we might be able to take such arguments seriously if we had evidence that any of this partying or spending gave Marie a sense of lasting satisfaction or fulfillment. But there is no evidence of this in the film. Marie enjoys herself during these scenes, but they do not deliver any sense of continuing enjoyment. Instead, the film rather warns the Queen – and it is during these sequences of enjoyment that Louis XV dies and the young King and Queen accede to the throne – that she is spending too much: Ambassador Mercy advises Marie at one point that 'there is no money left to give to your charities'. Furthermore, when her brother (Danny Huston) visits he tells her that she is gaining a reputation for gambling and constant parties. Eventually she will be pilloried by protesting peasants as 'Madame Deficit' in response to her indulgent spending (perhaps most forcefully, so the history books tell us, in the wake of the 'diamond necklace affair', an episode that the film sidesteps), so that this period of Marie's consumerist enjoyment seems to be a key catalyst for the coming Revolution. To claim that these sequences play a central role in Marie's construction of herself presents a rather distorted understanding of the film.

### *Exploration*

These scenes are followed by the birth of Marie and Louis's first child. It is here, with the birth of her child – a female child which she refers to as hers ('you shall be mine', she declares), for it is not a son of France – that Marie discovers a genuine sense of fulfillment. She gains a new lease of life, a sense of purpose, a 'project'. This sense is combined with her retreat to the Petit Trianon. This episode of the film also contains an explicit reference to Rousseau and the state of nature as one of untainted purity.

What occurs here is very much in the spirit of Hegelian negation: here, having given birth to a daughter, Marie Antoinette turns her back on the self-indulgent excesses which had occupied that last 15 or 20 minutes of the film in order to pursue directly opposite activities: a return to nature, freed of ornament and excess, an experiment in simplicity and humility. Much of this is framed in terms of a desire to get away from courtly life and the rituals of Versailles: for one, she had been determined to nurse the child herself, even to breastfeed, but of course, the rules of court forbade such exploits; while later some courtiers express their discontent at the Queen's continued absence from the court, her seeming refusal to acknowledge them. Marie's determination here is to find *something else*, to try out another way of doing things, and it is evidence of what might be the film's most important point: that this story is of Marie Antoinette's 'journey' (the film's script was based on a biography of Marie Antoinette subtitled 'The Journey'; Fraser 2001) and that Cavell points to the heroines of the unknown woman melodramas as women who are 'as if on a journey from conformity to self-reliance'. Marie is thus trying to get from one world, the world she is in, the world which has given rise to so much unhappiness for her, to desperation, to failure, to another world, a world that might have been defined by self-indulgent, excessive parties and purchases, and which now, as she takes a new step on her journey, might be discovered by way of a retreat to nature, the birth of a child, and a life lived in simplicity. These are experiments, ways of 'exploring herself' (as Emerson might put it), and I think these are central to the film's concerns: that the discovery of a life arises from the determination to 'explore oneself'.

Much of the remainder of the film extends the scope of these explorations: Marie's experiments with theatrical presentations; and through her extended affair with Count Fersen (Jamie Dornan) in which she genuinely glimpses what it might mean to discover happiness by way of companionship with another human being. And yet, these explorations give way to an overwhelming sense of grief and despair, first of all as a result of the death of one of her children (the third born), the death of her mother, along with the sense that her relationship with Fersen cannot be replicated by any of the members of the court of Versailles, certainly not with her husband.

But perhaps more than anything comes the realization of just how unpopular in France Marie has become. The film's atmosphere here gives rise to an extreme sense of melancholy, a sadness that seems, from Marie's point of view, to suggest that, even as she has tried to discover herself, tried to explore pleasure or nature, that all of it has come to nothing, that she is still unhappy – in short, this world is still a world that is not for her. This sense of resignation and despair comes to the fore when Marie again attends the Paris Opera where, once again, she applauds the performance. This time, however, she is alone in her clapping; whereas earlier in the film the

audience had joined the young Marie in her applause, here the rest of the audience refuses to take her lead, they ignore her, and she must once again endure the kind of isolation reminiscent of that morning when her sister-in-law gave birth.

And so it has all come to naught. The closing minutes of the film are filled with a sense of dread, of loss, of 'the end', of a sense in which a life and a world has been unfulfilled. The world as defined by Versailles is not the kind of world that can offer someone like Marie Antoinette any hope of a fulfilled life. Its rules, regulations and traditions – and the fact that the court exists in a kind of 'bubble' which severs its concerns from the rest of the world 'outside'; this kind of existence is not one in which there can ever be a successful exploration of oneself. Rather, the system of codes, hierarchies and favours which define the world and society of the *ancien régime* mitigates against any such exploration. Emerson or Cavell might conclude that, at Versailles, there can be no self-reliance, only conformity.

The final stages of the film demonstrate that Marie is aware of this: she is aware that, even as she has tried to explore herself, to discover a world that might fit her desire, where she might find happiness or companionship or fulfillment, there is no way she can find it in this world or this society. Rather, the world as she knows it would need to change entirely for there ever to be any possibility of the kind of fulfillment she seeks: she would need to pass from this world and enter another. In short, what is required is something akin to revolution. In what might well be the film's most extraordinary scene, as an angry mob that has marched from Paris demanding flour and bread now surrounds the palace baying for blood, Marie Antoinette steps outdoors onto a balcony to confront them. And yet she does not confront them. Rather, when she appears, the mob becomes silent, and Marie slowly walks forward to the edge of the balcony, then carefully, delicately bows her head down before them. Fraser, in her biography, has no account of such a bowing down, so I can only assume it is the film's own invention (for Fraser's account of this episode, see pp. 274-5). I would like to interpret it by thinking of it as the Queen's declaration of subservience to the wishes of the mob – of the people, *for* the people – and surely too it is an intimation that she is prepared to put her neck on the line, for she bows down as though preparing her neck for an axe or guillotine. This is Marie's admission that she understands what the mob is demanding, that surely on this night they might want her dead and, in effect, she is offering herself to them.

#### *Democracy and Politics*

From Cavell's perspective this act can be seen as Marie's 'sacrifice', and much could be made of the connection between this gesture and those gestures of Stella at the end of *Stella Dallas* and Nora at the end of *A Doll's*

*House*. But what might such sacrifices suggest for a politics of cinema? How does any film articulate a social structure; how do they give us insights into how societies or communities are formed and of what holds them together, or breaks them apart? *Marie Antoinette* attempts to answer such questions, for it demonstrates the ways in which one particular society was structured – the court of Versailles under the conditions of the *ancien régime* – while at the same time showing what those social structures denied or made impossible. What those structures made impossible, as figured in the character of Marie Antoinette, was any sense of self-determination, any sense of being able to build one's own life in one's own way based on one's own decisions – what Emerson would call 'self-reliance'. On the contrary, the social world of Versailles painted by the film is one of utter conformity (to again invoke Emerson), in which no-one acts on the basis of their own inclinations or decisions, but rather only out of obeying externally determined rules, regulations and customs.

Marie Antoinette's 'journey from conformity to self-reliance' is therefore an attempt, in terms of Cavell's Emerson, to bridge that gap between *the way the world is now* and some future way that *the world might become*. Of course, we know that the world that was to come was a world defined by the French Revolution and the re-birth of democracy, or at the very least, a new version of the social in which democracy became possible. I think the film makes explicit these conditions of the way the world is now – the prison-world of the *ancien régime* – and the imagination of a world that will become. This is what the film is 'about': the condemnation of one world from the perspective of imagining another.

But *Marie Antoinette* also foregrounds those processes of disconnection between the subjective and the social which go to the core of a version of democracy I would like to defend, a version which emerges in Cavell's readings of Emerson. This is the case because the focus of the film is on the subjective aspirations of Marie Antoinette – her quest to define herself as a self, to discover something amounting to self-reliance, to be able to confidently declare 'I am, I exist' – and of how those aspirations are thwarted. But they are not so much thwarted as they are simply incomprehensible: the notion of self-reliance is simply not one that occurs in this society, it is not something that registers. One can get a sense of how 'odd' such a notion might be by the wondrous response given by the Comtesse de Noailles (Judy Davis) to Marie Antoinette's exclamation when being dressed that 'This is ridiculous'. The Comtesse stares blankly, quizzically, as if Marie's statement is a bizarre spouting of nonsense. The Comtesse starkly declares 'No Madame, this is Versailles'. Marie's response could be placed alongside Emerson's frustration with conformity, the difficulty of saying something truly meaningful or substantial when all one has at one's mercy are the words which all conformity uses. How can I

make myself heard when the language available to me is the language of conformity? Who will hear me? I imagine Marie Antoinette's position is much the same: she speaks, but no-one seems to hear or acknowledge her words.

Passing from one world to another, overcoming conformity to discover self-reliance; such transformations point to the difficulty and challenge of politics as such. In the film, Marie is given versions of what is 'true for all men' – the commandments issued to her from her mother, from courtly customs, from Ambassador Mercy – but those truths cannot in any way connect with her own sense of asserting an 'I am'. Indeed, the truths of that society are ones which preclude the possibility of making such a declaration, of asserting one's *cogito ergo sum*, as Cavell puts it near the end of *Contesting Tears* (1994, 220). To try to discover a way to assert that *cogito* might be seen as Marie's aim in the film and she explores the various possible ways of doing this: by embarking on a spree of spending and parties; by returning to nature at the Petit Trianon; by embarking on a love affair with Fersen.... By the end of the film, however, she realizes that such an assertion is impossible: if she has tried to change herself, then that has not allowed her to assert her own *cogito* ('where does change begin', Cavell asks, 'with the individual (with myself) or with the collection of those who make up my (social, political) world?' ; 2004, 3). The only path left is for an entire society itself to change. As head of the society that must change, therefore, as its Queen, then Marie herself must give way, must sacrifice herself, in order that a new society might be born.

And what of democracy? The *ancien régime* shows us a world without democracy, certainly, but in doing so it shows us a world impervious to change. That inability to change is a result of a series of ingrained rules and customs. Those rules fail to be subject to significant change because the humans who are the subjects of those regulations are themselves unable to determine those regulations. In short, this is a society in which the question of what is right and just, of what is a just society, quite simply fails to be asked. Instead, one merely defers to external authorities, to the rules that have been handed down from one's forefathers, in order to determine what is to be done. (The scenes of Louis XVI's incapacity to make a self-informed decision imply such things: when meeting with his advisors, especially on the issue of funding the American War of Independence, Louis shows himself to be as clueless and dimwitted as he is in the bedroom.) For democracy, questions of change and of what constitutes a just society are both central and unanswerable – unanswerable in any definitive sense. Instead, their answers are always up for grabs, always capable of being reconsidered, undermined or improved upon. These might seem throwaway lines – that democracy is a matter of change or continued questioning – but it is Cavell's insistence on linking such change and



questioning with the need for asserting one's *cogito ergo sum* that are worth defending.

In a carefully considered critique of Cavell's approach to politics, Espen Hammer argues that, by focusing so much of the stakes of the political on the issue of the individual's search for self-authenticity, Cavell falls into the trap of political romanticism. Political participation and activity, those things which are specific to the public nature of politics and thus are not matters belonging to the personal realm are, for Hammer, elided by Cavell's insistence on, Hammer claims, 'an aestheticized leap into a self-indulgent concern with individual purity' (Hammer 2006, 170). These are strong criticisms but they fail the test of the modern reinvention of democracy which both Cavell and *Marie Antoinette* are keen to emphasize: that modern democracy goes hand-in-hand with the invention of modern subjectivity and the quest for self-reliance. This does not automatically lead to a 'self-indulgent concern with individual purity' (though it might), but more pertinently leads to a constant questioning of the self, a constant searching for one's identity and a constant desire to assert one's own 'I am'. Needless to say that this self-questioning goes hand-in-hand with, and cannot be dissociated from, the questioning of the society one finds oneself in and the 'place' where one finds oneself in that society. It is those searchings and questionings which are not undertaken at the court of Versailles – where the question of a 'self' is not at stake – by which the character of Marie Antoinette cannot abide and for which she is willing to sacrifice herself so that others – those peasants protesting outside the palace of Versailles as much as those who stormed the Bastille and eventually those who will bring forth the Revolution – so that these people might indeed have the opportunity of managing to assert their own *cogito*, their own 'I am, I exist'.

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