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Feminine Film Style: Does it Really Exist?
A Case Study of Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*
and Zoe Cassavete's *Broken English*

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Masculinity and femininity in American cinema has always been a controversial topic. The two constructs have been changing with societal expectations and progression, but in the past, every time women and femininity have been granted a chance to develop in cinema, such as the introduction of the risqué flapper in the 1920s and the femme fatale of the 1950s, these developments were quelled by the inevitable return to traditional gender roles. But, after the feminist movement of the 1960s, there was no doubt about how extremely displeased women were with the current state of gender equality (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Currently in American cinema, more women have been able to work in directing and production jobs, leading to many films that subvert the traditional hegemonic patriarchal views. The integration of women into bigger roles in cinema have led many to claim that film styles can be gendered just because of the director of the movie. This is sadly not the case, because women are not required to have a distinct style when they create their movies. Two women directors that subvert traditional views of gender expectations and are an example of a gendered view of film styles are Zoe Cassavetes and Sofia Coppola with their films *Broken English* (2007) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), respectively. Although both directors have created undoubtedly female empowering films, neither truly have a distinct feminine style due to massive style and presentation differences. The differences between *Broken English* (2007) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006) are best noted through the portrayal of the main characters, and the way both directors use the film theories of narcissism and voyeurism.

To accurately analyze these two films, I had to utilize sources for background information, as

well as other film analyses. The main source that provides the background information on film theory and history comes from Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2004); while the film analyses are from Todd Kennedy (2010), Pam Cook (2006), as well as Christina Lane and Nicole Richter (2012). For information on Sofia Coppola and Zoe Cassavetes, an interview by *New York* (2007), and a book about Coppola's life and family by Vincent LoBrutto and Harriet Morrison (2012), provides plenty.

Juxtaposing Feminine Film Styles

Before I take a closer look at Cassavetes's and Coppola's films, it is best to learn why the two were ever being juxtaposed to begin with. Both directors come from families of successful filmmakers, and are known friends. The two of them have even worked together on multiple projects, beginning in the early 1990s. Their most notable project together was a short running Comedy Central series called *Hi-Octane* in 1995 (LoBrutto & Morrison, 2012, p.85). Based on their similar backgrounds and close friendship, the conjecture that they were influenced by many of the same things is probable. In fact, it only makes the differences between their directing styles even more interesting.

The first distinct feature that proves there is no such thing as a formula for a feminine style is how Cassavetes and Coppola portray their main characters in their films. Cassavetes's main character, Nora, is a thirty-something woman feeling the pressure of her family and friends, as well as society, to find love and get married. This pressure slowly builds over the course of the movie, causing Nora to resort to using the crutch of alcohol or cigarettes. In fact, there is almost never a scene in *Broken English* that shows Nora not consuming one or the other, usually in copious amounts.

Current societal expectations force audience members to view smoking or drinking in excess to be a rather masculine quality. This idea is also supported by how Nora can be seen eating more food than male counterparts on screen, having male characters bring her drinks or dote on her, and occasionally sitting with her legs spread wide instead of the expected crossed legs in a "lady-like" fashion. In fact,

many of the men portrayed in the film are highly effeminized through their actions and how they talk, while the women take control and do as they please, which is a major subversion of classic gender expectations. This is very much the antithesis of Marie Antoinette's portrayal in her movie of the same name. While Nora takes to drinking and smoking to deal with the anxiety of her situation, Marie finds solace in fashion and foods; both of which are highly eroticized so that there is a sensuality portrayed while still managing to fill a void inside of Marie, even if only for a short time, and allowing her to build her sense of self (Lane & Richter, 2012, p. 199). Nora's use of excess fills a void but does not enable her to become more comfortable with her situation. While it is not correct to say that Marie's use of excess soothes her all of the time, since it inevitably becomes her downfall, it does equip her to become more confident in her situation and play her role as a royal wife much easier.

Another difference between Nora and Marie is Marie's constant objectification. While Coppola wants to draw attention to the way Marie is on display to the audience (Kennedy, 2010, p.52), Cassavetes does the opposite. Cassavetes does not want her audience to see any objectification of Nora; she instead wants to portray Nora as an independent woman dealing with the pressure to fall into social norms. Cassavetes's gaze (or point of view) shows Nora's ever-present anxiety through many close up facial shots peppered throughout the film. Instead of showing how women tend to be objectified, Cassavetes intended to have her audience empathize with Nora's cynical worldview toward the pressure women face to have someone in one's life in order to feel fulfilled, or fit in. This intention is very different from Coppola's desire to make a statement about women's portrayal in film, and can be observed immediately once her film starts. In one of the very first scenes of *Marie Antoinette* (2006), Marie is forced by protocol to be dressed by three other women. Like Kennedy (2010) says, this first scene influences the audience to recognize Marie's lack of input in her own affairs, as well as her objectification (p.52). By creating a relatable film about a warm but naive character trapped by circumstances she can't change (Cook, 2006, p.39), Coppola fabricated a piece that raised important questions about women's relation to

communication and silence through her use of visuals and sounds (Lane & Richter, 2012, p. 193-194). Coppola's complex use of aesthetics and presentation is absent in Cassavetes's film because Cassavetes did not nearly have as much focus on such issues of objectification in her film, and instead created *Broken English* (2007) in response to the questions she received about marriage in order to be make a comment on how society seems to think people are only happy when sharing their life with someone ("CELLULOID HEIR," 2007). Without each director's way of portraying their main characters, neither Cassavetes nor Coppola could have been successful in proving the point of their films.

Narcissism and Voyeurism

Coppola and Cassavetes also use the film theories of narcissism and voyeurism differently in order to make their statements about women's issues, adding to the evidence against a set type of style that can be described as unmistakably feminine. Narcissism in film occurs when the narrative wants the audience to identify and relate to the characters (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 233), while voyeurism can be defined in film as how audiences receive some sort of pleasure from viewing characters in a sexualized way (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 233). Both directors explore these ideas differently seeing as how Cassavetes only utilizes narcissism, while Coppola uses both of these film theories strategically in order to further prove her point about objectification and how audience's look at film. What is compelling about how Cassavetes's sole use of narcissism is how in typical Hollywood movies, a narcissistic presentation is usually based on identifying with active and aggressive male characters (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 233). Throughout *Broken English* (2007), Nora is the main focus of the camera while actively searching for someone to love, and aggressively running from a romantic partnership when the chance is available. Even when Nora decides to stop running from her fear of romance, she actively goes to Paris to search for the man who became her missed opportunity. This narcissistic presentation supports Nora's definition as a masculine character, despite her gender, as well as adds to the previous

evidence from how she was presented in the film.

While Coppola also uses narcissism, she does so in order to shape the meaning behind her use of voyeurism. *Marie Antoinette* (2006) utilizes a unique fusion between the two, resulting in Coppola subverting her own voyeuristic exhibition in order to make commentary about the male gaze, eventually transforming the presentation into narcissism. In the beginning of *Marie Antoinette*, Marie is shown surrounded by her vices while eating cake, foreshadowing her later indulgence in excess of food and fashion. During this scene, Marie looks into the camera seductively while taking a bite of her cake, proving that Coppola is well aware of how such shots are voyeuristic and are viewed as appealing to a male audience. Through her awareness, Coppola is asking the viewers take notice of how they become uncomfortable with her display, and realize what it feels like to have someone gaze upon them (Kennedy, 2010, p. 52). This idea of being gazed upon also comes up through multiple point of view shots, and can especially be observed in the scene in which Marie arrives at Versailles. When Marie leaves her carriage, she is forced to walk between two groups of welcomers that all silently stare at her as she passes; but what makes this scene special is how the camera does not always show Marie, but mostly the faces of the silent onlookers. Through Coppola's use of camera to stress the importance of the crowd's appearance and their silence when they look at Marie (Kennedy, 2010, P.52), Coppola falls into narcissism because she wants her audience to feel and empathize with the scrutiny that Marie faces as she enters Versailles. Coppola's fantastic union of the two film theories manages to not only paint Marie in her feminine glory, but also to make a strong statement against how women are portrayed in most cinema.

Feminine Film Style: A Mythical Convention

Despite how both directors have similar backgrounds and life influences that prove their awareness of traditional patriarchal standards in film, they both broke off and created their own

filmmaking style that can neither be defined as masculine or feminine due to the inconsistencies of how they chose to show, and tell, the stories of their main characters, as well as their use of narcissistic and voyeuristic film theories. As ideas of gender continue to grow and recognize more differences, the argument that a film style has to be gendered because of the director has no basis at all. While Cassavetes frames Nora as more masculine character and keeps her filmmaking style and statements about society simple in order to create her empowering film, Coppola keeps Marie's feminine integrity intact through complex direction while still creating a feminist argument. By comparing both *Broken English* (2007) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), one cannot claim that films made by women can be any more feminine than one wishes to view them. Style is completely subjective, and any person can claim that a film style is or is not a certain way if they wish to say so. There are no requirements for a film made by women to fall into a certain way of presenting itself in order to make a statement about society.

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