

IN WHAT WAYS ARE HISTORICAL WOMEN PORTRAYED IN BIOPICS?

Women in Film: 'Lost' and Contemporary Histories

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Abstract

Since the genre's conceptualisation, female subjects have been central to biographical films. However, scholars have frequently favoured biopics based on male figures, resulting in ignorance towards, even 21st-century, misogynistic portrayals of historical women. Therefore, this essay investigates the extent to which female-centric biopics perpetuate tropes of women as sexualised, their husbands' assets, and suffering, hysterical victims. Through examining *Jackie* and *Marie Antoinette*, it is undeniable that despite the directors' 'feminist' intentions, filmmakers' desires to craft visually rich, pathos-evoking biopics result in the exploitation and dehumanisation of subjects, as an audience's attention is desired above the portrayal of multifaceted protagonists.

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Women in Film: 'Lost' and Contemporary Histories

In what ways are historical women portrayed in biopics?

Introduction

From 1930s 'star system' (Erhart, 2018, p. 35) to contemporary cinema, women have long existed in biopics. Initially a 'producer-driven, formulaic genre' (Baccanti, 2023) to advance stardoms of Garbo and Shearer (Bingham, 2010, p. 217), this genre has transformed into depicting 'women's journeys to find agency' (Erhart, 2018, p. 13), in line with third and fourth-wave feminism (Pruitt, 2023). However, Bingham's '*Whose lives are they anyway?*' exposes misogynistic tropes within modern female-centred biopics: portrayals of subjects as sexualised, extensions of their husbands, and hysterical, suffering victims (Bingham, 2010). Through Larraín's *Jackie* (Larraín, 2016) and Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (Coppola, 2006), this essay will explore how, despite these auteurs' intentions to subvert misogynistic archetypes in crafting didactically 'feminist' portraits, both exacerbate patriarchy through perpetuating antiquated stereotypes of their subjects, intentionally or not.

Sexualisation

Combining psychoanalysis with filmmaking, Mulvey's 'Male Gaze' theory suggests women's on-screen sexualisation is an inherent aspect of cinema historically crafted by male directors and spectators (Mulvey, 1975).

Subsequently, whilst a female director helms *Marie Antoinette*, Coppola perpetuates this gaze in a film centred upon 'looking' (Ferriss, 2021, p. 16), sexualising Antoinette through 'highly-stylized objectification' (Lane & Richter, 2011, p. 190). Within the 'I Want Candy' sequence, Coppola's intellectual montage aligns Antoinette with treats she devours, diminishing her to a sexually consumable object. Moreover, hyper-sexualised extreme-close-ups of Antoinette's lips fragment her body, as Coppola indicates her status as a sexual, childbearing item to the 1700s French monarchy and scopophilic contemporary audiences.

However, perhaps 'feminist auteur' (Lane & Richter, 2011, p. 190) Coppola instead highlights Antoinette's power over her sexualisation, and conscious use of 'consumption to create herself as a spectacle' (Radner, 2011, p. 7). Whilst close-ups

of Antoinette's legs and hands during a sexual encounter suggest Coppola endorses voyeuristic sexualisation, her grin and the raunchy, non-diegetic 'Kings of the Wild Frontier' instead indicate a reclamation of historically denied sexual autonomy (Letzing, 2022). Arguably, Coppola defies patriarchal conventions in perpetuating 'sex liberation' ideals of third-wave feminism (MasterClass, 2022), bestowing sexual power to her subject, not scopophilic spectators.

However, despite Coppola's glamorisation of sexualisation, Antoinette's handover to France highlights dangerous ramifications of objectifying a, then 14-year-old, subject. Antoinette is stripped in a sequence of invasive close-ups that reinforce 'patriarchal gaze' and 'guide the viewer's eyes' to 'her fragile and young body' (Backman Rogers, 2019, p. 121). Moreover, central framing deplors such exploitative sexualisation as inhumanely isolating, suggesting reviews that *Marie Antoinette* is a shallow story of superficiality (Backman Rogers, 2019, p. 116) horrifyingly ignore Coppola's expository manifesto on the devastating sexualisation of girls, and broader female subjects.

Conversely, *Jackie*'s screenwriter Oppenheim intended to altogether deviate from sensuality and Kennedy-Onassis' media portrayals as a hypersexualised (Larraín, et al., 2016) victim of 'revenge porn' (Bianchi, 2023). Devoid of nude shots or sexual scenes that dominate psychological biopics like *Blonde* (Dominik, 2022), Larraín instead portrays Kennedy-Onassis' reserved glamour: homage to Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961) through black dresses and pearls emphasises her as an 'icon of elegance' (Wilson, 2015) to be revered, not objectified.

However, levels of cinematographic voyeurism necessary to delve into Kennedy-Onassis' psyche frequently cross into sexualising scopophilia. As Larraín intended to craft an introspective 'mood-driven interpretation' (Jacobs, 2021) of his grieving subject, Kennedy-Onassis spends much of *Jackie* alone, with infrequent dialogue enabling an audience's sexualising 'controlling and curious gaze' (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6) to fester. Notably, 'Kubrick-esque' (James, 2016) voyeuristic tracking shots of

Kennedy-Onassis silently tramping through the White House (fig. 1) encroach 'too far into its subject's already frail personal space' (Lodge, 2016). Furthermore, sensual reds and pinks and semi-sheer gowns exacerbate spectatorial pleasure from omnipresently gazing at a vulnerable, sexualised woman. Moreover, Larraín's hypersexual track down Kennedy-Onassis' leg following her husband's murder implies a loss of humanising psychological exploration in favour of the 'pleasure' of looking (Mulvey, 1975, p. 5). Concerningly, intertwining visual stylisation, sexualisation and grief suggest that exposed, yet beautiful, women are consumable sexual objects. Arguably, this is a dangerous establishment of a patriarchal power imbalance between the vulnerable and the voyeur amongst the contemporary #MeToo movements resisting exploitation (United Nations, 2018), raising questions surrounding the merit of a male director to helm female-centric stories in this tumultuous milieu.



Figure 1: Jackie (2016). Medium wide shot of Jackie Kennedy-Onassis tramping through the White House.

Overall, Coppola and Larraín repeatedly portray their female subjects as sexualised objects. Whilst Larraín's intentions were feminist in exploring Kennedy-Onassis' psyche above her physicality, and Coppola's in decrying Antoinette's exploitation, both auteurs deviate into the voyeuristic male gaze to achieve such aims, exacerbating their subjects' hypersexualised legacies.

Extensions of husbands

From the 'ideologically conservative' (Baccanti, 2023) biopic genre's birth, 'Hollywood promoted a romantic fantasy of marital roles' (Haskell, 2016, p. 2), reducing women to 'love goddesses, mothers' (Haskell, 2016, p. 8) and extensions of their husbands. Both Antoinette and Kennedy-Onassis gained prominence as wives-French Dauphine and American First Lady- raising a challenging paradox in portraying these subjects as autonomous, whilst recognising historical subservience to men.

Similar to Coppola's nuanced female protagonists in *The Virgin Suicides* (Coppola, 1999) and *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003), Antoinette is frequently characterised as liberated from her husband. Crafting Antoinette 'as if she had made the film' (Coppola, 2023, p. 139), Coppola opens *Marie Antoinette* with a wide-shot of her breaking the fourth wall (fig. 2): postmodern self-awareness (Thompson, 2016) that suggests Antoinette, not her husband, drives her life and the biopic's narrative. Such detachment is exemplified in Antoinette's flirtatious pursuit of Fersen at a ball, with her literal elevated position above Fersen indicating, atypically of the 1700s, sexual agency beyond her husband's desires.



Figure 2: *Marie Antoinette* (2006). Wide shot of Marie Antoinette being tended to as she stares into the camera.

However, as 'female biographies' are 'produced in a cultural framework that sees marriage [...] as a woman's ultimate fulfilment' (Bingham, 2010, p. 222), Coppola regularly reduces Antoinette to her husband's heir-producing accessory. Act 2 revolves around Antoinette's inability to conceive, from chastising voiceovers from her mother to a melodramatic breakdown scene (fig. 3), where eye-like wallpaper indicates familial and societal pressure to produce another Dauphin-extension: a male heir. Whilst an asphyxiating dolly-in here indicates Coppola's sympathy towards her subject's reduction to a childbearing appliance, this is voided by the hybridisation of this biopic with a "girly" aesthetic' (Baccanti, 2023). Therefore,



Figure 3: *Marie Antoinette* (2006). Medium wide shot of a forlorn Marie Antoinette, as she holds a letter from her mother.



Figure 4: *Marie Antoinette* (2006). Medium wide shot of Marie Antoinette lying in the grass at Petit Trianon.

Antoinette's visual comparisons to hyperfeminine white gowns (fig. 4), defenceless lambs (Meyer, 2021) and elegant swans (Joyce Elliott, n.d.) diminish her to a subservient wife: a prioritisation of aesthetic over feminist intent. Furthermore,

despite the film's flimsy relationship with 'truth' (Furnell, 2020), Coppola adheres to Fraser's biography about Antoinette (which formed the screenplay's basis) in portraying her refusal to leave Versailles (Bingham, 2010, p. 375), declaring 'my place is here with my husband'. Arguably, Antoinette's autonomy is nullified by such servitude, implying a woman wholly independent from her husband to be a fantasy, in the 1700s' and 2006's milieu.

Similarly, as Larraín positioned *Jackie* in the week following John F. Kennedy's assassination, Kennedy-Onassis' grief patriarchally suggests she is unable to function without her husband: a fading extension of his legacy. Repetitive non-linear flashbacks to JFK indicate Kennedy-Onassis is eternally bound to wifedom, and frequent negative space above her head (fig. 5) suggests JFK's legacy looms above Kennedy-Onassis' life. Additionally, Larraín implies Kennedy-Onassis believes herself to be JFK's possession, stating 'I should have shielded him' in assumption that her life, as her husband's asset, is expendable: reflecting Larraín's initial perception of Kennedy-Onassis to be solely 'the wife of a very important person' (Larraín, 2016). Moreover, however, as the camera predatorily encircles Kennedy-Onassis meeting crowds in Dallas, Larraín deploys sympathy towards such hellish dehumanisation of a subject who 'never wanted fame, [who] just became a Kennedy' and a disregarded accessory. However, compassion does not override the damaging suggestion of Kennedy-Onassis to lack humanity without JFK, with Larraín's utilisation of 1920s-developed (ScanCafe, 2020) 16mm film (Fontaine, 2017) resulting in regressions to century-old misogynistic ideals.



Figure 5: *Jackie* (2016). Medium close up shot of Jackie Kennedy-Onassis being interviewed after JFK's assassination.

However, recognising the irony that a biopic entitled '*Jackie*' 'pushed [Kennedy-Onassis] to the periphery' (Larraín, et al., 2016), Larraín exhibits Kennedy-Onassis' interview with a journalist- a week post-assassination- to endow her with control of her image (Eidelstein, 2016) beyond JFK. With centrally-framed shots reflecting a reclamation of identity, this scene tracks Kennedy-Onassis instructing the journalist

to edit her words 'so this will be [her] own version' of JFK's death: Larraín unshackles Kennedy-Onassis from wifedom. Arguably, Larraín's estrangement of Kennedy-Onassis from JFK, whilst focusing upon his absence, transcends binary perceptions of biopics to be wholly patriarchal or wholly feminist, crafting Polaschek's 'postfeminist biopic' (Baccanti, 2023). 'Mired in [...] outdated conventions' of women's expendability, whilst engaging with fourth-wave feminism in reshaping female narratives (Baccanti, 2023), *Jackie* reflects the crossroads of 2016 American feminism: straddling past and present, with alleged sexual predator Trump's election (BBC News, 2019) amongst rumblings of #MeToo and TimesUp as 'the year of women [...] speaking out' (Crockett, 2017).

Overall, whilst Coppola and Larraín intended to depict their subjects beyond wifedom, Antoinette and Kennedy-Onassis are ultimately portrayed as their husbands' extensions. Even filmmakers intent on subverting patriarchy cannot detach their biopics' narratives from 1700s and 1960s norms of women's dehumanisation, and our contemporary milieu in which gender inequality persists (The Women CEO, n.d.)

Suffering victims

Amongst the domestic melodrama's acceleration (Bingham, 2010, p. 218), 1950s Hollywood conceptualised a new patriarchal biopic trope: female 'victims who pay the price for their ambitions' (Bingham, 2010, p. 214) on a 'downward trajectory' (Bingham, 2010, p. 218) to madness. From Montez's fall from royal mistress to caged animal (Ophüls, 1955), to Kellerman's career ending with a spinal injury (LeRoy, 1952), female biopics focus 'on women more famous for suffering and victimization than for anything they accomplished' (Bingham, 2010, p. 214). This is notable in *Jackie* and *Marie Antoinette*, narratives about a beheaded monarch and widow.

As Larraín's oeuvre consists of 'bracingly direct character portraits' (Harvard Film Archive, 2013), *Jackie* unflinchingly examines Kennedy-Onassis' psyche: fraught amongst JFK's assassination. Before visuals commence, Levi's haunting score characterises Kennedy-Onassis as a doomed victim, with the opening chords' descent from high-pitched to ominously low reflecting her plummet into grief-propelled depression. Moreover, *Jackie* utilises similar close-ups to Larraín's *Spencer* (centered on Princess Diana) (Larraín, 2021) (fig. 6; fig. 7), suggesting the subjects' asphyxiation by media, status and grief reduces them to powerless victims. Red hues here evoke terror (Symbolic Nature, 2023) towards these vulnerable victims' safety, as Larraín forebodes his subjects' descent into substance abuse (alcohol; drugs; bulimia) and patriarchally indicates these women to be insane, and requiring protection.



Figure 6: *Jackie* (2016). Extreme close up shot of Jackie Kennedy-Onassis wiping her husband's blood off of her face.



Figure 7: *Spencer* (2021). Close up shot of Princess Diana looking towards a crowd of paparazzi photographers.

Furthermore, Larraín cements Kennedy-Onassis as a hysterical victim when she admits her suicidal ideation, underscored by non-diegetic string vibratos that forebode her psyche imploding. Larraín's frenetic crosscutting further indicates Kennedy-Onassis' loss of temporality and her anguish's cyclicity, with a dolly-in on her face reflecting grief's encroachment and her 'bond of suffering with the past': central to this patriarchal genre (Erhart, 2018, p. 38). Despite *Jackie* concluding with the triumphant 'Camelot', it is Larraín's multisensory, tumultuous mood that lingers: a dangerous diminishment of political women to hysterical victims in a year that could have seen the first female US President (CNN, 2016).

Conversely, Coppola deviates from Antoinette's 'tragic heroine' (Bingham, 2010, p. 372) characterisation in Fraser's biography, avoiding 'the victimhood spiral'

(Bingham, 2010, p. 376) to salvage Antoinette 'from a historical legacy' that has portrayed her 'as a figurehead of hatred' (Backman Rogers, 2019, p. 117). Even as a mob rages outside Versailles in Act Three, Coppola portrays Antoinette's acquisition of 'strength of character' (Bingham, 2010, p. 366) as she bows before revolutionaries in respect, rather than hysterically fleeing (fig.



Figure 8: *Marie Antoinette* (2006). Extreme wide shot of Marie Antoinette bowing at revolutionaries outside Versailles.

8). Moreover, Coppola's central framing and Antoinette's passionate 'don't be frightened' implies her to be a pillar of composure: a reflection of her accelerating power to authoritatively silence the mob's cacophony. Rather than depicting her as a terrified victim, Coppola endows Antoinette with a resolve unmatched by her cowering husband: a narrative reshaped from psychological decline to gradual empowerment.

However, Antoinette is not portrayed as suffering-free. As the mob rages, Coppola's transformation of the film's pastel palette to reds and blacks reflects Antoinette's fall from naivety to dread as she awaits death. Candles and a diegetic ticking clock emphasise Antoinette's impermanence, indicating her inevitable fate as a pained victim of revolution. Whilst Coppola refuses to display Antoinette's execution to not 'dwell on [her] punishment' (Bingham, 2010, p. 366), Antoinette's concluding declaration- 'I'm saying goodbye'- crafts pathos through the heart-break of a woman ripped from her home once again: undeniably, a victim. With *Marie Antoinette* assumed to be semi-autobiographically (Backman Rogers, 2019, p. 115) about Coppola 'as a celebrity member of one of Hollywood's royal families' (Cook, 2021), perhaps portrayals of the Dauphine's discontent reflect Coppola's disillusionment with fame, exemplifying the contemporary relevance of victimisation, scapegoating, and suffering.

Overall, *Jackie* and *Marie Antoinette* highlight their troubled subjects' suffering and victimisation. However, whilst Larraín's mood-driven approach damagingly portrays women to be homogenously hysterical, 'feminist' Coppola intertwines empowerment amongst Antoinette's suffering, crafting a multifaceted protagonist beyond 'tragic heroine' and patriarchal genre conventions.

Conclusion

To conclude, through examining *Marie Antoinette* and *Jackie*, women in biopics remain damagingly portrayed through patriarchal tropes (hypersexualised; wives; victims). From one perspective, Coppola and Larraín endow subjects with control of their narratives, from Antoinette's reclamation of sexual autonomy to Kennedy-Onassis crafting her legacy beyond her husband's: an alignment with 3rd and 4th-wave feminism. However, arguably Coppola and Larraín's reliance upon male gaze-centric, cinematic conventions ultimately results in subjects' dehumanisation to suffering, sexualised and expendable, from Coppola's fixation on Antoinette's childlessness to Larraín melodramatising Kennedy-Onassis' anguish. Therefore, prioritisation of aesthetic and pathos over portraying multifaceted subjects results in the nullification of feminist intent, indicating the genre remains rooted in misogynistic ideals of its 1930s conceptualisation.

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