

AN AUTEUR OF DECADENCE: SOFIA COPPOLA AND THE UNBEARABLE HEAVINESS OF COMING OF AGE

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ABSTRACT

As a filmmaker, Sofia Coppola is often under critiques considering her visual excess frivolous. This article is an auteur study towards the thematic and stylistic tendencies of Sofia Coppola's films. Through analysis of her *mise-en-scene*, I contend that Coppola, as a film auteur, tends to glorify the image of the lost generation. This glorification is bolstered by her signature style that echoes the spirit of the Decadent movement in the late-nineteenth-century European art scenes, which was preoccupied with the idea of *fin de siècle* or society in transition at the end of time. This idea is exemplified most vividly by motifs such as hedonistic behavior, visual excess, and cultural decline.

Keywords: film auteur, Sofia Coppola, Decadence art, liminality, and hyperreality

ABSTRAK

Sebagai seorang sutradara, Sofia Coppola sering dituduh menciptakan imaji-imaji yang gemerlap dan berlebihan, namun dangkal. Artikel ini adalah sebuah studi atas film-film Sofia Coppola untuk membongkar kecenderungan karakteristik tematik dan gayanya. Melalui analisis terhadap mise-en-scene film-filmnya, artikel ini memberikan argumentasi bahwa Sofia Coppola sebagai seorang auteur memiliki kecenderungan melakukan glorifikasi akan imaji kehancuran sebuah generasi. Upaya glorifikasi ini terutama didukung oleh gaya khas Coppola yang menggaungkan semangat gaya seni Dekadensi dari Eropa di akhir abad 19. Seni Dekadensi memiliki ketertarikan khusus terhadap fenomena masyarakat dalam transisi di akhir zaman. Fenomena ini terutama diekspresikan lewat karakteristik yang mengacu pada perilaku hedonis, keberlebihan visual, dan kehancuran budaya.

Kata kunci: pencipta film, Sofia Coppola, seni Dekadensi, liminalitas, dan hiperealitas

1. INTRODUCTION

Sofia Coppola is rarely thought of as a film *auteur*. She doesn't represent a typical image of a white male European filmmaker showing anti-establishment gestures in his art. This is the classical notion of auteur which is popularised in France during the 1920s which aims to distinguish art cinema filmmakers with unique authorial voice from scenario-led film directors commissioned by the studio

(Hayward, 2013). As a director who came from a privileged upbringing, there is a popular debate stemming from the clear connection between Coppola's works and her life. As a film critic of *Indiewire* pointed out, "Although she's hardly the only filmmaker to come from wealth, Coppola has been uniquely diligent -- or, if you will, obsessive -- in making that privilege the subject of her movies" (Adams & Adams, 2013).

The recurrent criticism toward the connection between her films and her upper-class upbringing indicates a popular and misleading view on how the *auteur* label is rightly justified from an autobiographical reading. The highly self-conscious way Coppola's films refer to the privileged world is so striking that it made a film critic of *Libération* writes, "Cinema is for Coppola a mirror in which she looks at herself, not a mirror she holds to the world" (Poirier, 2006).

Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* suffers the most from such criticisms for being figuratively "an empty hall of mirrors". Nevertheless, the mirror trope is essential to understand Sofia Coppola's filmic practice. Firstly, on her visual excess, that gives the impression of glamorous surface that suffers from "lack of depth", and secondly, to her self-reference practice.

Both tendencies of Sofia Coppola's film practices are, in fact, a key to understanding her *auteur* tendency. Her practice of visual excess as part of her style signature is a symptom of the Decadence style, while her practice of self-reference is an echo of common practice found in the *auteur* filmmaking tradition, namely self-reflexivity. Both tendencies are part of her critical mode toward a different world than the one Poirier assumed it is supposed to be like. Coppola's body of works operate as a critique toward the notion of American hyperreality. It refers especially to the

current state of hypermedia and its excess, namely the media-saturated society, notably represented by the omnipresent camera gaze found in her films.

Another point worth raising about her filmic practice is the recurring motif of coming-of-age. The narrative of rites-of-passage or adolescence in Coppola's films specifically illustrate the theme of liminality or a sense of being 'in a border' or in transition, and the anxiety it creates. The unarticulated anxiety and a recurring theme of alienation in Coppola's films, is a resonance toward the characteristic of the Decadence that "recognizes a nothingness at the centre of existence and dreads the emptiness within himself" (Reed, 1985).

The whole attitude of refinement of corruption found in the criticisms toward Coppola's films is also another echo of the Decadence style. The Decadent movement in the end of 19th Century European art scenes was particularly interested with the idea of *fin de siècle* and society in transition at the end of time, especially represented by motifs such as hedonistic behaviour, visual excess and cultural decline.

In this article, I argue that such themes, style, and motifs as found in Sofia Coppola's films ultimately characterize her *mise-en-scene*. The addition of *mise-en-scene* into the notion of film *auteur* is made by French film critics of Cahiers du Cinema in 1950s. It refers to "a director's discernible style through *mise-en-scene* or

to filmmaking practices where the director's signature was as much in evidence on the script/ scenario as it was on the film product itself" (Hayward, 2013). In Sofia Coppola's case, it manifests as her 'inner world' or *la vie interieur* which is best explained by Eric Rohmer as:

Those sorts of sentiments which one loves to hide most deeply within oneself—not only repressed humiliation, but the disgust or the lassitude which one feels for oneself—that the audacity of such a subject can appear only after some reflection (as cited in Hess, 1974).

2. METHOD

The most frequently referred theory about auteur is Andrew Sarris's *Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962* (1962). Even though Sarris's article is useful to pinpoint what to look at when we examine the authorial quality of a film director, Hayward reveals that Sarris's article cannot be regarded a proper theory. In his article, Sarris is allegedly mistranslated the concept of *politique des auteurs* which was initiated as a polemic by the critics of Cahiers du Cinema. This cultural polemic was elevated as 'theory' by Sarris with a nationalistic motive to raise the American cinema as "the only good cinema, with one of two European art films worthy of mention" (Hayward, 2013). Hence, other than several articles written to examine certain film directors, there is no 'Auteur Theory'. There are only auteur studies with different approaches in understanding film

directors as auteur or author of film texts.

The traditional approach to auteur studies tend to only focuses on the director as the sole producer of meaning. This creates a misconception that auteur studies only focuses on the canon of good or great directors. However, Susan Hayward's study indicates that auteur studies is always in development. Hayward (2013) categorises the development of auteur studies into at least three phases (see Fig. 1).

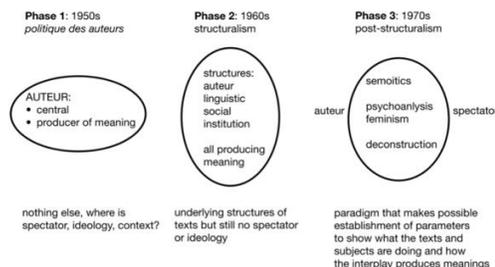


Fig. 1 The three phases of auteur studies

Based on Hayward's mapping of auteur studies' development, this study can be situated within the post-structuralism paradigm. It takes the auteur-intertextual approach which describes the auteur as "a figure constructed out of her or his film: because of specific hallmarks, the film is ostensibly a certain filmmaker's and also influenced by that of others, etc" (Hayward, 2013). Thus, I take into account both the assumed cultural and aesthetic conditions that operate at the time and place of text creation, such as Coppola's cultural upbringing which influence the way she understand her material. I also consider the reception context of Coppola's films, that is the way she understands her audience and

the way the film audience and critics understand her.

Furthermore, to uncover the signature style of a film *auteur*, we need to understand the formal design of her/ his filmic elements to create a coherent cinematic experience. Thus, in doing auteur studies, analysis of the filmic formal elements is essential. The formal elements in discussion are film narrative and film style. Analysis of film narrative constitutes the way story is unfold through the plot, characters, events, cause-and-effect relationship, and the time-and-space context. Analysis of film style refers to filmic treatments such as the cinematography (everything within a shot), *mise-en-scene* (everything within a scene), sounds (the relationship between image and sound), and editing (the relationship between shots) of a film (Bordwell et al., 2020). It is worth to note that in this study, the film formal analysis serves to answer the research question, not to describe the whole films' formal design.

For this auteur study, I look at some filmic formal elements in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*, *Lost in Translation*, *Marie Antoinette*, *Somewhere*, and *The Bling Ring*. I chose the films based on their similar narrative and stylistic themes. I will discuss these themes further to reveal their cultural significance.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Rites-of-Passage Narrative as Motif of Liminality

In a particular scene towards the end of *The Virgin Suicides* (Coppola, 1999), the Lisbon girls finally on phone calls basis with the neighbourhood boys. They take turns calling each other and pick up different songs to be played and listened to together. Instead of really talking to each other, they choose to communicate through audio-based mediums, namely the telephone and music. This particular scene illustrates Sofia Coppola's recurring theme of incommunicable feelings; an anxiety problem stemming from human's inability to express themselves, while at the same time having the wish to connect with other people. The communication process, as a means of reaching out to other people, is a border that the teenagers are overly anxious to cross. They are trapped in a liminal space which forces them to use other means of medium for self-expression.

In *Marie Antoinette* (Coppola, 2006), rather than using music, Marie uses fashion as the medium of self-definition. Early in the story, the audiences see with various scenes of undressing and redressing Marie. The story of how Marie has to give up her Austrian identity to become the Dauphine of France and submit herself under the Versailles's court authority marked by the act of dressing up. Later in the film, Marie over-indulges herself in dressing up according to her taste, not the

court's convention. While she has given up her initial identity to the Versailles' court, she finds a way to create a new identity using the means available to her. The irony of using fashion as the medium of Marie's self-definition is that, while it is her weapon to rebel against the court, it is only rendered possible by using her privilege of being the royal member of the said court.

The coming-of-age narrative as a motif of liminality in Coppola's film stems from the vague state of being stuck in the border. In *The Virgin Suicides*, it is a borderline of being no longer a kid, but not yet an adult. The Lisbon household is the liminal space that traps the girls into the state of childhood, while they inevitably have to grow up.

In *Marie Antoinette*, her identity is split between being an Austrian and French; both an outsider and an insider. The sense of being 'in the border' is appropriately described in Arnold Van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passages*, an anthropological work that first introduced the term 'liminal' into the field of anthropology in 1909. Van Gennep (2019) primarily describes rites of passage as having three-part structure of, namely separation, liminal period, and reassimilation. in which "the initiate is first stripped of the social status that he or she possessed before the ritual, inducted into the liminal period of transition, and finally given his or her new status and

reassimilated into society" (La Shure, 2011).

In *Marie Antoinette*, the handover scene is an echo of the Gennep's rites-of-passage ritual. Austria hands Marie over in the border territory of France and Austria. In this process, Marie is being stripped of any association with Austria before all the delegations' eyes to embrace her new French identity and formally introduced to the court of Versailles.

The theme of liminality is also translated into Coppola's narrative space. In *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013), almost every celebrity house that the teen thieves break into is designed in the Bauhaus style. The architecture highlights the idea of transparency, of an almost invisible border, but a border nevertheless that separates those celebrities from the common folk, while at the same time maintaining access of visibility. This is a kind of border with the mechanics of separation that relies on gaze and in a sense is similar to a screen.

By breaking into the celebrities' houses and playing with their stuff, those kids are breaking into the border of adolescence and imagining themselves as adults. The act of 'breaking and entering' in *The Bling Ring* is not simply an act of theft, in the sense of an illegal attempt to gain material possession, but rather an act of identity theft in which the teen thieves think that, by acting and performing as adults, they pass the initiation process to join that

of adulthood.

3.2. Visual Excess and the Aesthetic of Decadence

“This, Madame, is Versailles”
 (Coppola, 2006).

The world full of dancing in the club and strolling through Los Angeles with designer handbags and overpriced cars as depicted in *The Bling Ring* sums up the film’s main idea of hedonistic excess. This is a ringing resemblance to *Marie Antoinette* that deals with the story of the hedonist Queen of France. In conveying the idea of hedonistic excess, both films share a similar medium, namely fashion.

In *Marie Antoinette*, the use of fashion as leitmotif could be found especially in the dressing up scenes. Marie’s first experience of waking up in Versailles is both a funny and revealing scene of the court’s etiquette of appearances that Marie finds ridiculous. The answer to Marie’s objection, quoted above, is a perfect epitaph of the film’s visual theme and Sofia Coppola’s style in general. By comparing the nature of Versailles’s culture to dressing up, the film refers to its own style as visual excess; an aesthetic of appearance in which the surface is the substance.

John R Reed (1985) describes the Decadence as an artistic method that is “highly self-conscious” and “may include a degree of self-mockery” by using technique of “dissolution and reconstruction” to depict

“scenes of longing, aspiration, frustration, and despair”.

Reconstruction is a crucial part of Sofia Coppola’s filmic practice, especially to deal with the idea of the past. *The Virgin Suicides* tells the story of the Lisbon girls through a group of boys’ memories. This remembered past is represented through the nostalgia mode that gives a sense of mourning toward a certain irrevocable past. The motif that depicts this notion could be found in the narrative in which the boys and the viewers never really know the reason for the girls’ suicides, as it is knowledge of the past and thus inaccessible.

Reconstruction in *Marie Antoinette* is even more interesting. The opening *direct address* shot of Marie laughing, the anachronistic appearance of a pair of Converse shoes, the use of contemporary music, and the overly stylized fashion indicate a self-mocking tone toward the historical film genre convention. The *mise-en-scene* of the film is highly stylized, rather than historically accurate. Rather than an attempt of historiography (rewriting history about *Marie Antoinette*), the film is a contemporary attempt to make sense of the past. Like any other question about the past, it primarily concerns with the present. *Marie Antoinette* self-consciously points out this connection of the past and the present within the film’s mode of reconstructing history. In other words, *Marie Antoinette* refuses to give false impression as a

medium to get access to the truth about the past. It is a historical film that demonstrates the limit of historical film to offer history.

In relation to the Decadence style, *Marie Antoinette's* narrative also suits the idea of the *fin de siècle*; Versailles at the peak of its overindulgence in hedonistic behaviour, right before the French Revolution, is a society at the edge of transition. Versailles in this context is a liminal space for the Decadents; a group of people immensely dependent on a kind of lifestyle they actually despise. The pre-revolutionary Versailles might be visually celebrated, but with regard to its dissolution. The visually excessive style of *Marie Antoinette* is an ironic treatment toward the irony of the past it refers to, since the Decadence “above all, is concerned with transitional states in art, society, and psychology” (Reed, 1985).

Reed’s examination of the Decadence, as both social phenomenon and aesthetic definition, is useful to aid understanding of Coppola’s film style as an aesthetic response to a particular social condition. However, there is a problem of simply labelling Sofia Coppola as a Decadent filmmaker. The Decadent is a distinguished characteristic of European culture in the 19th Century; a *fin de siècle* phenomenon that signifies a social transition. However, the Decadence becomes problematic when it frames an American phenomenon since according to

David Weir (2008), “In America, the cultural conditions that produced the possibility of decadence in Europe simply did not exist”. Therefore, relying on Coppola’s style signature alone is not a sufficient argument to name her as an *auteur*. There is also another distinctive characteristic of Sofia Coppola’s film practice that needs to be considered. It is a practice commonly found in *auteur* filmmaking tradition, namely self-reflexivity.

3.3. Under the Camera Gaze: Sofia Coppola’s Self-Reflexivity

“It’s the idea that the phone has become everybody’s camera and everybody’s a photographer, and the immediacy of that is translated out into the public.” (Prince, 2013)

Sofia Coppola would be an oddity within the conventional canon of film *auteur*. Her privileged background does not fit well into the perceived notion of film *auteur*, which predominantly stems from the idea of a great individual artist with a clear artistic vision who struggles to make his or her masterpiece. Her father is the big American *auteur*, her family trade in filmmaking through American Zoetrope for the last 30 years, and she made her *début* as a film actress when she was a baby. Comparable to *Marie Antoinette*, Sofia Coppola is a royal member of the “Hollywood aristocracy”.

The general perception towards Coppola’s place of privilege affects the general reading of her films, as Todd

Kennedy pointed out:

Essentially, the implication is that Coppola 1) as a woman, only has the ability to make films because of her economic privilege, 2) only has whatever talent she does possess because of her all-powerful director/father, and 3) because her movies are feminine, can only produce pretty films that "lack depth" (Kennedy, 2010).

The criticism of "lack depth" primarily derives from *Marie Antoinette's* audience reception, which ironically is also one of Coppola's films that openly, "turns in on itself and speaks about its own artistic conventions and presuppositions" (Polan, 1974). The opening scene of Marie blatantly looks into the camera represents the film's attitude of signalling awareness to its own artifice. The *direct-address* shot of Marie, as if she is laughing at the audience, is an opening statement of visual playfulness. The similar motif of playfulness also found in the appearance of an anachronistic pair of Converse shoes and the use of contemporary pop music as soundtrack. Such a playful attitude is an intervention towards the supposed accurate world of historical construction and seamless representational world of a film.

Sofia Coppola's self-reflexivity is not only confined to the filmic system of representation, but also to the contemporary mainstream media culture. Such an idea or reflective thought toward the media is illustrated by the omnipresent camera gaze in Coppola's films, most

notably found in *The Bling Ring*.

The Bling Ring opens with a shot of the teen thieves breaking into a house, as if the security camera recorded it. In this story world of celebrity-obsessed society, Los Angeles full with *paparazzi*, candid security cameras, the teen thieves act and perform their life as if they continuously have an audience. This camera hyper-awareness culture is marked by the teens' habit of using camera phone to produce, and social networks to distribute, their images. If *Marie Antoinette's* world is a world of visual excess, *The Bling Ring's* world is a place where visual excess has been socially naturalized. Visual excess is the quintessential characteristic of the tabloid culture, where glittering images of emptiness are produced and distributed for mass consumption.

In *The Bling Ring*, the celebrities' Bauhaus houses illustrate an "irreversible" gaze play in the mediation process of celebrity culture by the mainstream screen-based media, such as television and the Internet. The house is a metaphor of the transparent performance stage, where the act of seeing also involves being seen. The celebrity-obsessed media no longer only produces pleasure that derives from voyeuristic acts, but also from exhibitionist impulses.

The feeling of constantly being under the omnipresent gaze is also a motif found in *The Virgin Suicides*. The Lisbon family's

story turns into news consumption, represented by the way the neighbours adopt a television gaze. The neighbours consume and respond toward the Lisbon family's story with the mode of detachment-attachment similar to a soap opera audience. In the film, the Lisbons are living their lives as if they are taking part in a reality show on screen, where their act are validated only through the gaze of their neighbours. *Marie Antoinette* takes this gaze motif even further, with the *direct address* shot. Unlike the Lisbons, Marie takes part in the gaze play and puts herself in both positions of subject and object of the gaze. Her life is primarily a performance, a choreographed visual feast as the way it is visually represented. The teen thieves of *The Bling Ring* take the gaze play even further, by actively participating in the process of seeing and being seen in the process of media consumption.

The object/subject positioning of the gaze play in Sofia Coppola's films demonstrates the self-reflexivity practice that refers specifically to the mediation process of mainstream screen-based media. It refers to television spectatorship, celebrity-obsessed culture, and the image-making industry. Rather than a self-reflexivity practice aiming to reveal a specific nature of cinema, it serves as a critical view toward the media-saturated society of current America. Sofia Coppola's

self-reflexivity is a self-critical practice from within the system (Hollywood) to reveal its own artifice, or to quote Umberto Eco, "the Absolute Fake", that derives from the vacuum "of a present without depth" (Umberto Eco & Weaver, 1987).

A scene from *Somewhere* would be the best to describe this superficial notion. *Somewhere* tells a story about a glamorous empty life of a famous Hollywood actor. His lifestyle involves on-call private striptease show which is always shown as awkwardly choreographed, thus making the viewer aware of its fabrication. It is a performance that has become a part of "real life" or "a blending of 'reality' and representation, where there is no clear indication of where the former stops and the latter begins" (Oberly, 2019).

Thus, Coppola's Decadent style is an exemplary means to represent this idea of hyperreality, especially related to the current media culture. For when an artist uses the decadent style, "they were employing an aesthetic technique that embodied the emerging beliefs of their time" (Reed, 1985). A number of Coppola's films might be dealing with the idea of the past, but those ideas are firmly grounded in the present.

In her interview in 2013, Sofia Coppola admits that she is aware of the contemporary practice of film viewing, "I was in a lab doing color timing on this huge, beautiful screen, and then I figured

people are probably going to be watching this film on their phones. But I like watching films at home, too, which is probably where most people view films. Films look good on iPads, too” (Prince, 2013).

This interview illustrates Coppola’s awareness of a change in film viewing behaviour, especially changes brought by technological advances. *The Bling Ring* is very conscious of this emerging belief, not only of celebrity tabloid culture, but also the way screen-based technology changes people’s behaviour and encourages this culture of image excess, where media are omnipresent both in public and private spaces.

4. CONCLUSION

To situate Sofia Coppola within the category of film *auteur* is indeed complicated. She is no maverick in the conventional notion about film *auteur* that rebels against the conventional film mode of representation. Her practice is still within the Classical Hollywood Cinema convention which uses realist illusion as a representational mode. Even her *direct address* shot in *Marie Antoinette* serves more as an opening statement, rather than an attempt to break the fourth wall. Another issue that also needs to be addressed is that to put the label of a Decadent *auteur* implies that she is actually part of the Decadent movement, which is a specific European cultural phenomenon at the end of 19th Century.

To the latter issue I propose an alteration, namely from Decadent *auteur* to an *auteur* of Decadence. Rather than relating Coppola’s practice to the historical Decadent movement, I propose to see it as a performing act. Her signature style is not a product of cultural conditions of the Decadent movement, but rather “the need to re-enact bourgeois fantasy of the aristocratic life” (Weir, 2008). This need of re-enactment using the mythical *fin de siècle* is merely an artistic device of her self-reflexivity in referring to the transitional state in and of contemporary American society. Especially considering the impact of media technological advances and the emerging culture resulting from people engagement with those technologies.

To address the former problem, it would be right to look back into Andrew Sarris’s characterization of *auteur*. After the technical competence and style signature, Sarris (1962) points out the third characteristic that determines a director as an *auteur*, namely the ‘interior meaning’ that “is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material”.

In regard to her recurrent theme and style, the main tension of Coppola’s films would be best described as an expressed anxiety towards the mediating process of representation in a prevailing hyperreal world. This predicament, in the very heart of her cinematic practice, is in line with the

spirit of Decadence, which Reed (1985) illustrates as “(a) frustrated yearning after some unattainable image, ideal, or faith” where the inevitability of frustration may lead to “a melancholy of obsession with remoteness in space or time, especially with childhood” (1985).

The Virgin Suicides might be the best example to illustrate this spirit. The story of the Lisbon girls mediated by the gazes of neighbourhood’s boys and ladies is an attempt to represent a childhood mystery as an unattainable truth. This is a mode of nostalgia used by the film to refer to an obsession towards an unattainable distant past, where the haunting music serves as a cue for a vague presence of melancholy. It is a kind of melancholy which mourns for the loss of any real connection between image and reality.

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