Even into the 21st Century the people of France continue their disdain for their last Queen, Marie Antoinette, more colloquially known as Madame Déficit. When Sofia Coppola’s contemporary rendering of her reign was turned into film and presented at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival it was received with boos and distaste for its elevated depiction of one of France’s most notorious villains. Understandable, a libertine and a squanderer, this sovereign now serves as a symbol of pre-Revolutionary France, class conflict, extreme aristocracy and absolutism. With minimal historical accuracy, Coppola’s Marie is naïve and misguided, thrust into a position of abundant privilege and discontent at the ripe age of fourteen. Following suit with her previous work, The Virgin Suicides (1999) and Lost in Translation (2003), Marie Antoinette (2006) is an acute portrayal of female isolation, loneliness and longing.

Leading us from Austria to France, from peace to revolution, Coppola presents a fun and flirty rendition of a coming of age story baroque-style. Her studded cast is led by Kirsten Dunst in the title role, cousin Jason Schwartzman as King Louis XVI, and Rose Byrne and Steve Coogan in supporting roles. Using modern pop music and marked self-awareness, Coppola inflicts contemporary elements into a very classical framework of the past.

Revolving around the pressure on Marie to produce an heir to the throne, her unconsummated marriage remains as such for many years on account of her stuffy unaffectionate husband. Painfully dull and kind of a brat, he is more enticed by the logistics and history of key making than his young adoring wife. As to be expected in the 18th Century, women were objects of desire, reproductive machines and tools to carry lineage. Exploiting this time and place, Coppola constructs a sympathetic and feminist vision of the queen’s life, humanizing the character and the court.

In moderate pace, Coppola repeats scenes to elapse time and emphasize the redundancy and superfluity of Versailles, and Marie’s burgeoning ennui. Everything and everyone appear too idle and too particular. Growing exasperated with the situation, Marie makes sincere, but failed, attempts to engage and allure Louis. Typical of her on screen performances, Dunst brings sincerity and tenderness to her role and subsequently to the throne. We feel
her vulnerability in brief nude glimpses, sexual rejections, and perplexed and precarious expressions. Not to mention, the creepiness of being awakened every morning by a parade of courtly women encircling her bed to... wait for it... dress her.

The esthetic thrills and frills of the film are as indulgent as the characters themselves. An edgy I Want Candy Remix revs up the montage of Manolo Blahnik shoes and Ladurée macarons while Marie’s clique primp and fusses. The resulting record high beehive is a feat of its own. Coppola raises Marie to a style-icon status, much like herself, making a crinoline and a girdle look both funky and chic. These powdered faces flood parties filled with drinking and decadence, seeking self-gratification into the early morning hours.

Shot in actual Versailles, the exaggeration is not inflated. Just outside these confines lies increasing unrest within the people of France concerning widespread poverty and illness. Both Marie and her husband cannot be bothered with issues of politics or decision-making, and truthfully, neither are suited for such. When brought to her attention, Marie oh-so-selflessly forfeits her ongoing supply of diamonds. Admittedly, her immoderation does not stand out amongst her colleagues and surroundings. Amid the spending and frivolity, Marie is not immune to pain and suffering. First, in her abrupt uprooting, forcing all ties to her former Austrian home to be severed, the harsh Royal French rules imposed on her, and her new evil stepsisters unable to drop her Austrian-ness. Then to the public ridicule and gossip about her sexual shortcomings, and later, the death of her mother and of one of her children.

Marie seeks refuge in a cozy cottage nearby with the daughter she finally bears and a new Swedish lover. Magical and ethereal, Instagram-filtered garden scenes with her little cherub Marie Therese follow. They prance through the gardens and grass in euphoric rococo stature. Though, her separation and loneliness do not subside after childbearing and a lover. She remains trapped as a pawn to her mother and her country, in an effort to retain an Austrian-France alliance. An eternal outcast, Marie never truly fits in and so, was never fully accepted.

Coppola’s themes of teenage alienation and an unusual coming of age echo a semi-autobiographical tone. Along with Dunst, both can easily understand adolescence under pressure and in the spotlight, and gender discrimination, authenticating perspective and sentiment. Sharing light moments of laughter and farce, this satire also looks to the harsh reality of female injustices. Slightly iconoclastic, Coppola’s interpretation breathes life into the royalty. This highly modernized and stylized portrayal opts for an emotional focal point rather than an epic historical biopic. Making the story her own, Coppola turns elements of melancholy, teen angst and lavish lifestyles into an anti-period-flick on point for irreverent millennials, allowing us to closely align ourselves with Marie and/or other characters. If any of the above doesn’t resonate somehow, then, haven’t we all experienced a debilitating hangover from too much Champagne, experimented sexually and been passed a rolled substance at a party to inhale. And really, how could anyone
resent or resist Kirsten Dunst’s sweet dimples and cutesy hairstyles?