Cultural Value in Historical Pastiche

Timothy Robinson

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/799
Cultural Value in Historical Pastiche: Reclaiming the Past as Modern ‘Parody’ and Postmodern ‘Pastiche’ in The Hours and Marie Antoinette

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Literary & Cultural Studies from The College of William and Mary

by

Timothy Michael Robinson

Accepted for ________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

_______________________________
Colleen Kennedy, Director

_______________________________
Michael Leruth

_______________________________
Christy Burns

Williamsburg, VA
April 23, 2008
CONTENTS

I. FILM, HISTORY, AND JAMESON 2

II. RECOVERING A MODERNIST AESTHETIC IN THE HOURS 14

III. CRITIQUING POSTMODERN PASTICHE IN MARIE ANTOINETTE 44

IV. BEYOND JAMESON 69

V. WORKS CITED 78
One of the earliest and most influential works regarding the “postmodern” moment, Fredric Jameson’s book *Postmodernism* (1991) erects a series of cultural binaries to explain a shift from modernism to postmodernism during the 20th-century. In applying Jameson’s theory to two recent “historical” films, I explore Jameson’s contention that contemporary representations of history vacillate between modernist “parody” and postmodernist “pastiche.” Though Stephen Daldry’s *The Hours* (2002) appears more “modern” compared against Sofia Coppola’s “postmodern” *Marie Antoinette* (2006), Jameson’s terms nevertheless slip in application, causing us to question not only the fixity of Jameson’s cultural binaries but also his implicit valuation of modernist texts as “meaningful” and postmodernist pastiche as simply “blank parody.” Even if we accept Jameson’s notion that the postmodern individual is “fragmented,” and that we see a consequent “waning of affect,” the individual can nevertheless act meaningfully, as Jameson’s own theorizing indicates. Clearly we can choose “older” representational modes, like the parodic, in contemporary cultural production; however, these modes may not necessarily be the most “authentic” in contemporary postmodernism. My analysis of *The Hours* and *Marie Antoinette* suggests that the more “postmodern” a contemporary historical film is, the more cultural value it possesses. In effect, pastiche in film ironically becomes more meaningful in our contemporary context, for it is able to engage more effectively than modernist “parody” with our experience of the individual, “history,” and “reality” in postmodernism. Thus, I argue that there is
cultural value to “pastiche,” and I use Coppola’s film to prove both the superficiality and the potential for meaningful critique within postmodernism’s pastiche aesthetic.

I. Film, History, and Jameson

The notion of “history” has always been subject to interpretation. Though both written and filmic historical texts interpret their source material, historian Robert Rosenstone contends that we are far more skeptical about filmed history than written history as a standard of authority. Rather than dismissing historical films as simply “untrustworthy” and “fabricated,” however, Rosenstone points out that both “history in words” and “history in images” are problematic and biased. In Visions of the Past (1995), Rosenstone advocates an appreciation of historical films on their own terms: “The rules to evaluate historical film cannot come solely from written history. They must come from the medium itself” (15). Rosenstone’s understanding of the historical film “on its own terms” is indebted not only to Hayden White’s formulation of “historiophoty,” as “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” (White 1193), but also to Marc Ferro’s Cinema and History (1977, French; 1988, English) and Pierre Sorlin’s The Film in History (1980), both of which pioneered the study of film as an entirely different medium for understanding history. Ferro and Sorlin argue that historical films reveal more about the time of the film’s production than the represented diegetic past, and the extent to which an historical film engages with our understanding of “reality” at the time of production ultimately provides the historical film its cultural value as a site of meaning.
The catalyst for historical film studies can be attributed to John O’Connor and Martin A. Jackson, founders of *Film & History: an Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television History* in 1970. Today, history-specific journals such as *The American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History* devote entire sections to film, operating alongside film-specific journals such as *Screening the Past* and *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*. Academics in both disciplines use these journals to publish case-studies as well as to discuss the problematic relationship between history and the visual media. The topic of film and history covers a broad range of specializations\(^1\) and has become extremely popular in the past fifteen years, producing book-length works like Marcia Landy’s *Cinematic Uses of the Past* as well as the anthologies *The Persistence of History* (ed. Vivian Sobchack) and *Lights, Camera, History* (eds. Francaviglia, Rodnitzky, and Rosenstone). Additional contemporary works include William Guynn’s *Writing History in Film* (2006), Rosenstone’s *History on Film/Film on History* (2006), and Marnie Hughes-Warrington’s *History Goes to the Movies* (2007). And this list is by no means exhaustive.

Following these various contributions to the field of historical film studies, we “see a move away from the presentation of history as a polished and complete story and towards its being a representation that can and ought to be questioned” (Hughes-Warrington 5). In his most recent study *History on Film/Film on History* (2006), Rosenstone divides historical representation on film into three broad categories: the dramatic feature film, the documentary film, and the oppositional or innovative historical

---

\(^1\) Popular areas of study include the ancient world (Jon Solomon, Maria Wyke), costumes (Charles Tashiro), biographical pictures (George Custen), post-colonial identity (Mbye Cham), “history” according to Hollywood (Robert Brent Toplin, Peter C. Rollins), and WWII and/or the Holocaust (Caroline Joan Picart, Joshua Hirsch, Annette Insdorf).
Defining the dramatic historical feature, Rosenstone writes, “Whether the mainstream drama focuses on documented people or creates fictional characters and sets them amidst some important event or movement, the historical thinking involved is much the same: individuals (one, two, or a small group) are at the centre of the historical process” (15). Essentially, the dramatic feature views history from the standpoint of the individual. Such films often rely heavily on emotional experience in order to register an authentic response by the audience to the historical situation portrayed on screen. Because of its elevation of the individual and emotions, the historical dramatic feature tends to be the most successful of the three “types” of historical films; it continues to be “in terms of audience and influence, the most important form of history in the visual media” (15). Since most of these films adhere to a classical Hollywood style of filmmaking, they are often easily consumable by audiences and tend to be the most high-profile of the three.

Though Rosenstone admits that the “opposition or innovative” historical feature encompasses a wide range of films, he claims that “these are largely works of opposition to what we may designate as ‘Hollywood’, works consciously created to contest the seamless stories of heroes and victims that make up the mainstream feature and the standard documentary” (18). These films undermine the conventions of Hollywood dramatic features, most notably its linear narrative and its formulation of the individual as a stable identity, and they undermine documentary features as well, which purportedly offer an “objective” treatment of its subject. Additionally, the innovative historical film interrogates the dramatic and documentary feature’s emphasis on emotion, suggesting that “affect” can be used as a cultural construct to elicit a particular response in the
audience (which subsequently serves a particular agenda by the supposed “objective” filmmakers). Rosenstone observes an emergence of these types of films in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s; furthermore, he argues that these “innovative” historical films are often labeled as “postmodern” in that they do some or all of the following:

Foreground their own construction; tell the past self-reflexively and from a multiplicity of viewpoints; forsake normal story development, or problematize the stories they recount; utilize humour, parody, and absurdist as modes of presenting the past; refuse to insist on a coherent or single meaning of events; indulge in fragmentary or poetic knowledge; and never forget that the present moment is the site of all past representation.” (19)

While Rosenstone hints that some of these types of films are not explicitly meant to be read as examples of postmodernism, they are often used by theorists as signs of “postmodernism” in contemporary culture.

Even though Rosenstone does not see postmodernism as the cultural dominant that Jameson does, Jameson’s binaries still inform his study and remain important to my own. First published as an essay in the 1980’s and revised in 1991², Jameson’s Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism remains a seminal text; his theory has been canonized to the extent that contemporary cultural critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Richard Dyer position themselves in response to Jameson when outlining their own theories about “postmodernism,” “parody,” and “pastiche” in the twenty-first

---

century\textsuperscript{3}. I will be using Jameson’s *Postmodernism* to inform my argument regarding “history” in postmodern culture as it is represented in film. In applying Jameson’s theory of “postmodernism” to the recent historical features *The Hours* and *Marie Antoinette*, I hope to answer some of the following questions: What is the interrelationship between film, history, and postmodernism? What are the theoretical and practical problems posed by cinematic forms of historical representation? Which mode of representation (parody or pastiche) most authenticates our experience of “reality” in postmodern culture? What are the implications of approaching history through parody and/or pastiche? Has the individual subject disappeared to such an extent in postmodern culture as to eradiate the possibility for meaning-making? What is the value (if any) of historical pastiche in postmodernism?

A cultural critic who specializes in Marxist theory, Fredric Jameson views the world and history in terms of socio-economic factors. As evident in the full title (*Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*), Jameson posits from the outset that “postmodernism” is somehow synonymous with “late capitalism.” His introduction states that “it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix). Jameson first observes “postmodernism” in the early 1970s, though he dates the beginning of “late capitalism” as early as the post-WII years. While the term “postmodernism” emerges first in the domain of art, specifically in relation to architecture (e.g., the Westin Bonaventure hotel, the Frank Gehry House in California), Jameson says, “What has happened is that aesthetic production today, has become

\textsuperscript{3} Hutcheon has written extensively on both “parody” and “postmodernism,” including the two books *A Theory of Parody* (2000) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2002); Dyer has recently published a full-length book devoted to the concept of “pastiche,” aptly titled *Pastiche* (2007).
integrated into commodity production generally,” and one must now “grasp ‘postmodernism’ not as a style, but rather as a cultural dominant” (4). It is the cultural dominant of “multinational business,” the most recent and most extreme form of capitalism, which Jameson characterizes as postmodern culture, for it has usurped every aspect of cultural production (including “art”) to the extent that it has become the air we breathe. According to Jameson, postmodernism is not a choice; rather, it is a cultural dominant that proves so pervasive, that one cannot opt out of it.

In observing contemporary life in the 1980s, Jameson opens the first chapter: “The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which promotions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by sense of the end of this or that…taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called ‘postmodernism’” (1). Jameson at once distinguishes the modernist impulse towards progress and the future against the contemporary affect of “the end”; in other words, “postmodernism” as a cultural phenomenon emerges in the aftermath of high modernism and reflects the loss of belief in modernism’s ability to create a new, progressive human consciousness. The five principal symptoms of Jameson’s “postmodernity” include: a new “depthlessness” of the image (“waning of affect”); a weakening of historicity (“pastiche”); a whole new type of emotional ground tone (“hysterical sublime”); a new relation to technology (geopolitical aesthetic); and a mutation in built space (cognitive mapping). I will focus on the first two features, linking the individual’s “waning of affect” with the notion of historical pastiche.

Jameson discusses the “depthlessness of the image” in the chapter’s first section, “The Deconstruction of Expression.” Using the notion of “expression” as a site for

meaning-making, Jameson discerns “depth” in the expression of modernist art, citing Van Gogh’s *Peasant Shoes* as an example. For Jameson, Van Gogh’s painting “requires us to reconstruct some initial situation out of which the finished work emerges,” and he argues that it must “be grasped simply as the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive and marginalized state” (7).

Quoting Heidegger’s reading of the painting, which interprets it as the human ability to make meaning in the world, Jameson shows that its “depth” functions doubly as a symbolic act; not only does the “peasant” make meaning by using the shoes for the singular purpose of survival, but we as spectators also try to attach meaning to Van Gogh’s painting.

Jameson then contrasts Van Gogh’s *Peasant Shoes* with Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, a print that for him illustrates the “depthlessness” of the postmodern aesthetic. Van Gogh’s shoes are rooted in the natural world whereas Warhol’s shoes hang in the void. The latter do not appear to be anyone’s shoes or to be worn for any purpose; they do not even match. Van Gogh’s shoes illustrate depth in that they can be read as the creation of meaning in a meaningless world, but Warhol’s shoes simply exist on the surface as fashionable, anti-utilitarian commodities. If we attempt to reconstruct the initial situation from which the work arose, such a task would lead us nowhere in Warhol’s case, for his mass-produced prints make no room for “reality.” Jameson uses these examples to remark on “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (9).
Contending that the “depthlessness” of the image is symptomatic of an increasing “waning of affect” in the postmodern individual, Jameson once again uses an example from modern art, Edward Munch’s *The Scream*, to explicate his theory. Jameson calls Munch’s painting “a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety” (11). Jameson roots Expressionism, which is the artistic outward manifestation of inner angst and alienation, in Modernism, thus implicating the modernist self in terms of strict inside/outside categories. However, the intense feelings and emotions of subjectivity evident in *The Scream* are nearly extinct in postmodern art. For Jameson, there is no possibility for alienation in postmodern culture because modernism’s deep subjectivity has been hollowed out, even annihilated. He compares the “waning of affect” to schizophrenia in postmodernism, in which the postmodern subject constantly hears voices telling it what to do; the lines between inner/outer experiences blur to such a degree that language structures disintegrate (rendering meaning-making impossible), and the modernist conception of the individual (as a centered, self-contained “individual monad”) ceases to exist. Feeling is no longer physically restricted to the body; instead, we experience feeling outside of the self through culture (images, films, commodities), creating a fluid sense of identity.

Jameson summarizes:

The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego – what I have been calling the waning of affect. But it means the end of much more – the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke
(as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. (15)

The modernist notion of the “alienated,” angst-ridden individual subject transforms into a “fragmented” postmodern individual whose inside/outside barriers are crumbling. Consequently, language breaks down in the formerly “centered self,” complicating the possibility for individual agency and an “idiosyncratic” aesthetic.

It is at this point in the chapter that Jameson shifts toward “The Postmodern and the Past,” the concept of most importance to my study. Heading the section “Pastiche Eclipses Parody,” Jameson writes, “The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” (16). Both parody and pastiche are imitative forms of representation, but Jameson erects a dichotomy between the two categories as a means of mapping out his notion of “modernism” (parody) and “postmodernism” (pastiche). Though the notion of “parody” is quite old, dating back to classical Greek and Roman cultures, Jameson argues that twentieth-century modernism indeed finds its aesthetic mode in parody: “To be sure, parody found a fertile area in the idiosyncrasies of the moderns and their ‘inimitable’ styles: the Faulknerian long sentence, for example, with its breathless gerundives; Lawrentian nature imagery punctuated by testy colloquialism; Wallace Stevens’s inveterate hypostasis of nonsubstantive parts of speech…” (16). These elements are all characteristic or unique to
one individual in that they deviate from a norm which then reasserts itself through
difference. The many and diverse literary styles of the moderns are so easy to parody
because they are so “idiosyncratic.” However, in the tendency toward postmodern
culture, these “distinct private styles and mannerisms [have] been followed by a linguistic
fragmentation of social life itself to the point where the norm itself is eclipsed” (17). The
paradox is that the “norm” then becomes a simulation, and modernist styles only become
“postmodernist codes.” Furthermore, postmodern culture devolves into a “field of
stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” (17).

In linking the practice of parody to “modernism,” Jameson attributes that form of
representation to the modernist notion of the individual subject, who is a centered and
unified monad and for whom language still functions. Therefore, parody presupposes the
possibility for the construction of meaning in that it is meant to be read as a “symbolic”
act (as an imitation of a previous representation). While the modernist individual
experiences a tension between the inner and outer worlds, the line blurs to such a degree
in the postmodernist individual that language structures disintegrate; the parodic mode
can no longer function in a consumer culture that defines subjectivity via commodities.
For Jameson, the loss of the individual and the loss of language structures result in
“pastiche”:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead
language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s
ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any
conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed,
some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a
statue with blind eyeballs. (17)

As mentioned earlier, parody and pastiche are both forms of representation dealing with
imitation. One distinction for Jameson, however, lies in political purpose. Because
parody has an ultimate aim or goal (operating through the depth model), it also exists for
a specific purpose in staking some claim on that which it imitates. Thus, parody is
political in that it critiques or comments on the object of parody, persisting the modernist
belief in meaning-making. Pastiche, on the other hand, functions as “blank parody,” a
hollowed-version devoid of political purpose; it has no ulterior motive as a result of the
contemporary postmodern “waning of affect,” in which the individual subject has been
effaced and whose command of language fails. Jameson finds that the high modernist
ideology of agency and individual style has collapsed in postmodernism, and that “the
producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles,
speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now
global culture” (17-8).

We can no longer occupy a critical distance towards those “idiosyncratic” styles
of the moderns, operating according to the depth model; rather, postmodern texts
incorporate these styles to the extent that they only exist on the surface as “blank
parody,” with no critique or ultimate purpose. Whereas modernist parody points toward
the object of parody (e.g., inimitable modernist styles), postmodernist pastiche can only
refer to culture, becoming a simulation of cultural codes that bear no relation to the
“real.” Indeed, we no longer experience the “real” in any organic measure, for we are
constantly inundated with images and commodities that inhibit any proximity to a
natural, shared, yet ultimately elusive sense of “reality.” These images have saturated our experience of “reality” so much so that we can neither escape from their nearness nor from their surface-ness. In effect, we can no longer attain the critical distance from which parody is constructed, thus producing the “well-nigh universal practice” of pastiche (17).

As modernism’s Utopian dream of infinite promise and progress evaporates over the course of the twentieth-century, the individual increasingly lacks agency and is forced to turn to the past as a means of coping not only with the “end of” the future but also with the inevitability of the present. We form a unique relationship with the past in postmodern culture, one based in “nostalgic” representation more so than in lived “reality.” In his discussion on “historicism,” which is the act of interpreting the past through the lens of the present, Jameson refers to the “cannibalization” of older styles in new, updated versions, most often indicated by the ubiquitous prefix “neo.” Postmodernism’s tendency towards historicizing styles yields an “omnipresence of pastiche,” in which these categorical “neo” styles become simulacra, copies with no originals; thus, our sense of “history” becomes a simulacrum rooted in image. Jameson cites one example of postmodern “historicism” in film’s “nostalgia mode,” in which a “desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the ‘generation’” (19). Nostalgic pastiches such as George Lucas’s American Graffiti (1973) and Roman Polanski’s Chinatown (1974) are never “a matter of some old-fashioned ‘representation’ of historical content, but approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image” (17). Thus, the purpose of the nostalgia film is not to
represent an actual, lived past; rather, it approaches the past through “style,” reducing it to image and creating a disparate sense of the past that has little basis in “reality.” In effect, our postmodern crisis in historicity, “of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way,” has taken on a life of its own in images, to the point in which “the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history” (20).

Postmodern forms of history do not present an accurate “past” but refer mostly to the present. Jameson observes that we experience in postmodernism “a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (25). Because industry controls representation in “late capitalism” (TV, publishing, mass media, schools), history manifests only as representation. Essentially, history becomes yet one more commodity in which to market. For Jameson, the problem with postmodern history then becomes an issue of access, for our only access to “the past” is through problematic representations that idealize the past as simulacra, as “nostalgia.” As a result, “history” primarily comes to reflect our present experience in context of postmodernism.

II. Recovering a modernist aesthetic in The Hours

In his discussion of Van Gogh’s Peasant Shoes, Jameson argues that “one way of reconstructing the initial situation to which the work is somehow a response is by stressing the raw materials, the initial content, which it confronts and which it reworks, transforms, and appropriates” (7). Basically, in order to restore meaning to the painting
and to save it from being reduced to “sheer decoration” through mass-production in a postmodern culture, we first need to reconstruct the “situation” from which it arose and to which the artist reacts or critiques; only then will we be able to read the work as a “symbolic act” that constructs meaning according to the depth model. Stephen Daldry’s film *The Hours* (2002), which is an adaptation of Michael Cunningham’s 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, adopts internally this approach to modern art, for it attempts to re-imagine the “situation” in which Virginia Woolf initially creates and writes the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (published in 1925). Furthermore, the film strives both to preserve and to construct significance and meaning in that text; it chronicles not only the text as Woolf writes it in 1923 but also its various meanings in different historical contexts (1951 and 2001). Stephen Holden, film reviewer for *The New York Times*, echoes this idea:

> A central idea animating *Mrs. Dalloway* and embodied in its stream-of-consciousness languages is that people who never meet, like Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, are connected by experiencing the same external events. *The Hours* extends that idea through the decades to celebrate the timelessness of great literature by placing the author, her fictional alter ego and two of her latter-day readers in the same sphere of consciousness.

In effect, the film adopts a modernist aesthetic because it presupposes that a text still signifies and that meaning is still possible. Thus is the project of the film, to explore the “situation” out of which Woolf writes *Mrs. Dalloway* and how that text continues to signify meaning long after its initial production.

The film uses three primary elements to express its modernist sensibility: the narrative features the author figure as an afflicted “individual monad” who struggles with
the notion of “expression” in realizing a work of art; the cinematography privileges the underlying “affect” of each female protagonist through subjective camerawork; and the editing mimics visually the “stream-of-consciousness” literary style of Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). It is this last feature, however, which becomes problematic in the film’s attempt at a modernist sensibility. Because Daldry employs an imitative approach to editing not only as an homage to Woolf but also as an internal narrative form of parody (amongst the three competing narratives), the manipulation of history and temporality straddles the line between parody and pastiche, and since Jameson denies the presence of meaning in pastiche, this temporal tension in *The Hours* jeopardizes the meaning that the film actively tries to construct according to its modernist aesthetic. The film wants to suggest that both Woolf’s text and its category of the angst-ridden modernist individual still function today, yet the film’s editing strategy threatens to eradicate such meaning due to its tendency toward temporal pastiche.

I will argue that this postmodern tendency does in fact empty out the film’s construction of meaning in the characters themselves (as individual modernist monads), for it becomes an out-moded formulation of the individual subject in the context of postmodernism; the modernist notion of the individual, as outlined by Jameson, no longer registers as “authentic” in postmodernism. However, the film’s treatment of history and temporality paradoxically recovers some sense of meaning in the text as it actively engages with postmodern culture’s “crisis in historicity.” Thus, the film is still meaningful; yet ironically, it is the very element which threatens the film’s construction of meaning (editing) that ultimately acts as a source for meaning. In effect, the film’s pastiche/ahistoricism is not necessarily meaningless, as Jameson contends, for it becomes
meaningful and “authentic” to our understanding of “history” in the cultural context of postmodernism.

First, I will show how The Hours functions according to a modernist aesthetic and as a form of parody. Recall that for Jameson, parody highlights the difference between the object of parody and the parody itself, and that “the idiosyncrasies of the moderns and their ‘inimitable’ styles” made it easy to parody the modernist literary style because it was so easily identifiable with a particular author – Faulkner, Lawrence, Stevens, etc. (16). Although parodying a particular style or text creates a likeness between the object of parody and the parody itself, the ultimate purpose is to create a paradoxical difference between the two texts. It is from this perspective of difference that one can discern the “idiosyncratic” style as a (literary) construction, one that the parody actively critiques (whether it be humorous or not). Jameson argues that modernist parody often contains “ulterior motives” due to a “satiric impulse” (17), arguing that parody inherently involves a level of social or political commentary that he contends has been eradicated in postmodernist pastiche. (I will elaborate more on the term “pastiche” in my discussion of Marie Antoinette). Therefore, when I use the word “parody” I am referring to Jameson’s notion of the term as it relates to Modernism, specifically in its belief in the possibility for the construction of meaning through imitation and repetition.

The Hours functions as a parody in three respects: as an adaptation of a literary text (Michael Cunningham’s 1998 novel of the same name), as a rewriting of another literary text (Virginia Woolf’s 1925 novel Mrs. Dalloway), and as an internal parody

---

5 Because I am using Jameson’s notion of “parody,” which he discusses exclusively in the context of “modernism,” I am focusing on “parody” as a form of artistic expression in a cultural context, not necessarily its potential for humor and its relationship to “satire.” I focus on “parody” as a mode of representation that still believes in the possibility for meaning-making through imitation, specifically as it is used in “modernism.”
within the text itself, which connects three separate narrative lines through cross-cutting editing and parodic graphic matches. As an adaptation of Cunningham’s novel, the film explicitly shares many characteristics with the source text. These include settings (Richmond 1923, Los Angeles 1951, New York 1997 – changed to 2001 in the film), characters (Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown, Clarissa Vaughn), plots (Virginia writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Laura Brown baking a birthday cake for her husband, Clarissa preparing a dinner party for Richard), and themes (a life in one day, the value of a moment, a meditation on suicide). Rather than concentrating on the film as a parody of Cunningham’s novel (which requires more in-depth analysis that would ultimately be irrelevant to my particular discussion of the film), I will instead focus on its extra-filmic treatment of Woolf’s text and its intra-filmic treatment of narrative as primary sources for parody. In both Cunningham’s novel and Daldry’s film, Clarissa Vaughn’s real life replicates Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. Though I will elaborate on this subject in more detail when discussing the similarities between the two texts, it is enough to point out for now that Clarissa’s narrative in *The Hours* operates as a rewriting of Woolf’s text; her narrative involves a similar trajectory with explicit references to *Mrs. Dalloway*, yet it is set in the contemporary “real world,” not a fictional post-WWI diegesis. By rewriting and updating Woolf’s acclaimed novel, the film engages in the modernist trope of rewriting classics, which was popularized by Ezra Pound and the modernist project to “Make it new!” Many modernist authors turned to Greek mythology and classical texts and reinterpreted them in a modern context, one of the most famous being James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (rewriting Homer’s *The Odyssey*). In adopting the trope of rewriting classics, the film engages with a modernist sensibility through the representational mode of parody.
Not only does the film parody Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* at the level of narrative but also through editing. One of the film’s editing strategies is to create a visual equivalent of literary “stream-of-consciousness,” a style that Woolf herself practiced. The film produces this effect primarily through the techniques of cross-cutting and graphic matches, creating one over-arching, free-flowing narrative that transcends the limits of time and space. Film reviewer James Berardinell of *Reelviews* notes the “parallelism” of this technique, which allows Daldry to reinforce the ties between each narrative arc. The characters are often constructed in the mise-en-scene so as to mimic each other; thus, each historical representation (1923, 1951, and 2001) becomes a visual parody by means of graphic matches that are reinforced through parallel editing. The editing suggests that the three principle female characters are all connected through similar feelings and experiences, that the only obstacle separating them is time. Erica Abeel of the *Film Journal International* writes, “Gestures and motifs echo, ricochet and repeat – just as Laura tosses her failed cake into the trash, so Clarissa sweeps the ‘crab thing’ into the garbage after tragedy has annulled the party.” Essentially, *The Hours* parodies the “idiosyncratic” style of Woolf through a visual likeness to her literary “stream-of-consciousness.” However, it is precisely the inimitability of Woolf’s style that allows for parody – its uniqueness ensures difference. In the translation from word to image, then, one could argue that the inimitable style of Woolf simply becomes reduced to a flat signifier, for it is reduced to an image.

Here is where Jameson’s notion of “parody” versus “pastiche” intersects with his argument that “Historicity’ effaces History” in postmodern culture. Jameson discerns this intersection in the “nostalgia film,” which approaches the past through “style” and
subsequently reduces history to image. He says that postmodern culture experiences a “crisis in historicity,” or an inability to think historically outside the lens of the present, and that he observes this crisis in the form of artistic representation to the extent that “the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history” (20). *The Hours* appropriates a “modernist aesthetic,” yet by transposing a “stream-of-consciousness” style of editing, thus reducing word to image, the film takes on a postmodern perspective that threatens to undermine the depth and subjectivity of the characters; it is as if they only feign a sense of “affect” because of their constant imitation. The organizing principle of the film is distinctly postmodern, in Jameson’s terms, in that the film tries to collapse time and space. While the film presents us with three different characters living in three separate settings, the editing invites us to visualize the similarities among each of the narratives, conflating three periods of 24-hours into one conglomerate. Because of the cross-cutting and graphic matches, we do not experience these narratives as separate but as coexisting; ultimately, the film attempts to tell one story that reverberates throughout history. In so doing, the film exhibits a tendency towards postmodern cultural production, in which “we are condemned to seek History by way of our pop images and simulacra of that history” (25). The film asks us to experience a woman’s life in one day, a plot device that knowingly parodies Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, but the editing reduces it to a succession of images that border the line between parody and pastiche. Because the film attempts to collapse time into one continuous present, the editing actually creates similarity between the narratives more so than difference, and we are no longer able to attain the critical distance that parody requires. Therefore, the film’s editing technique becomes a problematic site that reveals a tension between modern and postmodern aesthetics in
current cultural production, for the film’s postmodernist editing seems to subvert the its modernist sensibility.

I want to focus in more detail on the formal elements of the film that contribute to its “modernist aesthetic,” and I will first describe how the narrative elevates the role of the artist as an alienated, monadic figure who struggles with external expression. Recall that Jameson sees in Munch’s painting *The Scream* the “great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation” (11). Though all of the primary characters in *The Hours* embody these “thematics,” they become most significant and meaningful in the figures of Virginia Woolf and Richard Brown. Both Virginia and Richard are successful authors who confront these conflicts of despair through writing, an occupation that requires them to struggle with “the very aesthetic of expression itself” (11). Indeed, Jameson writes that the modernist subject experiences a separation between inside and outside categories, between internal experience and external “reality”; it is in transcending that fixed boundary that one can successfully “express” internal thoughts or feelings by projecting them onto the external world. The successful achievement of expression elevates the individual to the status of “artist,” and *The Hours* perpetuates this modernist sensibility most prominently in Virginia and Richard.

The film characterizes Virginia Woolf as a monad-like artist in many respects. First, Virginia is a woman. Though women have more freedom and agency in the 20th-century than ever before in Western culture, they are far from equal – politically or socially – during the first half of the 20th-century. Woolf has come to be acknowledged as an early feminist (writing, among other works, the 1929 essay “A Room of One’s
Own”) because she became a successful writer who actively privileges the experiences of women in her novels. Virginia also experiences alienation from society because of her mental illness. The film manifests this idea most prominently in her relationship with husband Leonard Woolf, making the argument that it is her illness which continually divides their marriage. During the scene at the train station, Leonard says that they moved to Richmond in order for her to rest and to rehabilitate after her last “episode.” He contends that she still “hears voices” that separate her from external “reality.” To Virginia, Richmond itself becomes a site of isolation, for she longs to be back in the busy city-life of London (hence, she flees to the train station). Leonard tries previously to appease her objection by installing a printing press at their house in Richmond (“Hogarth House”), but this only perpetuates Virginia’s sense of isolation in that it confines yet another aspect of her life to the domestic space. The film also shows Virginia writing primarily in a secluded room upstairs, away from the duties of the household; in fact, when one of the servants interrupts her writing, Virginia glares at her with uncompromising eyes. It is only when Virginia’s sister Vanessa and her children arrive for an afternoon visit that we finally see Virginia connecting on an intimate level with other people. In regards to the construction of the narrative, the film sets up Virginia as a “modernist” individual subject who struggles with the same conflict of “expression” as the monad-like artist. Though Virginia suffers from mental ailments and social anxieties, her narrative climax involves her transcending that sense of isolation; she is finally able to express her feelings at the train station to Leonard, who concedes to move back to London, yet she eventually chooses suicide as her ultimate form of expression in the film’s opening and closing shots.
Similar to the film’s characterization of Virginia Woolf, Richard Brown also invokes many characteristics of the modernist individual subject, even though his story is set in a different socio-historical context (New York City, 2001). First, the film’s Richard Brown character is a hybrid of Woolf’s Septimus Smith and Richard Dalloway characters: he fulfills Septimus’s role as the suicidal artist figure as well as Richard Dalloway’s part as Clarissa’s (previous) love interest. Just as Septimus functions as a double of Clarissa in Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Richard Brown functions as a double of Virginia in the film, primarily as a social outcast who feels alienated from the outside world. Society alienates Richard Brown in part because he is a homosexual. He experiences a sense of isolation similar to Virginia, who is met with such resistance because she is a woman; they both belong, broadly speaking, to “marginalized groups” within their respective historical contexts. Additionally Richard becomes ostracized from society through illness. Instead of “hearing voices,” however, Richard suffers from AIDS. Indeed, he is in the later stages of the disease, which confines him to his apartment in a parodic recasting of Woolf’s bed rest treatment in Richmond. Though Richard lives in New York City, he experiences neither the excitement nor the variegated opportunities that the city has to offer; instead, the disease forces him to live in solitude in the apartment, and his only escape is suicide (another recasting of Virginia’s plight). Furthermore, Richard has very little in terms of family and friends. His sole remaining family member is his mother, who leaves the family when he is only a child, and although he had a previous love affair with Louis Waters, they are no longer on speaking terms. It is Clarissa who takes care of Richard as his only friend, but even they have trouble communicating. The narrative constructs Richard, much like Virginia, as a social
outcast. While Virginia’s narrative follows her in the initial stages of writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Richard’s narrative centers on an author who no longer has the ability of expression, showing an author after-the-fact. He has become an extremely successful writer, winning the Carrouther’s prize for literature, yet he questions whether or not he actually deserves the acclaim. Is he honored for his individual expression as an artist or as a victim suffering from AIDS? His characterization resembles the monad artist, whose physiological ailment has forced him into a conflicted state of solitude that ultimately leads him to commit suicide as a last form of expression. Indeed, both Virginia’s and Richard’s suicides express their commitment to and valuation of life, a double-bind that they wrestle with not only in their writing (in which literary “expression” acts as a vindication of life) but also in their deaths (paradoxically finding life in death).

Having explained how Virginia and Richard represent the modernist individual subject in their sense of social alienation and their mutual conflicts with “expression,” I will now discuss how the film also functions according to a modernist aesthetic through the representation of “affect” in the characters. When Jameson compares Van Gogh’s “modern” shoes to Warhol’s “postmodern” shoes, he claims that Van Gogh’s painting expresses a deep subjectivity and underlying “affect,” whereas Warhol’s silkscreen feigns little (if any) interest beyond the surface. Indeed, Jameson observes what he calls the “waning of affect” in postmodern culture (10), asserting that emotions, feelings, and overall subjectivity have become increasingly effaced due to a surface-oriented consumer culture that operates through commodification. Van Gogh’s painting, however, invites us to look for a deeper meaning, to see beyond the surface; it is supposed to “affect” us. Jameson uses the presence of “affect” as one of the defining characteristics of
“Modernism,” and *The Hours*’ belief in “affect” and deep subjectivity reinforces its intentions according to a “modernist aesthetic.” The film also features many elements of melodrama, a genre that traditionally privileges emotion yet ironically operates at a relatively surface level of understanding. *The Hours* argues that these women appear happy and ordinary on the surface to other characters, but they are in fact troubled and plagued by the past. Daldry uses cinematography (specifically the close-up and subjective/point-of-view shots) as a means to represent the deep subjective experience of each of the three female protagonists, visualizing the film’s attempt to recover a sense of “affect” in the individual.

For example, Daldry employs tracking shots and close-ups to emphasize the depth of Clarissa’s breakdown in the kitchen. After visiting Richard, Clarissa returns to her apartment to prepare for the party that she will give that evening. When Louis Waters (a previous rival for Richard’s affection) arrives for the impending event, Clarissa is suddenly thrust into the past, causing her to reevaluate not only the present but also her overall purpose in life. She thinks about Richard’s comment that all she does is throw parties, and not for someone else, but for herself. Louis stands in the hallway as Clarissa collapses in a corner of the kitchen, saying, “I seem to be unraveling…” Referring to Louis’s return, Richard’s illness, and the looming party, Clarissa sobs, “It’s too much. It’s just too much.” Crouching in the corner, she tells Louis about one summer morning in Wellfleet when Richard snuck up behind her, kissed her, and gave her the affectionate moniker, “Mrs. Dalloway.” Indeed, Clarissa and Richard reminisce about this “moment of happiness” many times throughout the film. As Clarissa bares her soul to Louis, the camera slowly tracks forward, and towards the end of her breakdown, the camera remains
in a tight close-up of her face, looking off frame-left. It is not until Louis explains his own personal liberation after leaving Richard (“I felt free for the first time in years”) that Clarissa begins to calm down; they reach a mutual understanding. Because Clarissa enjoys giving parties for other people rather than tending to her own needs, an idea that Richard brings to her attention, Clarissa could be read as a woman who exists solely on the surface. However, Daldry wants us to understand that there is depth to her character and meaning behind her words, not simply those of a surface-oriented, affect-less urbanite. Daldry chooses to use close-ups in underlining the depth of both Clarissa’s and Louis’s confessions, encouraging us to identify with Clarissa and allowing her breakdown to “affect” us.

During the course of the film, each of the three women (Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa) experiences a breakdown, and Daldry handles the material in a way that accentuates the underlying emotion that is released in each collapse. Similar to his treatment of Clarissa’s breakdown, Daldry relies on close-ups during Virginia’s moment of crisis to project a sense of depth to the character’s fragile and emotional state. Once Virginia’s sister Vanessa leaves Hogarth House, Virginia decides finally that she cannot continue living in Richmond; rather, she must return to London, to the busy life of the city, for she feels imprisoned by the secluded life in the Richmond countryside. Leonard catches up to her eventually at the train station, and it is here that Virginia unleashes her inner turmoil. Leonard claims that she is not thinking clearly, that she is hearing voices again, but Virginia cries out, “It is mine!…If I were thinking clearly, Leonard, I would tell you that I wrestle alone in the dark, in the deep dark, and that only I can know, only I can understand my own condition.” Instead of filming their dialogue with both Leonard
and Virginia in the same frame, Daldry uses traditional shot/reverse-shot in creating a literal distance between the married couple; however, the camera frames each of their shots in close-up, which evokes the intensity and the underlying depth of their words. Virginia says, “This is my right” and “That is my choice,” and she eventually gives Leonard an ultimatum: “But if it is a choice between Richmond and death, I choose death.” Virginia tries to convince Leonard that she is dying in Richmond, that their move to the country has affected her to the point of death. This scene addresses abstract issues such as choice, humanity, confinement and death, and Daldry’s visual treatment of the material (handling it in intense close-ups of their faces) increases the tension between the two characters by reinforcing the depth and meaning behind their words.

While Daldry employs close-ups to preserve the modernist sensibility of “affect” in the characters, he also utilizes subjective camerawork through which characters project inner experience onto the outside world, which creates an Expressionistic landscape similar to Munch’s The Scream. Jameson argues that “the problem of expression is itself closely linked to some conception of the subject as a monad-like container, within which things are felt which are then expressed by projection outwards” (15). Jameson discerns a link between expression (or, the ability to outwardly express “affect”) and the monad, going so far as to say that “expression requires the category of the individual monad” (15, my emphasis). He concludes, “When you constitute your individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient field and a closed realm, you thereby shut yourself off from everything else and condemn yourself to the mindless solitude of the monad, buried alive and condemned to a prison cell without egress” (15). Subjectivity, therefore, can only be expressed by the “individual monad,” yet this precondition ultimately condemns the subject to a life of
isolation, a state that manifests in Munch’s *The Scream*. Daldry uses subjective camerawork to highlight the individual subjectivity of each female protagonist; however, at the same time that Daldry’s p-o-v camera marks the individual expression of each woman he nevertheless condemns them to an isolated “prison cell without egress” (15). Daldry’s film reveals that indeed the very notion of expression itself requires both the individual monad as well as its social isolation as a “monad-like container,” a tension visualized in each female character as she wrestles with the notion of “expression” throughout the day/film.

Though Daldry uses a number of point-of-view shots early in the film to establish identification with each of the three female protagonists, it is not until Virginia begins working on *Mrs. Dalloway* that the camera is marked explicitly subjective, to the point where the image becomes surreal. As Virginia is in the process of writing, we see successive close-up shots of her smoking and fidgeting her hands; deep in thought, she hesitates. Exhaling, Virginia tilts her head downward, and the camera cuts to a page of writing. (We assume that this must be the paper on which Virginia is writing her new novel.) The camera, titled slightly to the right, slowly zooms in and brings the text on the page closer to the screen. Meanwhile, Daldry overlaps the sequence with Virginia’s voice-over narration: “It’s on this day, this day of all days, her fate becomes clear to her…” The camera continues to zoom in until it centers on the word “Clarissa.” Suddenly, one of Virginia’s servants enters her room, asking what she would like for lunch. Head tilted downward, Virginia lifts her eyes and glares at the servant, visibly upset that her writing has been disturbed. In this scene Daldry switches from a position of relative objectivity (as Virginia prepares to write) to a markedly subjective shot (as
Virginia plunges into the text. The camera takes on the subjectivity of Virginia, and the zoom-in technique suggests the character’s total immersion into the world of the novel. The effect becomes surreal, for we question whether or not this is actually happening. Furthermore, that the servant, who exists in Virginia’s external world, interrupts her serves to underscore the argument of Virginia as the modernist alienated subject, for she does not hide her contempt for the obtrusive servant. Indeed, she has to isolate herself in order to “express” (or, in this case, to write); it is from this position that she can transcend the boundary between the inner and outer worlds, to break through that “monad-like container” in expressing her subjectivity through language. This process can be difficult, which is why Virginia scolds the servant. She prefers to work alone in her room, undisturbed, and it is this point-of-view shot that offers a glimpse into her isolated subjective experience as she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Undoubtedly the most expressionistic shot of the film occurs during Laura Brown’s moment of crisis at the hotel. After leaving her son Richie with the babysitter and checking into a hotel, Laura Brown contemplates committing suicide. Laura lays on the bed and reads her copy of *Mrs. Dalloway*, which we hear through Virginia’s voice-over narration. The camera then cuts from Laura to Virginia, whose niece asks her, “What were you thinking about?” The camera then cross-cuts from a close-up of Virginia to a side close-up of Laura Brown, who has fallen asleep in the hotel room. All of a sudden the camera shifts to an overhead perspective of the bed, underneath which we see river water slowly emerge. It rises to the level of the bed and quickly overwhelms the somnolent Laura, whose pregnant belly is on display. Suddenly we shift back to Virginia, who says, “Oh. I was going to kill my heroine. But I’ve changed my mind,”
which prompts another cross-cut to Laura, sitting up, gasping, crying, “I can’t! I can’t!” This sequence is highly expressionistic in that the rising water in the hotel room suggests an outward projection of inner despair. However, though it is a highly subjective sequence, we are uncertain whose head we are actually inside. From Laura’s perspective, it could be interpreted as a dream sequence, a visual realization of her inner anxieties about the family and domestic confinement from which she seeks asylum. However, the way that Daldry uses cross-cutting seems to suggest that it may be only a figment of Virginia’s imagination; though Virginia does not envision Laura as the “heroine” of Mrs. Dalloway, the close-ups of her face book-end the expressionistic part of the sequence, and her subsequent dialogue hints that it may have simply existed in “my mind.” I prefer to think of it as Laura’s perspective in a moment of catharsis. Indeed, Jameson finds that the despair of the individual monad is realized often in a moment of catharsis when “emotion’ is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling” (11-2). Either way, Daldry uses subjective camerawork to project the inner thoughts or emotions (“affect”) of the characters and in doing so evokes the deep subjectivity of these conflicted modernist subjects who struggle to express themselves.

Daldry does not limit the subjective camera to the three female leads, for he also uses it when revealing Richard’s true identity as “Richie Brown.” After Laura picks up her son at the neighbor’s house, she turns to him in the car and says, “I love you, sweetheart. You’re my guy.” The camera, positioned on the passenger side, reveals Richie’s smiling face in the foreground. Suddenly the film cuts to a black-and-white photograph of Laura in a wedding dress. As the camera slowly zooms out, we notice that
there are blue pills scattered on frame-left, and a sickly hand touches the edge of the frame. (This outward zoom contrasts with the aforementioned inward zoom of Virginia sitting and writing “Clarissa,” perhaps creating another link between the film’s two literary figures.) The camera then cuts to a behind-the-shoulder shot of Richard, who lifts up his head and turns to the right. What we have just seen is a point-of-view shot from Richard’s perspective in 2001. During the next shot, which positions Richard looking out the window, we hear in a child’s voice-over “Mommy!” This then prompts a cross-cutting back to 1951, where we see Richie at the window screaming for his mother, Laura. The film subsequently cross-cuts back to 2001, revealing an extreme close-up of Richard’s face as tears fall down his face. In this sequence, much like Laura’s “drowning,” Daldry relies on cross-cutting when using the subjective camera. Indeed, we realize that Richard has been thinking about that specific day of his life in 1951 when his mother left him with the babysitter. In terms of subjectivity and depth, we understand how the past still affects Richard, similar to Clarissa’s preoccupation with the past; both characters have internalized those events to the extent that those emotions and feelings emerge in the present, causing the characters to breakdown and to reevaluate their lives in the present. This usage of the subjective camera allows us to reformulate our understanding of Richard, for we had not realized his true identity as the son of Laura Brown. Furthermore, Richard’s catharsis, captured and emphasized through subjective camera, illustrates his depth as a character as well as his isolation and pain.

Having outlined how the film functions according to a modernist aesthetic, specifically through its evocations of the individual monad and its underlying affect, I will now discuss how the film at the same time functions as a modernist form of parody.
Again, for Jameson, parody is an imitation of a particular style, convention or text, one that provides a critique of its source often as a social, historical, or political construction with “underlying motives.” In the case of *The Hours*, the film’s most obvious parody is of Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Not only does the film fictionally recreate Woolf’s own writing of the novel, but Richard and Clarissa’s 2001 narrative “arc” actually reenacts the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway*. By explicitly imitating Woolf’s text, the film creates a dialogue between the two texts and even plays on the notion that the rewriting of classics is a popular trope employed by modernist artists.

The film imitates Woolf’s text most basically through narrative. In Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa is a married upper-middle-class woman whose task for the day is to prepare a party for that evening. Throughout the day Clarissa runs errands around London and reunites with people from her past, notably her past lover (Peter Walsh). These encounters with people from the past force Clarissa to reevaluate her life in terms of marriage (should she have married Richard or Peter?) and purpose (does she exist solely for superficial reasons?). Though she briefly contemplates suicide, Clarissa eventually determines the value and the sheer vitality in a moment of being, allowing her to continue living with a reinvigorated sense of self. Clarissa Vaughn, the 2001 protagonist in *The Hours*, has a similar narrative trajectory: her task for the day is to prepare a party. Just as Clarissa Dalloway announces in the novel’s first line, Clarissa Vaughn proclaims that she will buy the flowers herself. She encounters people from her past (Richard, Louis) who cause her to reevaluate her purpose in life. While Clarissa Dalloway eventually throws her party to great success, Clarissa Vaughn’s party never occurs, due to Richard Brown’s sudden suicide. However, Clarissa still emerges with a
sense of renewal and a newfound value in life. That the film never realizes Clarissa’s party may be seen as a critique of the final party in Woolf’s novel. I would argue that the party in Woolf’s novel can be read as a form of containment; Clarissa nevertheless follows through with her duties as a hostess, reinscribing the notion that her primary purpose as a married woman is that of a party hostess. In its reworking of the novel’s plot, the film refuses to realize the final party, suggesting that Clarissa Vaughn in fact has the opportunity to distance herself from that image of the party hostess, that an alternative is possible. Such is one possible critique of the film’s parodic representation of Woolf’s narrative.

Additionally the film references Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* by adopting a similar love triangle between three primary characters, though the film subverts Woolf’s Peter-Clarissa-Richard grouping with its inclusion of Sally. Both narratives allude to a past love affair that keeps returning to the present. Undoubtedly Clarissa Vaughn and Louis Waters play versions of Clarissa Dalloway and Peter Walsh, though Clarissa Vaughn never has an affair with Louis. Indeed, Louis is gay, and it is the Richard character that is caught between two lovers (Clarissa and Louis). Rather than solely fulfilling Woolf’s “Richard Dalloway” character, Richard Brown additionally becomes a substitution for Septimus, the WWI shellshock victim who eventually commits suicide. (In fact, both the filmic Richard and the literary Septimus commit suicide by jumping out of a window.) In its reformulation of the novel’s love-triangle, the film yields no marriage among the three characters. Clarissa marries Richard in Woolf’s novel, yet she spends most of the novel contemplating whether she should have married him or Peter. Though Woolf does not explicitly come down on either side, it is as if *The Hours* makes the choice: neither.
Instead, the film’s rewriting of the novel has Clarissa “married” to Sally, who is Clarissa’s old friend in Woolf’s novel. Woolf suggests that Clarissa and Sally had a possibly romantic liaison in their youth, and in this way the film chooses a different life for its own Clarissa. Though Clarissa and Richard are married in Woolf’s novel, the film portrays Clarissa Vaughn and Richard Brown as argumentative and hierarchical, with Clarissa as the empowered caregiver to Richard’s diminished poet. It appears that Clarissa Vaughn has more agency than Clarissa Dalloway, and her decision to take a female lover perhaps could speak for the growing awareness and acceptance of homosexuality in the twenty-first-century (linking the bohemia of 1920s Bloomsbury to that of 2000s Greenwich Village). Thus, the film takes many liberties in its imitation of Woolf’s novel, especially by re-imagining the primary love-triangle. Furthermore, the film’s rewriting helps defamiliarize us from the source text, producing a critical distance from which we are able to critique the film as a parody.

While the film explicitly replicates *Mrs. Dalloway* through Clarissa Vaughn’s 2001 narrative, it additionally imitates Woolf’s own literary style, producing a two-fold parody of the source novel. Though Virginia Woolf is not the only modernist author to write in a stream-of-consciousness literary style, it is clearly part of her “inimitable” style in the public consciousness. She writes in a heavily impressionistic style, representing inner consciousness and subjectivity through association. In the “Modern Fiction” chapter of her non-fiction book *The Common Reader* (1925), Woolf advocates for modern fiction writers to “look within,” to explore the inside cognitive processes of each character. Rather than relying on form and convention to dictate the writing of a novel, one must recover the “spirit” or the “life” that becomes stifled by such formulas.
Oftentimes “stream-of-consciousness” narratives refuse strict chronological or linear narrative; the narrative instead flows and eddies similar to a river. For example, as Clarissa navigates her way through London near the beginning of Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf freely shifts from Clarissa’s point-of-view to that of various members on the street:

So Sarah Bletchley said with her baby in her arms, tipping her foot up and down as though she were by her own fender in Pimlico, but keeping her eyes on the Mall, while Emily Coates ranged over the Palace windows and thought of the housemaids, the innumerable housemaids, the bedrooms, the innumerable bedrooms. Joined by an elderly gentleman with an Aberdeen terrier, by men without occupation, the crowd increased. Little Mr. Bowley, who had rooms in the Albany and was sealed with wax over the deeper sources of life but could be unsealed suddenly, inappropriately, sentimentally, by this sort of thing… (19-20)

Woolf’s “stream-of-consciousness” exhibits a fluid quality that allows her to shift effortlessly from one consciousness to another. The effect is not so much jarring as it is smooth and seamless. Indeed, Woolf practices this literary style in Mrs. Dalloway not only as a means to “look within” the characters but also to recover a sense of “life” in modern fiction (which she argues is lost when one relies too heavily on formula and convention). The Hours’ screenwriter David Hare comments in Sight & Sound about the film’s structural similarity to Woolf’s own fluid literary style: “You’ve got three stories, you don’t see how they’re linked and then slowly, as the thing proceeds, you begin to understand how they’re connected thematically and literally…What’s wonderful about a triangular structure is that you never know where you’re going next (Johnston).”

To visualize Woolf’s literary “stream-of-consciousness” style, the film opens with a complex sequence that establishes the cross-cutting editing technique as the primary means to organize fluidly the film’s three competing narratives. The film begins with Virginia Woolf’s suicide in Sussex, England 1941. By revealing her suicide during the prologue, the film establishes immediately its non-linearity in that her suicide is not the
first chronological event in the film’s overall storyline. Following the title screen the film proceeds in setting up its three primary settings: Los Angeles, 1951; Richmond, England, 1923; New York City, 2001. The first narrative follows Dan Brown as he pulls his car into a suburban driveway, walks inside his home, sets a bouquet of flowers on the table, and then goes to check on his sleeping wife. This opening is significant in many respects: it establishes a tension between the outside social world and the inside domestic space (categories of inside/outside); it takes place at daybreak, suggesting the “life-in-a-day” arc that the film will adopt; and it uses the male character as the conduit through which we are introduced to the female character. The film invokes the traditional sense of identification with the male figure in the narrative, yet the camera subsequently subverts this identification by declining to follow Dan for the remainder of the 1951 narrative. Instead, it attaches to Laura. In fact, Daldry establishes both Virginia’s and Clarissa’s narratives in a similar way. The 1923 narrative follows Leonard Woolf as he makes his way from the city to his home, where Virginia lies in her bedroom upstairs. However, this motif undergoes a slight modification in 2001: the “traditional” male figure becomes embodied by a female lesbian in the character Sally Lester. Daldry cuts from Sally in the New York City subway to her walking down the street as she approaches a brownstone apartment in Greenwich Village, where Clarissa Vaughn sleeps upstairs.

Even though each of these openings invokes the traditional male role as the progenitor of the narrative, the camera quickly takes to the women instead of the men, opting to focus on their stories for the remainder of the film. Thus, it establishes early on a “feminine” perspective that reinforces Virginia’s God-like voice-over narration during
the prologue. Additionally, the film’s opening establishes the difference among the settings by placing each in a specific time and place, and in order to render a fluid transition within the non-chronological plotline (1941, 1951, 1923, 2001), Daldry uses cross-cutting editing that allows us to jump from one perspective to another, thereby creating a visual parody of Woolf’s own “stream-of-consciousness” literary style as evident in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

While the film functions as a parody of something outside of the text (Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*), it can consequently be read as an internal parody used to bind each of the separate narrative lines together. This is achieved not only through each woman’s similarity in narrative trajectory (they all experience varying degrees of depression and suicidal impulses) but also through visual and verbal cues. As Daldry sets up each of the women’s narratives, he uses similar camerawork that develops into a series of graphic matches. Daldry often frames each of the women in a similar manner, producing graphic matches that transcend the limits of space and time and which are linked to one another through visual imitation. Thus, we experience these women as living in a form of parody, for Daldry underlines their imitative nature during highly orchestrated sequences that cross-cut seamlessly throughout history.

For example, Daldry links these women through a series of parodic graphic matches during the film’s opening sequence. Positioned inside the 1951 bedroom, the camera tracks downward and to the right, eventually resting on the image of Laura Brown, lying on her left side in bed and whose eyes are still closed. Likewise, the 1923 camera slowly tracks to the right inside Virginia’s bedroom, stopping on the image of Virginia, who is lying on her left side with her eyes open. And once Sally enters the
2001 bedroom in Greenwich Village, the camera continues tracking to the right and ends up focusing on Clarissa Vaughn, lying on her left side and whose eyes suddenly flash open. This visual parody creates a likeness between the otherwise disparate women; though they exist in strictly different contexts, the camerawork encourages us to form a connection among them out of sheer imitation. (Nevertheless, the slight alteration of eyes – closed, open, both – may reinforce an underlying difference in their initial state at the film’s beginning.) Getting out of bed, both Virginia and Clarissa appear as mirror images when washing their face (a conventional symbol of fragmented subjectivity), and the camera even cross-cuts between the two as they lean forward to splash the water. Later in the day, as Virginia begins working on the novel, she says aloud, “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” The camera then cross-cuts to Laura Brown, sitting up in bed, reading aloud the same first line from her hardback edition of Mrs. Dalloway. We next see Clarissa, standing in her kitchen, exclaiming, “Sally, I think I’ll buy the flowers myself.”

In this three-shot sequence, we see how each successive shot parodies the one before: we start with the authorial voice (the source), which proceeds to the reader’s response (indirectly from the novel), ending with a woman who internalizes the novel to the extent that she is living the experience (fluid boundary, living outside of herself). Indeed, Clarissa does not actively cite or even acknowledge the text, for her life in fact becomes the text of Mrs. Dalloway (a postmodern concept that will later support my argument about the film’s tendency toward historical pastiche). The repetition in the women’s lives serves as parody in that they first exist as representation (i.e., Virginia says the “flowers” line), which is subsequently imitated and altered in a different
historical contexts. Nevertheless, these imitations act to reinforce the “inimitability” of Woolf’s original line, thus functioning as a verbal (dialogue) and visual (“stream-of-consciousness” editing, graphic matches) parody. This entire opening sequence functions to interweave these three separate storylines, and this is achieved through the techniques of graphic matches and cross-cutting editing; furthermore, the editing visualizes history as a parody of both word and image in its imitation of Woolf’s text.

These graphic matches and cross-cutting editing allow the film to unite the three female narratives in a style that resembles the fluidity of Woolf’s “stream-of-consciousness”. Though it is not difficult to find this type of style transposed in avant-garde cinema (e.g. Leger’s Ballet Méchanique, or Bunuel’s Un Chien Andalou), its presence in “classical” narrative cinema remains less common. Typified by Hollywood continuity editing, narrative cinema is less likely to take the digressions that stream-of-consciousness privileges. Classical narrative cinema also prefers a clear sense of order and objectivity, declining too much freedom and subjectivity. The Hours, operating as a Hollywood-style film in terms of narrative, uses this unconventional approach to editing, one that operates more so through association rather than continuity, as a means not only of organizing its tri-part structure but also in mimicking the literary style of its primary muse: Virginia Woolf. Many sequences in the film implement this style, not just in the beginning. For example, as Dan waits for Laura in bed towards the end of the film, we see Laura Brown open the bathroom door and pause in the threshold. The camera then cuts to Leonard Woolf as he opens the door to Virginia’s workroom and asks if she is coming to bed; we see Leonard’s face frozen in the doorway, mimicking Laura Brown’s face, as if anticipating Virginia’s response. Virginia says, “Mrs. Dalloway’s destiny must
be resolved,” which motivates the next shot, revealing Clarissa Vaughn standing frozen in her kitchen after Richard’s suicide. Three separate contexts united through editing and linked through parodic images. This brief sequence exemplifies the editing strategy of the film as an internal parody of the interweaving narratives as well as an external parody of Woolf’s style that jumps from one consciousness to another, from one time period to another, seamlessly.

Because his notion of “parody” presupposes the possibility of meaning in imitation, Jameson claims that “parody” found a “fertile area” in Modernism. However, The Hours’ internal use of “parody” actually borders on “pastiche,” which Jameson argues is symptomatic of the postmodern culture in which the film is produced. Until now I have shown how the film attempts to preserve the category of the modernist individual as a monad-like artist, yet the film nevertheless shows signs of the postmodern ethos at the time of its production (2002) as a means to salvage such a concept. This becomes clear in the film’s stream-of-consciousness editing strategy. The film uses three different narratives ultimately to tell one common story: that is, the experience of a repressed woman who endures a crisis, prompting a reevaluation of her life in the span of 24 hours. This bare outline is similar to that of Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, but The Hours “modernizes” the narrative by creating two additional storylines. In the film Virginia muses about her novel Mrs. Dalloway and how she wants to tell a woman’s whole life in one day; thus is the basic organizing principle of The Hours. However, the film complicates Woolf’s initial narrative by following three protagonists in three different historical settings. Not only are these characters’ whole lives reduced to a single day but also their experiences in that day are reduced to one space and one time. Daldry uses
cross-cutting editing as a means of realizing this narrative strategy, yet the effect blurs the line between modern “parody” and postmodern “pastiche.” While the film tries to operate according to a modernist aesthetic by adopting such conventions as the alienated modernist individual and the presence of “affect,” its approach to temporality and history is distinctly postmodern, for it collapses the boundaries of time and space into one continuous present.

Even though the film clearly sets up three distinct settings in the opening sequence, those categories begin to slip as the film progresses. By the end of the film we learn that Richard is in fact “Richie,” and Laura Brown even shows up in Clarissa’s 2001 narrative, thus collapsing both the 1951 and 2001 narratives into one continuous story arc. The film attempts to transcend limitations of time and space in evoking a “universal” subjectivity of women (as the conflicted modernist monad), yet it ironically creates a continuous postmodern present that threatens to flatten such experiences and hollow out the subjectivities of the characters. Additionally, in its rewriting of Woolf’s text, which could be read as a modernist form of rewriting classics, the film collapses historically distinct problems (for instance, Richard’s AIDS becomes a modified version of Septimus’s WWI shell-shock). Though each of these “illnesses” are historically and contextually appropriate, the substitution nevertheless borders on a pastiche of Woolf’s text; the film fails to acknowledge any reason for the substitution, thus resembling Jameson’s notion of pastiche as “blank parody,” devoid of meaning or critique. The film then could be read more as “pastiche” than “parody,” in which the film’s production of meaning-making comes into question, asking whether or not the text allows for the possibility of meaning. Thus, if we read The Hours as historical pastiche, then such a
move would threaten to eradicate its many invocations of modernist thematics, which presuppose meaning and as well as subjectivity.

Indeed, by the end of the film, the interweaving machinations of the narratives evoke a sense of temporal pastiche. Following Richard’s suicide, Clarissa is in a state of shock when someone knocks at her apartment door. Enter Laura Brown, Richard’s estranged mother, the second character to cross-over from the 1951 narrative into 2001. Though Laura is played by the same actress (Julianne Moore), her make-up reveals that she has obviously aged. She has come to see Clarissa and eventually unloads her side of Richard’s story. At first Clarissa remains unconvinced of Laura’s martyrdom in abandoning the family. However, as Laura proceeds, the camera frames both Laura and Clarissa in close-up, heightening the tension in the scene. Laura tells her, “What does it mean to regret, when you have no choice?” She later adds, “It was death. I chose life.” By the end of Laura’s confession, Clarissa has recognized herself in Laura’s plight; she identifies with her sense of entrapment. They experience a deep connection precisely because they share a common sensibility, thus pointing to the overall structure of the film. It is jarring and unexpected to see Laura in the 2001 context because we associate her with a different historical period, yet the film constantly tries to unite each temporality through similarities and subtle connections in creating a universal experience – we are not even sure if Laura is alive or not before she knocks at Clarissa’s door. We are supposed to accept this ending as valid because it is as if Laura and Clarissa have existed in the same continuous present through the entire film; in a sense, it seems inevitable that they finally meet. Due to the leveling of temporality, the meaning behind this cathartic moment in which Clarissa’s narrative is resolved becomes hollowed out.
with its sense of melodramatic contrivance. The film at once wants us to experience the deep, subjective, ultimately “modern” experience of these women during this cathartic conversation, but it nevertheless relies on its postmodern structuring principle to set up such an effect, eliciting a sense of postmodern “pastiche-ness” more so than modern “subjectivity” from the characters.

If we then read the film as historical pastiche, then we accept Jameson’s binaries as well as his formulation of pastiche as empty. Though I find many of Jameson’s cultural binaries convincing and useful, especially his distinctions between the “alienated” modernist individual and the “fragmented” postmodernist subject, his evaluation of pastiche as empty seems too restrictive and denies the possibility for meaning-making in postmodernism. In terms of its approach to history and temporality, *The Hours* successfully engages with our current “anxiety” over an ongoing, continuous present in postmodernism. The film’s ultimate transcendence of time and space (crystallized in the scene with Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughn) actually engages with our experience of history in the context of postmodernism as always through the guise of the present. Thus, the cross-cutting editing technique actually provides meaning to the text in that it constructs a fluid sense of history that both reflects and authenticates our own experience in postmodernism. Though the film’s approach to history is “meaningful” in a postmodern context, its formulation of the individual as a “monad-like container” is ultimately regressive, for it comes out of a different cultural context (“modernism”). Indeed, Jameson’s notion of the modernist individual subject becomes melodramatic as realized in Daldry’s film; the characters’ dilemma with containment, expression, and sheer emotional experience rings somewhat false in the context of the
postmodern culture of which the film is a product. These individuals exist more as constructs rather than “authentic” representations to a postmodern audience who (acc. to Jameson) navigates through a consumer culture.

While *The Hours* tries to recover a sense of “affect,” which presupposes an internal struggle for expression that defined the modernist individual subject, it nevertheless does so through a postmodern aesthetic that, for Jameson, dominates contemporary cultural production. As a result, the film’s editing strategy straddles the line of parody and pastiche in its treatment of history and temporality. Rather than lamenting the film’s tendency toward historical pastiche, an idea that Jameson would find symptomatic of postmodernism, the film’s postmodern approach to editing ultimately provides the films its meaning; the film engages with our unique experience of history as pastiche in postmodernism more so than with our experience of the individual as an angst-ridden monad, which functions ultimately as a melodramatic construct more so than an authentic representation in the film.

III. Critiquing Postmodern Pastiche in *Marie Antoinette*

If Daldry’s film *The Hours* reflects an attempt to resurrect the modern individual, as Jameson understands it, in the representation of history through “parody,” both textually (as a series of graphic matches and parallel narratives) and inter-textually (as a rewriting of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*), then Sofia Coppola’s film *Marie Antoinette* (2006) reflects an attempt to engage with the postmodern individual, according to Jameson’s cultural binaries, through its representation of history as “pastiche.” The film illustrates
three constitutive features of Jameson’s postmodern culture: the court’s constant gossiping and stifling behavior toward Marie contribute to the flattening of the individual; three separate parties reveal Marie’s “waning of affect” and overall depthlessness by invoking many postmodern thematics such as performance as “identity,” chance, spectacle, and familiarity; and the film’s anachronistic soundtrack provides a pastiche aesthetic that privileges style and image over substance. It is this last feature, however, that becomes problematic in the film’s approach to history. While the film takes a specifically postmodern approach in rendering Marie Antoinette’s biography, Coppola nevertheless seems to point towards a critique of contemporary American consumerism via the excess of 18th-century Versailles. According to Jameson, however, though such a critique was possible through the modernist practice of parody, pastiche allows little possibility for social or historical commentary in that it collapses meaning into surface-level signification. I argue against Jameson in saying that Coppola effectively uses pastiche to critique postmodern culture. Because the film revels in its depthlessness at the same time that it critiques it, the film offers a modified conception of pastiche that broadens Jameson’s conception of the term as well as undermines the larger cultural binaries that he erects between modernism and postmodernism.

Jameson argues that the disappearance of the individual in postmodernism produces the “well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” (16). He claims that while the modernist individual subject experiences a tension between the outer and the inner worlds, the line blurs to such an extent in the postmodern individual that language structures disintegrate, rendering meaning-making impossible. Thus, the modernist conception of the individual becomes an illusion. The “inimitable” styles of
the moderns fail to reinforce any sense of the “norm” in postmodernism, to the point where the “norm” is actually eclipsed. As a result, the individual no longer has an “inimitable” style that could allow for parody. Whereas modernist parody points towards the subject of parody, postmodernist pastiche can only refer to postmodern culture itself, becoming a simulation of cultural codes that bear no relation to the “real.” Postmodern culture reduces modernist conceptions such as “history” and “reality” to the surface levels of style and image that consequently eradicate an authentic and universal sense of “reality” unmediated by images. Furthermore, Jameson describes pastiche as “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (17). Like parody, pastiche is a form of imitation, yet it lacks any of parody’s inherent critique, which has been excavated due to postmodernism’s proliferation of images, the mass media, and technology. We can no longer occupy parody’s critical distance, illustrated by the depth model in Modernism; rather, postmodernist texts incorporate these styles to the point where they only exist on the surface as “blank parody,” producing an imitation based on similarity yielding neither critique nor ulterior purpose. Indeed, it is Jameson’s notion of pastiche as a politically bankrupt imitation of style that I will explore in my discussion of Coppola’s film as both a postmodernist text and a pastiche representation of history.

In fact, postmodern culture transforms the notion of “history” from the presentation of fact to a simulation of actual lived “history” in the form of representation. Though “history” has always been based somewhat on interpretation, which subsequently renders impossible a purely objective record of any event, it is in postmodernism that we become highly skeptical of “history” as a form of simulacra that may have little basis in “reality.” Because industry controls representation in “late capitalism,” history
manifests as yet one more commodity to market. Therefore, our only access to “the past” is through problematic representations that ultimately function to construct “history” in terms of the present (what he terms “historicity”). It is postmodern culture’s “crisis in historicity,” of feeling disconnected from the continuity of history, that causes the “culture industry” to idealize the past as simulacra through the nostalgia mode, which Jameson finds symptomatic of postmodernism. The purpose of the nostalgia film is not to represent a past “reality”; rather, it approaches the past through style, through the “glossy qualities of the image” (17). The nostalgia film reduces history to image, creating a warped sense of the past that has little basis in “reality.” As a result, “the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history” (20) in postmodern culture.

*Marie Antoinette* functions similarly to Jameson’s nostalgia film in that it approaches history through style, specifically due to its postmodern pastiche aesthetic; however, the film adopts this aesthetic in order to critique its own fabrication, revealing that postmodern accounts of history exist simply as *style*, not “reality.” Coppola’s film uses pastiche as a means of exposing the plight of history in postmodern culture, in particular the way history becomes usurped by style, simulation, and commodification. Coppola exposes postmodernism’s simulation of history most significantly through the anachronistic soundtrack, which features heavily pop- and punk-influenced music to underscore the idea that it is not only her film that is an imitation of a “reality” that may never have existed, but also other highly speculative accounts of Marie Antoinette’s history. In addition, the pastiche approach to history ironically makes the representation feel more authentic and “real” because this style grows out of our contemporary worldview. We understand that Coppola’s version of Marie Antoinette is not an historically
“accurate” portrayal of the queen herself; nevertheless, we experience Coppola’s Marie as “authentic” in the contemporary context of postmodernism. If Jameson finds “pastiche” to be the representational mode of postmodernism, if “pastiche” has in fact eclipsed “parody,” then it would only be fitting that a postmodern audience would relate more to that culture’s form of representation, thus increasing our identification with the protagonist. Though this account of the past is more removed from an authentic “reality” than that of a “heritage film,” which proclaims its verisimilitude to an actual lived past through agonizing attention to detail, we identify with this fabrication more effectively as a result of the updated music choices and overall pastiche aesthetic, both of which are characteristic of contemporary culture (as opposed to that of 18th-century France). The film resolves this paradox, however, by revealing the constructed-ness of history as a commodity.

Jameson argues that postmodern culture turns history into a commodity, an idea that Coppola addresses directly in her film. Coppola tries to disrupt the fate of “history” in postmodern culture, specifically the “history” of Marie Antoinette herself. As a fixed commodity, “Marie Antoinette” signifies a wealthy and spoiled queen of pre-Revolutionary France who is ultimately decapitated by the guillotine for acts of treason (most notably, for bankrupting the country). In effect, these attributes of the queen’s “history” have solidified over the years into a bound and fixed commodity. Coppola attempts to suggest that both “history” and “Marie Antoinette” herself exist in postmodernism as commodities, and Coppola does so by taking part in the process of historical and cultural production. In Marie Antoinette: The Journey (2001), which is Coppola’s primary source text, Antonia Fraser writes, “In the course of tracing this
journey, I have hoped to unravel the cruel myths and salacious distortions surrounding her name” (xix, “Author’s Note”). In fact, both Fraser and Coppola can be situated in the recent trend regarding Marie Antoinette scholarship to insert a sense of understanding and humanity in their portrait of the notorious queen. In the introduction to *Writings on the Body of a Queen*, editor Dena Goodman claims, “[Marie] was constantly being identified, constructed, presented, and represented. Her body was the site of controversy and power struggles; its image was central to those struggles” (3). Coppola’s film itself reflects on the commodification of historical figures, using the queen of France as its primary target, for not only does the film’s historical character herself exude a sense of depthlessness but the film accordingly takes such an approach in its representation. Thus, because the “real” Marie Antoinette is forever inaccessible, the “real” Marie Antoinette is *Marie Antoinette*. I will conduct a reading of the film that outlines how Marie herself becomes a commodity, a narrative trajectory that is resolved by her total reduction to image by the end of the film. Indeed, she becomes a commodified image that takes on a life of its own and in fact usurps her own lived “reality.” In exposing both as commodities, the film attempts to create a space for an alternative history, one that evokes sympathy toward the notorious queen and that suggests an overconfidence in our understanding of historical figures.

I argue that the film serves as a corrective to the problematic image of Marie Antoinette that persists today, for Coppola encourages us to understand Marie on a more human, subjective level. The film is meaningful in exposing the commodification of history in postmodern culture as merely a pastiche understanding of “cultural” history (rather than monumental History); moreover, this effect is produced through an
unconventional and anachronistic approach to its historical subject that underscores a subjective rather than objective understanding of history. The film does not try to hide its status as a *neo*-bio-pic; instead, the film revels in its pastiche. It is possible both to read the film as a serious comment on history in postmodernism and at the same time to read it as deliberately superficial. Because it functions on both levels, the film questions Jameson’s definition of pastiche as devoid of serious social, historical, or political commentary. That *Marie Antoinette* is able to both appropriate the representational mode of pastiche as well as construct an inherent critique against such commodification makes us question the stability of Jameson’s cultural dichotomies.

In discussing how the film functions as a “postmodernist text,” I will begin by looking at the first part of the film as it chronicles Marie’s arrival at Versailles and her interaction with the royal court. Moreover, the film’s opening establishes the tension between Marie and the court, in which she struggles to “express” herself against the constant court gossip. In the introduction to *Writings on the Body of a Queen*, editor Dena Goodman writes, “Feminist and postmodern scholars in particular have challenged the possibility of writing biography on the grounds that it assumes both a unified, autonomous subject and the naturalness of its unfolding in narrative” (14). Likewise, Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* functions like a postmodern biography in that it interrogates the category of the individual subject (Marie) as well as the “naturalness” of the narrative, which the opening credits announce immediately. The film begins by invoking a decadent image of Marie Antoinette that the film will try to de-monumentalize and to complicate in its pastiche representation. Written in pink font, the opening credits appear on the black screen as the soundtrack plays:
The problem of leisure
What to do for pleasure
Ideal love a new purchase
A market of the senses…
Fornication makes you happy
No escape from society
Natural’s not in it
Your relations are of power
We all have good intentions
But all with strings attached. (Gang of Four’s “Natural’s Not In It”)

Instead of establishing the film in the conventional mode of historical bio-pics, using perhaps a sweeping instrumental score that reflects the instrumentation and composition of the time period, this film begins with a pop-punk song written in 1979, roughly 200 years after the events depicted in the film. The music forces us to re-evaluate our assumptions of not only the film (as a traditional historical biography) but also the figure of Marie herself. Indeed, the lyrics anticipate the representation of the characters as “unnatural.” The song choice could also be read as an intertextual reference to Joris-Karyl Huysmans’s 1884 novel Against Nature (French translation, “À Rebours”), which follows the mundane and surface-oriented interests of the protagonist Des Esseintes, an archetypal dandy figure. The analogy becomes evident in the only visual image of the opening credits, which reveals a brief glimpse of Marie lounging in a chair as a servant puts on her shoes. Coppola frames Marie in a decadent pose that signals the depthlessness in the character as akin to the dandy. However, at one point Marie actually lifts her head and turns towards the camera, shoots a quixotic glance, and then rests her head back down in repose. Because Marie looks directly at the camera, the shot becomes self-reflexive in referencing both the presence of the camera as well as the audience. The self-reflexive gesture suggests that this is a knowing representation of Marie Antoinette that is aware of its own construction simply as representation, not hard fact or official
“History.” Moreover, the film sets up the notions that “history” and “identity” are constructions that become mere simulacra in postmodernism. Coppola intends to complicate the prevailing image of Marie Antoinette that survives today – one characterized by decadence and frivolity (much like the dandy), and Coppola does so through self-reflexivity and pastiche. In so doing, Coppola openly acknowledges her simulation of history in the film’s opening frames. The anachronistic music choice highlights the “unnatural” interpretation of Marie Antoinette in postmodernism, as a commodified image of history rather than an actual person who lived in the past, and it sets up the primary tension of the film: Marie (and history) as a surface commodity that struggles even to express herself and whose image the film tries to explore and ultimately to contest.

While the opening image of Marie suggests her commodification as a particularly decadent historical figure, the film’s primary plot line (marriage alliance) explicitly questions her agency as well as her ability for expression. As a form of visual flattening that reflects the machinations of the plot, window and mirror images suggest the depthlessness of Marie as an individual subject. Following the opening credits, Coppola situates us in Austria, 1768, where we learn that Marie’s mother has arranged for her fourteen year-old daughter to be married to the Dauphin of France, Louis XVI. This is the first indication of Marie’s treatment as an object, in this case of political allegiance. While Marie is en route to the French border, Coppola positions the camera so as to gaze upon Marie’s distant-looking face through the carriage window; moreover, Coppola frequently films Marie’s transparency through windows that collectively project a depthless quality to the character. It seems that for her mother and Ambassador Mercy,
Marie exists merely as a political pawn. One scene shows Marie reading a letter from her mother. As Coppola zooms in on Marie’s image in a mirror, we hear the mother’s voice-over narration as Marie stares at her image. It is significant that her mother speaks, not Marie, for it reinforces the “de-centered” self that she finds in the mirror’s surface. Marie does not exist as a stable and centered self; rather, she functions as an object of others’ desires, in this case her mother’s desire for her to produce a male heir and to solidify the alliance between Austria and France, which de-centers her sense of agency and subjectivity. The second scene in which Marie reads a letter from her mother completely erases any trace of subjectivity. Once again hearing the mother’s voice-over narration, we see Marie standing against an interior palace wall that exhibits a similar floral pattern to her dress; in fact, she blends in with the exteriors. In creating a likeness between the individual and wall-paper, Coppola represents the blurring of inside/outside categories that Jameson observes in the postmodern individual, whom we see almost literally disappearing to surface. Marie’s reduction to transparent surface ornamentation creates a link between visual flattening and her objectification in the plot, and this visual depthlessness illustrates her de-centered subjectivity and its effect on her inability to express marital frustrations to Ambassador Mercy and to her mother.

Windows, mirrors, and wallpaper visually demonstrate a depthless quality to Marie’s character whereas her superficial interests clash with the political expectations of the royal court, which itself treats her as an object and transforms her into a commodity. After her arrival at Versailles, Marie soon experiences marital troubles with Louis XVI, in particular their failure to consummate the marriage. Asked to convince Marie of the importance in producing a male heir, which Coppola presents as her sole purpose in
France, Ambassador Mercy talks to Marie about the situation, saying, “I am pleased Madame is taking this seriously.” However, Marie pauses and then blurts out, “Oh, is Mobbs on his way?” referring to her pet dog in Austria. Marie’s interests lie not in politics but in herself. Coppola returns to this dynamic in a later scene with Ambassador Mercy, who asks Marie, “Has Madame read the current brief on our [political] situation?” She playfully responds, “No, I haven’t read it yet. Can you just tell me about it?” Coppola represents Marie as interested only in objects such as shoes and dresses (she asks for his advice on “sleeves with ruffles or without ruffles”) more so than in politics. Politics are foreign to her, but shoes and cakes and dresses (commodities) are all available to her in the immediate present and thus capture her interest.

In Coppola’s source text *The Journey*, Antonia Fraser says that she has attempted “to tell Marie Antoinette’s dramatic story without anticipating its terrible ending” (xix, “Author’s Note”). Indeed, it appears that Coppola uses Fraser’s strategy as a metaphor for the film’s portrayal of Marie as a postmodern individual whose interest lies in the present and who rarely thinks about past or future consequences. Her flippancy lends an airy and light quality to her character, so evident that one woman in the court remarks, “She looks like a little piece of cake.” Not only does she look like an exquisite piece of cake, but she *is* a piece of cake in that she exists as a mélange of variegated ingredients with no essential, “autonomous” core; her superficial interests render comparison to a baked confection that is all decoration, sweetness, and light. Both Marie’s superficiality and her refusal to engage in political discussion commodify her in the eyes of the court. However, the court criticizes Marie for her shallowness at the same time that it makes her shallow. The court thrives on luxury and excess (evident in the parties that I will discuss
later), and it also tries to assimilate Marie into its extravagant culture through a rigorous protocol that ultimately critiques its own non-utilitarianism. It is significant that Marie does not exhibit such superficial behavior before her arrival at Versailles, for it is the royal court that transforms Marie into a superficial commodity: the image of a light and fluffy personage that will eventually subsume the “reality” of Marie Antoinette and lead to her execution.

Coppola uses Marie’s superficiality and her likeness to a cake as a means to interrogate the notion of her as a unified individual subject who possesses the ability to express thoughts and ideas. In fact, Coppola critiques not only Marie but also us, via her mirroring of contemporary culture. Coppola forms a critique against the culture of Versailles that both produces and executes Marie, yet by comparing the court of Versailles to contemporary postmodern culture, Coppola consequently indicates us in that critique. It is as if our judgment of Marie as simply depthless and “affect”-less, thus our quick dismissal of any inherent “worth” to Marie, implicates our own postmodern superficiality. Though the film creates this depthless image of Marie, it alternately challenges that image by openly acknowledging its own fabrication as an ahistorical biography, insisting on hearsay and gossip as primary methods by which history can be falsely constructed. Many early scenes feature characters gossiping either about Marie Antoinette herself or about her problematic marriage to Louis XVI. People in the court gossip about Marie’s failure to consummate the marriage and to produce an heir; however, no one knows directly what happens inside the bedroom, for everything is hearsay. Marie is subject to gossip even on her first day at Versailles. Making her grand entrance into the palace, Marie is met with disapproving stares and hisses. Later, we see
a distraught Marie walking outside with her girlfriends while we hear three women gossip through voice-over narration: “Well, I heard that she bought a boy…No…Yes, yes, I heard that she found a little peasant boy by the side of the street and took him in like a stray dog…”

Though Marie is the topic of most of the court gossip, she is not the only victim. Indeed, the women of the court behave like cliquish school girls as they take pleasure in ostracizing people such as the Comtesse du Barry, a Paris courtesan who entertains the King. For example, the Comtesse bumps into Marie’s shoulder as she walks past her, prompting one of Marie’s girlfriends to retort, “That was unnecessary.” Coppola portrays Versailles as if it were a modern-day high school full of warring adolescents. The film is about how gossip can sometimes take over the life of the individual so as to become “reality” itself, whether it is based in truth or not. The film suggests that all history (as it exists in postmodern culture) is nothing more than simulacra based on received gossip that has been passed down over the years, eventually forming a commodity of “history” in postmodernism. Moreover, gossip blurs the inside/outside category of the individual subject, for gossip creates a false identity of someone else that may in fact subsume the “reality” of that individual; the public image may usurp the actual individual, replacing subjectivity with persona. Therefore, the individual struggles not only to maintain a stable sense of self but also to express itself through language. It is as if gossip creates what Jameson describes as “a linguistic fragmentation of social life itself to the point where the norm itself is eclipsed” (17). Though these early scenes of gossip are relatively harmless, they only become more critical as the film progresses, for Coppola chronicles how Marie Antoinette becomes usurped by the public perception of “Marie Antoinette,” a
commodity that gossip propagates. Thus, the individual subject begins to disappear as gossip takes over as the primary signifier of the individual as well as actual lived “history.”

At the same time that hearsay and gossip transform Marie Antoinette into a commodity, her obsession with commodities only fuels the fire, and Coppola conflates the excess of Versailles with that of American postmodern culture as a means to make the past identifiable to a contemporary audience as well as to construct a critique against the shallowness of consumer culture. After Marie discovers that the Comtesse du Provence has given birth, a feat Marie has yet to accomplish, Coppola films a montage in which Marie and her friends try on different outfits and pairs of shoes. Thus, Marie’s shopping spree takes the place of grief and anxiety, substituting internal “affect” for external commodities. First, we see a row of extravagant shoes as the camera tracks to the left. We then get a series of close-up shots that focus on additional shoes, fans, and fabrics. Indeed, the sequence consists of Marie and her two girlfriends sitting on a couch and ogling at the seemingly endless amount of shoes and pink fabrics – “[it] looks just like candy,” one of the women comments. Coppola cross-cuts between the conspicuous consumption of material goods and the continual consumption of dessert dishes, in which the treats magically disappear through jump-cut editing. The musical track conflates these parallel ideas (clothing and food) in Bow Wow Wow’s 1982 remake of “I Want Candy.” While the lyrics represent a man as “eye candy,” this filmic sequence situates everything as eye candy: shoes, clothes, hair, jewels, desserts, champagne, and poker chips. Marie even comments self-reflexively on the excess when she asks her hairdresser, “It’s not too much, is it?” (However, Coppola undermines Marie’s sincerity
and naïveté by revealing a completely outrageous bouffant that towers at least two-feet above her scalp.)

Furthermore, Coppola compares the excess of Versailles and postmodern America in this same sequence by capturing an overhead shot of shoes as a graphic homage to Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*. We first see two neat rows of shoes lined up beside one another, then Coppola jump-cuts to an image in which the shoes are scattered within the frame; indeed, the linearity is broken, and suddenly they resemble the non-functional, free-floating shoes that Warhol photographs. According to Jameson, Warhol’s mass-produced print serves as the quintessential image of postmodern art – he even uses it on the cover of *Postmodernism*. Both the Warhol reference and the music by Bow Wow Wow create a dialogue between the aural and the visual, producing a potential commentary that links the consumer culture of American postmodernism with pre-Revolutionary Versailles. Indeed, the pastiche aesthetic at once makes the past identifiable to us, operating according to contemporary cultural production and using easily identifiable signifiers from pop-art and punk music, thereby encouraging us to see ourselves as navigating through a culture of mass production not too dissimilar from Versailles. We realize that this is not an “authentic” depiction of history; rather, it is highly influenced by the present in rendering an image of Marie to which a contemporary audience can relate. This entire sequence serves doubly to commodify Marie and to critique that commodification as she navigates through an environment of “eye candy.” As a means of visualizing the effect of consumerism on the individual, Coppola suggests how shoes literally replace an actual “subject” – the child that Marie has yet to conceive (the child itself becomes a commodity). Marie projects her subjectivity onto
commodities (just as we do in the postmodern practice of mass-production and conspicuous consumption), contributing to her lost sense of self in combating the many rumors and gossip of the court.

Having discussed how Marie’s interaction with the court mirrors the postmodern tendency toward the disappearance of the autonomous individual in consumer culture, I will now explore how the film’s depiction of three separate parties reinforces Marie’s excess and superficiality by invoking many postmodernist thematics: disguise and performance as “identity,” chance, spectacle, and familiarity. Following the “Shoes and Cake” montage, Marie and her friends escape from the court and attend a masked ball in Paris. Because she has been forbidden to attend the ball, Marie adopts a different persona in an effort to blend in with others. However, Coppola undermines the futile attempt at a costume, for her mask is nothing more than a slim piece of transparent black fabric that fails to disguise any part of her face. Because the stability of the individual subject comes under critique in postmodernism, which describes identity as an ideological construction more so than an intrinsic quality, Marie’s penchant for dress-up and performance suggests the postmodern notion of identity as heterogeneous, as made up of various roles. Marie attempts to realize these desires for play and performance not only at the masquerade but also at her house in the country, le Petit Trianon, where she performs as an amateur actress on stage. Antonia Fraser comments, “Significantly, Marie Antoinette’s chosen parts had absolutely nothing to do with the gorgeously attired stately role she played day by day at Versailles. She played shepherdesses, village maidens and chambermaids” (179). Though Marie is unable to fully disappear in her costume for the masquerade ball, her image on stage marks a strong contrast to her appearance at
Versailles. Indeed, she dons the clothing and make-up of a commoner, acting as a village maiden on stage. In both cases it is important that Marie escapes the confines of the court, where she is treated above all as an object; these become efforts on Marie’s part to assert a sense of subjectivity that the court usurps as the film progresses. Identity becomes a series of performances that offer a form of liberation from the individual’s sense of fragmentation in postmodernism. Thus, while Marie engages in an act of liberation from the court’s commodification of her image, these performances nevertheless underline her sense of a fragmented self that can only be expressed by acting out roles that relegate identity to the realm of surfaces.

Coppola films these scenes, however, in a playful tone, which is both heightened and critiqued during Marie’s 18th birthday party. A montage of excessive behavior and pleasurable indulgence, the party features people constantly drinking, eating, gambling, and dancing, all set to the New Order song “Ceremony.” Coppola uses the anachronistic music choice to collapse temporal boundaries in conveying a sense of Marie’s feeling at the time that consequently resonates with a contemporary audience. Indeed, the music contributes to the party’s many excesses in evoking a “peculiar kind of euphoria” (16), which Jameson finds in the increasingly affect-less postmodern individual. According to Jameson’s terms, the relentless “intensities,” marked by a spectacle of food, drink, and music, actually replace the feelings or “affect” of the court, which Coppola treats as a microcosm of postmodern culture. And, of course, the fact that our identification with Marie comes via pop music compounds Jameson’s notion of postmodernism and its tendency towards pastiche. Though the music allows us to discern the simulation involved in the party’s representation, or the “unreality” of the historical situation, Louis
XVI’s advice to his wife (“Try not to lose our fortune”) foreshadows their fateful yet real ending. The ubiquitous presence of gambling underlines Marie’s chancing with the wealth of France, for her excesses (crystallized in her preoccupation with extravagant parties) become the basis for later accusations of treason. Furthermore, the theme of monetary excess runs throughout the film, and this scene acts as one of the clearest examples of money squandering for which Marie is responsible. Coppola reinforces and critiques the excess of the party by showing a brief scene of the “morning after,” in which the servants clean up the waste and residue from the night before. This sequence serves as an example of Coppola combining social commentary with pastiche in catering both to the playful, “euphoric” attitude in the postmodern spectacle and the dangers that underlie such extravagance in consumerism.

During one of the last big parties of the film, Coppola draws an analogy between those parties held at Versailles and those held in contemporary postmodern culture. At a dinner party for the American Revolutionary soldiers, the guests play a variety of games: they guess the namecard that is stuck to their forehead, they rub their fingers on glasses to make music, they drink and smoke recreationally, and they play hide-and-seek in the chateau. These familiar games contribute to the film’s overall approach in “modernizing” (or, “postmodernizing”) our historical view of Marie Antoinette. Because these activities are familiar to a contemporary audience, Coppola tries to say that these people are just like us, that we can identify with these historical figures through common experience. Such is the stylistic goal of pastiche, which is a form of imitation based on similarity rather than difference. The three parties that I have outlined reveal different aspects of Jameson’s postmodernism as it relates to Coppola’s vision of Versailles: the
masquerade ball (as well as Marie’s acting on stage) reveal a problematic sense of identity based on disguise and performance, which relegates subjectivity to the realm of surfaces and role-playing; Coppola undercuts the excess and the spectacle of Marie’s 18th birthday by suggesting that it is all left to chance, not divine right; and the party for the American soldiers depicts “history” in terms of the present, as it operates according to familiarity with contemporary games and activities. Each party makes an additional point in compounding our sense of identification with the past, whether through pastiche aesthetic or via postmodernist thematics. Furthermore, Coppola constructs our identification with a postmodern Marie so as to de-mythologize the historical figure “Marie Antoinette” that is first presented to us in the film’s opening credits.

In the midst of these parties, Marie and Louis XVI are finally able to consummate their marriage, thus securing the marriage alliance and fulfilling Marie’s primary goal. After she gives birth to a daughter (Marie Therese), she is awarded the key to a chateau in the country, which acts as a sign of approval by the court. Though Louis XVI fails to express interest in Marie during their first years of marriage, he does reveal a penchant for keys and locks. Indeed, once the couple consummates the marriage, Louis XVI presents Marie with a key to the house in the country; thus, she becomes one of his locks, reducing her to an object not unlike the court’s gossip. Coppola films Marie’s escape from court to Le Petit Trianon through traditional pastoral imagery, including shots of greenery, flowers, sunshine, animals, and leisure activities. Marie speaks through voice-over narration, “I want something more simple, more natural to wear in the garden.” We witness a physical transformation in Marie, whose hair and dress become more natural than those mile-high wigs and elaborate costumes of the court. Marie searches for
something “authentic” that lies outside Versailles, yet we question whether in fact she finds it or not. When her girlfriends come to visit, Marie reads to them, “Rousseau says, ‘If man has been corrupted by an artificial civilization, what is the natural state? The state of nature, from which he has been removed? Imagine wandering up and down the forest without industry, without speech, and without home.’” While this invocation of Rousseau and his theory of nature are absent in Fraser’s source text, Coppola invents this monologue as a means to expand on her exploration of the “natural state” in postmodernism. Rousseau questions which is more “natural,” society or nature, a tension that Coppola proposes during the film’s opening credits. Though Rousseau clearly decides nature, Coppola remains skeptical of nature’s ability to preserve man’s “natural” state. Though she portrays Versailles as “unnatural,” for it is entirely run by politics, surfaces, gossip, and commodities, she also suggests that the “country” can no longer be experienced purely. It is as if the country functions as one more commodity that the characters experience superficially. One of Marie’s girlfriends remarks in an enthusiastic yet empty statement, “Oh we must do this more often – I love the country!” Coppola follows Marie’s recitation of Rousseau with an image of the women lounging on a rowboat as it meanders along the river; the women look distant and bored, suggesting that their attention span is finally spent. Indeed, they exploit the country as another form of entertainment, for it eventually grows as dull as their commodities at the court. Just like Jameson’s description of postmodernism as a “cultural dominant,” Coppola envisions society as inescapable. It is significant that Marie performs on the stage during her sojourn to the country in that it signifies an infiltration of society into “nature.” The very practice of theatre requires an audience, which in turn creates a power dynamic between
the spectator and the spectacle. Thus, we see the workings of a mini society in an “authentic” space that proves to be more no authentic than a social gathering at Versailles. Also, the performance functions as a mise-en-abyme that signals both the construction of the “authentic” pastoral space as well as the film itself; neither is “natural,” no matter how much they purport to be otherwise. This episode in the country serves as a counter-setting to Versailles, a move towards a more “natural” and “authentic” mode of experience, yet Coppola critiques that possibility by revealing the country as another commodity that the characters exploit according to the machinations of society.

After the film’s depictions of the pastoral as an idealized possibility for liberation from the excessive parties of the court, which nevertheless acts as a “cultural dominant” for Marie at le Petit Trianon, Coppola reopens the tension between gossip and history as Marie returns to court. The gossip about Marie becomes so great that it spreads throughout France, and it is in reference to Marie Antoinette’s most infamous quotation that the film indict the problematic status of “history” in postmodern culture. Asked by her girlfriends if she said the lines, “Let them eat cake,” Marie responds, “That’s such nonsense, I would never say that.” According to Sena Jeter Naslund, author of the fiction novel *Abundance* (2006), that infamous phrase does not originate with Marie Antoinette. She explains, “That heartless sentence was the speech of another queen, the wife of Louis XIV, not Louis XVI, a hundred years before a very young and innocent Marie Antoinette traveled by horse-drawn coaches from Austria to France to marry the Dauphin destined to inherit the throne of France” (xiv, “Author’s Note”). Likewise, Antonia Fraser claims that the story was “wrongly ascribed” to Marie and that the action would be out of her
“unfashionably philanthropic” character (xx, “Author’s Note”). While contemporary scholars agree that Marie Antoinette never utters those words, the fact that we nevertheless need to clarify the story speaks volumes for the questionable validity of historical “fact,” especially in the public consciousness. Marie’s girlfriends then go on to discuss additional rumors, to which Marie responds, “Don’t they ever get tired of these ridiculous stories?” This entire scene examines how rumors and gossip, no matter how false they may be, can be interpreted as truth. That one of the women in the scene is reading from a quasi gossip magazine reinforces the statement’s lack of authenticity.

Regarding the roles of gossip and of mass publication in 18th-century France, Dena Goodman writes, “Marie Antoinette was the first in France to live at a time when pamphlets and newspapers and other forms of print publicity were ready to put the spotlight on public figures – to manufacture news if necessary to satisfy an avid reading public newly introduced to the thrills of court scandals and revolutionary politics” (3). Coppola again creates a link between the present and the past, in this case through the practice of tabloid-esque publications, as a means for us to understand Marie’s plight as a public figure. These statements are false, and we sympathize with Marie’s inability to control such nonsense being purported as “truth.” Additionally, the scene addresses how “history” is constructed and how it can sometimes bear little relation to any “reality” whatsoever; just because it is in print does not mean that it is true, especially if it comes from a tabloid (which operates through speculation and exists solely for commercial purposes). In fact, hearsay functions as simulation. Because of the contemporary association between Marie and the quotation “let them eat cake,” our false association serves as an example of simulacra in postmodern culture. Jameson argues that our
problematic relationship to history in postmodernism is a matter of access, for we are never able to receive an objective reading of history, only different accounts that have been left for us and that ultimately carry cultural biases or agendas. In light of the importance the film places on hearsay and gossip as primary methods of storytelling, the film suggests that history itself always borders on gossip. Indeed, the comment “let them eat cake” becomes a commodity in that it can be used to construct a particularly villainous image of Marie Antoinette that will sell tabloid pamphlets and newspapers. Furthermore, this scene, which occurs near the end of the film, reveals the serious potential for gossip to usurp “reality” and to turn “history” (whether or not it is true) into a commodity that still persists today.

By the film’s end, Coppola ultimately resolves the tension between Marie’s individuality and her commodification by transforming Marie herself into a commodity, for the court gossip has taken on a life of its own and completely reduced her “reality” to a flat image. As the people of France begin to revolt against Marie and the French royalty, we see a series of portraits that reveal civil unrest. The image of Marie remains the same, yet we see three different headlines appear/disappear successively across the middle of the portrait: “Beware of Deficit,” “Queen of Debt,” and “Spending France into Ruin!” These headlines label Marie as a villainess who has squandered the country’s wealth. Actual lived history is reduced to the forms of these headlines, which in turn transform Marie’s entire reign to that portraiture image. We assume that these are the cries of the people, but we see no people construct these images; the images mask the people’s absence. In turn, we question the validity of these statements because we have been invited to identify with Marie throughout the film. Though we have seen her spend
money recklessly, the film nevertheless asks us to construct a new vision of Marie herself, outside of the conventional headlines that have been passed on to a contemporary audience as “history.” We forgive Marie because Coppola chooses to represent her as an object, as a pawn, as a commodity. Coppola even resolves the connection between visual flattening and Marie’s narrative trajectory in the final form of portraiture, which renders both Marie herself and history as commodities. As the headlines follow one after another, it is as if this image takes on a new life of its own that is then substituted for “reality.” Coppola suggests that it is this image of Marie Antoinette that history remembers, that there may have been an alternate story that this image has silenced. This sequence reveals how different words and connotations can become associated with a particular image, and how postmodern culture reduces those headlines of history into an image upon which contending people label as “truth.”

However, Coppola complicates this image by refusing closure. Because Coppola represents Marie Antoinette’s biography as pastiche, the anachronistic approach encourages us to see Marie as a construction. Indeed, we follow her throughout the film as she becomes commodified by court gossip and hearsay, flattened to the point where her image finally kills her. Her death is one of the most well-known facts about Marie Antoinette, who lost her head on the guillotine. Surprisingly, Coppola refuses to show Marie’s death. The film ends with a mob outside of Versailles that forces Marie and her family to leave the palace. The penultimate image is of Marie looking at the horizon from the carriage window and whispering, “I’m saying goodbye.” Though the earlier images of Marie in the carriage depict her face through the transparent window, this last carriage ride only positions the camera inside the vehicle; this choice emphasizes the
“reality” of the situation by staring at Marie’s face head-on, rather than mediated through transparent window glass. Furthermore, in choosing not to represent Marie’s death, Coppola again refuses to yield to the official “History” of Marie Antoinette; that is not the story that Coppola wants to tell. Instead, she wants to disrupt that conception of “Marie Antoinette” by inserting a sympathetic view towards a notoriously misunderstood figure. Though she follows the commodification of Marie Antoinette into the form of an image, she subsequently critiques that process through her pastiche aesthetic, producing an ahistorical biography that distances us from the “reality” of those events depicted. Thus, it is possible to read the film in terms of its serious commentary on the state of history in postmodernism, for even absences carry political implications.

In my discussion of Coppola’s film *Marie Antoinette*, I have shown how the film can be appreciated both as a commentary on the commodified state of history in postmodern culture and as pastiche. However, these two ideas remain mutually exclusive for Jameson. Coppola’s film is able to do both, to adopt a pastiche aesthetic that consequently allows her to construct a critique of contemporary culture. Indeed, the film argues that history in postmodernism exists as an amalgamation of different accounts or “hearsays,” which collectively yields a pastiche understanding of any single historical event; thus, it is fitting that Coppola uses the representational mode of pastiche in her account of Marie’s biography, for it reflects the fate of “real History” in postmodernism. Coppola suggests that “history” and “Marie Antoinette” herself exist as commodities in postmodernism; even the film itself functions formally as a commodity, as a piece of historical fiction that entices consumers with its easily consumable pastiche aesthetic.
Furthermore, in collapsing categories of time and space by comparing contemporary postmodern culture to pre-Revolutionary Versailles, Coppola exposes a common double-bind: as a microcosm of postmodern culture, the royal court criticizes Marie for her shallowness at the same time that it makes her shallow. Coppola is able to discern this cultural phenomenon not only in our contemporary world but also in Marie Antoinette’s treatment at Versailles. As she equates Marie’s court with our own culture, Coppola may be saying that the shallowness of the postmodern individual results from the shallowness of the culture that produces it. In this respect, the critique aligns Coppola with Jameson in that they both view the individual subject as a product of the shallow “cultural dominant” that commodifies individuals, yet Coppola nevertheless still believes in the possibility of meaningful critique in postmodernist pastiche.

IV. Beyond Jameson

Ultimately, Jameson erects a series of binaries between “modernism” and “postmodernism” that serves better as theory than axiom. Most persuasive is Jameson’s formulation of the “fragmented” individual subject who experiences a “waning of affect” in postmodernism; in fact, Coppola’s film itself makes the same point as Jameson about “individuality” – that we are Marie Antoinette, in terms of a disappearing sense of self. However, Jameson’s theory of the postmodern denies the possibility of any individual subjectivity at the expense of making his binaries seem “logical.” In his article “Troping History: Modernist Residue in Fredric Jameson’s Pastiche and Linda Hutcheon’s Parody,” John Duvall makes the point, “Jameson’s assertion of the death of the great
modernist styles is undercut by his own distinctive style, which resists pastiche by its very density and difficulty.” If postmodernism is so pervasive, as Jameson himself calls it a “cultural dominant,” then how can one step “out,” as it were, to critique it? If the postmodern individual truly no longer has an idiosyncratic “brush stroke” due to the disappearance of the individual itself, then how does Jameson expect us to believe his theory, which is written in his own “distinctive style”? How can we expect him to make meaning when he claims that the postmodern individual can no longer do so because of the “linguistic fragmentation of the social itself”? Even if we accept Jameson’s notion that the postmodern individual is “fragmented” and experiences a consequent “waning of affect,” the individual can nevertheless act meaningfully, as Jameson’s own theorizing indicates.

Another critique of Jameson is that clearly we can choose “older” representational modes, like the parodic, in contemporary cultural production. Our representations of history, which have to be “imitative,” thus fall into two camps for Jameson: parody or pastiche. Responding to critics such as Jameson in her book The Politics of Postmodernism (2002), Linda Hutcheon writes:

The prevailing interpretation is that postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own that is oversaturated with images. Instead, I would want to argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations. (90)
Jameson argues that “postmodernity,” or the modes of production of “late capitalism,” has become so pervasive as to infiltrate aesthetic production itself, resulting in what he calls mindless “pastiche.” Hutcheon, however, disagrees with Jameson’s totalizing theory. While Hutcheon seems to agree with Jameson that pastiche is empty and exists as a commodity in a late-capitalist society, she nevertheless disputes his claim that the artist cannot step outside of such a system. In fact, Hutcheon believes that the artist can levy a meaningful critique against that system, for those two realms (late capitalist “postmodernity” and artistic “postmodernism”) are fundamentally separate. For Hutcheon, one is still able to step sufficiently outside of “postmodernity” to make an aesthetic decision to critique that culture.

Because Hutcheon discerns a fundamental difference between Jameson’s notions of “postmodernity” and “postmodernism,” her definition of “parody” is broader than Jameson’s. While Jameson argues that parodic forms in postmodern culture tend to devolve into pastiche, Hutcheon’s theory of “postmodern parody” actually functions as an extension of Jameson’s modernist parody. The difference between Jameson’s modernist “parody” and Hutcheon’s “postmodern parody” is that the latter quotes other texts more frequently and incorporates them to the extent that it functions like an intertext. Hutcheon’s theory of “postmodern parody” is even more ironic and self-referential than modernist forms of parody, and its imitation is always complicit at some level. Hutcheon writes, “Not only is there no resolution (false or otherwise) of contradictory forms in postmodern parody, but there is a foregrounding of those very contradictions” (90). Coppola’s film thus appears to function similarly to Hutcheon’s notion of “postmodern parody.” By interweaving elements from both the present as well
as the past in filming Marie Antoinette’s biography, Coppola foregrounds the contradictory nature of “history” in postmodernism, that it is representing the past as much as it is representing the present. Coppola’s ahistorical film blurs the distinction between the past and the present, conflating them into a continuous postmodern present. Though history and temporality similarly collapse in Daldry’s The Hours, the film nevertheless tries to hide that collapse within its modernist aesthetic, thus reducing the risk of devolving into temporal pastiche (which it does, in fact, by the end of the film). Hutcheon remarks that postmodern films such as Zelig (1983), Carmen (1984), and The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1981) “do indeed deal with history and they do so in ironic, but not at all un-serious, ways” (109). Indeed, we can read Marie Antoinette as Hutcheon’s “postmodern parody,” for it is “fundamentally ironic and critical” (94); furthermore, this label distances Coppola’s film from empty pastiche, of which both Jameson and Hutcheon dismiss as a meaningless exercise of imitation.

As Jameson claims, if pastiche has in fact “eclipsed” parody in postmodernism as the dominant representational mode, then what is the value (if any) of pastiche? In his recent book Pastiche (2007), a full-length critical study of the term, Richard Dyer examines the history of the term “pastiche,” exploring its various definitions, uses, and connotations in different historical contexts. He writes:

One of the connotations of the word ‘pastiche,’ perhaps always, certainly since Jameson’s discussion of it in the context of postmodernism (1984), is that it cannot be critical, indeed that its very closeness to what it imitates prevents it from having the distance necessary to critique. Certainly, pastiche is not, like
parody, by definition critical (or, come to that, like homage, by definition, evaluative in a positive sense). (157)

Like Hutcheon, part of Dyer’s agenda is to save “pastiche” from Jameson’s criticism. Dyer argues for the potential of critique in pastiche as well as its ability both to construct and to elicit an emotional response. I argue that Marie Antoinette is engaged in the former. While Dyer studies the history of the term “pastiche” in illustrating the many uses of this mode in different historical contexts, I instead explore “pastiche” in the contemporary context of postmodernism and read Marie Antoinette as a text that successfully adopts a pastiche aesthetic in order to critique contemporary consumer culture; the film can be both postmodern and pastiche, and still be valuable. In fact, though the chief criticism of the film is that it is too superficial and that it ultimately lacks any coherent message, it is ironic that Coppola’s Marie Antoinette appears on the cover of Film Comment (September/October 2006), in which Nathan Lee defends the “radical frivolity” of the film (24).

So, what is our relationship to history? How do we approach the past – through parody or pastiche? Our conception of history is always skewed by the present, yet this becomes increasingly more and more evident in postmodernism. Jameson argues that in postmodern culture the temporal boundaries between past and present have blurred to such an extent that we can no longer distinguish between the two categories. Thus, we experience a “crisis in historicity,” which produces a continuous present and an ever-elusive past. Whether or not we approach history through modernist parody or postmodernist pastiche, these representational modes carry many implications regarding the individual, affect, and the process of meaning-making. According to Jameson, if we
approach the past through parody, then we still believe in the angst-ridden individual monad, the internal presence of “affect,” the possibility of meaning, and some critical distance from the object of parody (operating through the depth model); in terms of the historical film genre, the historical event becomes the “object of parody” from which we try to achieve a critical distance in the present so as to construct a critique. If we identify with the past through a pastiche aesthetic, on the other hand, then we understand the individual as disappearing and “fragmented,” that “intensities” replace internal “affect,” that meaning-making is simply a cultural construction, and that our efforts to parody only result in surface signification due to the nearness and similarity to the object of parody (operating through the surface model). Many historical films approach the past through parody in that they try to achieve a critical distance between the past and present in order to form a critique of either time period. Moreover, they operate through the depth model, for they still believe in the possibility of meaning-making.

Though pastiche does not originate in postmodernism, we see this aesthetic emerge out of and dominate our postmodern moment, for it reflects the “crisis in historicity” that Jameson observes in postmodernism. This aesthetic is appropriate to postmodernism because it exposes our relationship to the past at this moment in history. Because we receive only fragmentary accounts of any historical event from multiple subjective viewpoints, which inevitably carry their own biases and agendas, we acquire only a “pastiche” understanding of history. Indeed, our understanding is often indirect and mediated through problematic forms of representation (of which the historical film is only one example). As Jameson points out, it is a matter of access, which becomes increasingly mediated in postmodernism through images and representation. It is an
illusion that we have a complete, fixed, and self-contained understanding of history, for Jameson believes that we experience history through culture, through the agenda of not only Western culture but also the individual, nationalistic narratives (i.e., American) within that overarching sphere. I argue that when we represent history, we still have the choice between parody and pastiche. However, because of the cultural implications ascribed to each term, I feel that one is more “authentic” to contemporary “reality” than the other. The mode of parody is still possible, as in the case of The Hours, yet its formulation of the individual seems archaic in the context of postmodern culture (thus, its treatment of history and temporality blurs the line between parody and pastiche). We can attempt parody, as Daldry does, by invoking the angst-ridden individual, yet my analysis of the film suggests that we cannot fully realize it, as Daldry’s contemporary film lapses into temporal pastiche. Pastiche more effectively engages with the postmodern condition of the individual as “fragmented” and whose experience of history is mediated by the present. Therefore, because parody clings to an archaic notion of the individual and its corresponding “affect,” pastiche ironically becomes more meaningful today because of its emergence out of contemporary postmodernism as well as its engagement with our understanding of “reality” at the present.

A final way to look at the two films is via Robert Rosenstone’s categories of historical film, particularly the dramatic feature and the oppositional or innovative film. Due to its focus on the individual (both fictional and non-fictional) as well as its melodramatic treatment of “affect,” The Hours fits Rosenstone’s notion of the Hollywood-style “dramatic feature.” On the other hand, due to its interrogation of the stability of the “individual” (as “fragmented”), as well as its self-reflexive pastiche
aesthetic, I would argue that *Marie Antoinette* can be seen as an example of Rosenstone’s “innovative” historical film. Rosenstone claims that the “innovative” historical film typically proposes “new strategies for dealing with the traces of the past, strategies that point towards new forms of historical thought” (18). Because these films challenge audience expectation by forcing them to think in unconventional terms, they are often independently financed by marginal studios outside of the Hollywood system, which operates according to the dominant modes of “late capitalism.” Coppola’s film, however, is an exception. Though Coppola’s film is produced within the Hollywood system, as a product of Columbia Pictures, it nevertheless exhibits many characteristics of Rosenstone’s oppositional film and functions as a meaningful and critical historical feature. That Coppola achieves this critique from within the dominant system, however, is evidence that one can in fact produce meaning within postmodern culture. As an example of historical pastiche, *Marie Antoinette* proves that pastiche is not necessarily meaningless in the context of postmodernism; postmodernism is not necessarily a “cultural dominant” as Jameson would have it, for we can still believe in the possibility for critique, even from within the dominant system.

Looking at pastiche in the context of postmodernism and history, specifically in the historical film genre, it is evident that meaningful postmodernist pastiche is not necessarily an oxymoron. Even though Jameson’s theory of the “postmodern” originates in the 1980s, it is still useful today as a means of describing our contemporary culture in a global consumer economy. A primary example of Jameson’s theory in recent practice is Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*, which relies heavily on his formulation of contemporaneity in representing the past. My analysis of *Marie Antoinette* and *The Hours* reveals a sense
that the more “postmodern” a contemporary historical film is, the more “real” it becomes; in other words, a postmodern or “innovative” historical film actually engages with our contemporary experience of “reality” more than a modern or “dramatic” historical feature, which draws its power from an archaic sense of the individual that exists in illusion (e.g., Hollywood) rather than in “reality.” As a result, postmodern historical features ironically become more meaningful in our contemporary context. Moreover, there is cultural value to “pastiche,” and I use Coppola’s film to prove both the superficiality and the potential for meaningful critique within postmodernism’s pastiche aesthetic. In a 2006 interview with the magazine *Entertainment Weekly*, actress Kirsten Dunst remarks about filming *Marie Antoinette*: “It all felt very present-day to me. It didn’t feel like we were making a movie about the past at all” (Kirschling 40). Indeed, by reclaiming the past as postmodernist pastiche, Coppola produces the more meaningful historical film in that it speaks more directly to our experience in postmodernism.


