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T. Lawrence Larkin, *In Search of Marie-Antoinette in the 1930s: Stefan Zweig, Irving Thalberg, and Norma Shearer*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. vii-xx + 296 pp. Notes and index. \$89.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-3-030-14599-6.

Review by Laura Mason, Johns Hopkins University.

T. Lawrence Larkin's book is something of a paradox. On the one hand, it examines a 250-year-old fascination with Marie-Antoinette—visible in paintings, pornography, biography, memoirs, and film—that historians are still making sense of.<sup>[1]</sup> On the other, it does so by examining a 1938 costume drama that was not very successful when released and which has not aged well. Why this particular focus? Larkin argues that the making of *Marie Antoinette*, the movie, offers an unusual opportunity to explore the making of a Marie-Antoinette myth. Focusing on the principal creative forces behind the film—Austrian biographer Stefan Zweig, on whose book the film was based; MGM producer Irving Thalberg; and actress Norma Shearer, who played the queen—he asks how they negotiated the “curious tension” between creating an “‘authentic’ image of the queen” and fashioning “a fiction...of her.” In answering that question, Larkin illuminates the collaborative effort inherent in historical films, which academics too often treat as the products of a single imagination.

The bulk of this book consists of three lengthy chapters, one for each member of its central trio. Stefan Zweig, Larkin explains, was interested in “subconscious desires” (p. 29) which, like Freud, he thought would manifest in new ways if repressed. As well, he thought people who failed carried “more interesting ‘mental baggage’” (p. 33). For both reasons, Zweig believed Marie-Antoinette an interesting biographical subject. As he saw it, Louis XVI's inability to have intercourse for the first seven years of their marriage produced sexual frustration in Marie-Antoinette, who channeled her dissatisfaction into “rebellious behavior, expensive fashions, wild amusements, and frivolous friends” (p. 59). When corrective surgery permitted the king to have sex and the queen to have children, her personal failings diminished. But the most decisive event in her life was the “spiritual intimacy” and possible affair she enjoyed with Swedish count Axel von Fersen which, by “awakening” (p. 64) Marie-Antoinette to her youthful errors, transformed her into a faithful ally of king and crown.

If Zweig's intellectual interests shaped the central argument of his biography, Larkin tells us, his method of writing and his distress about European fascism determined the final contours of his book. For after producing a draft that hewed closely to his research, Zweig “condensed” and “dramatized” to craft an “engrossing story,” paring away historical detail that got in the way (p. 40). Wishing to give readers some “consolation” in dark times (p. 57), he depicted the queen as

an “average woman” (the biography’s subtitle) who repented of her early mistakes to become a devoted mother, loyal defender of the Crown, and even a figure of tragic greatness at the end because of the courage with which she faced “the humiliations of imprisonment, trial, and execution” (p. 58).

Although Zweig’s biography elicited mixed critical reaction, it was quite popular with ordinary readers, probably, Larkin opines, because it gave them the impression of “being educated while... being entertained” (p. 89). That success encouraged MGM producer Irving Thalberg to acquire rights to the book, which he believed would translate into a “quality” film capable of bringing profits and prestige alike to the studio (pp. 106-107).

The chapters on Thalberg and Norma Shearer that follow make an interesting contribution to scholarship on history and film. That scholarship has become increasingly sophisticated in recent years, as academics abandon the claims of privileged access to historical truth that were long implicit in their complaints about a film’s accuracy. Many now engage a more balanced dialogue about what professional historians and film makers might learn from one another about representing an uncertain past in an ever-changing present.[2] And yet, historians still tend to treat movies as coherent texts roughly equivalent to books or articles by a single author. Such an approach masks the collaborative effort behind even the most independent of films and obscures a director’s pressing need to raise money. By detailing how *Marie Antoinette* was made within the classic Hollywood system, Larkin explores the historical film as big business venture, highlighting the complexity of production and the compromises imposed even on those with clear vision and unusual means to realize it.

Larkin writes that Thalberg assembled a team of writers to produce a screenplay that signaled historical “authenticity” (p. 107) but also contained the “romance, sex, and/or violence” (p. 115) he thought essential for commercial success. The writers consulted Zweig’s book as well as eighteenth-century memoirs and nineteenth-century biographies but moved ever further from those sources as they produced successive drafts. Meanwhile, Thalberg, “eager to incorporate as many lurid details of the [queen’s] private life as possible” (p. 143) to attract a wider audience, negotiated with Joseph Breen, supervisor of Hollywood’s production code, over how explicitly to represent the king’s sexual impotence and the queen’s supposed affairs. The screenplay that emerged acknowledged some of the queen’s failings but recovered audience sympathy at the end by deploying Zweig’s notion of late-blooming redemption.

The third personality behind *Marie Antoinette* was actress Norma Shearer who, as Thalberg’s wife and regular collaborator, gained unusual influence over the film’s production after he died unexpectedly. Like Zweig and Thalberg, Shearer hoped to combine historical research with imagination, drawing on her own experience to find empathetic points of contact with Marie-Antoinette and mobilize the kind of “sensitive” performance contemporaries took for verisimilitude (p. 196). But Shearer was more concerned with her own reputation than that of her subject. Believing her audience would never accept her in the role of a queen as flawed as Zweig’s (and Thalberg’s), she recast Marie-Antoinette as an innocent who rose above undeserved humiliation at court and loss of the love of her life to become a devoted mother, loyal wife, and resourceful royal.

Larkin’s detailed account positions Zweig, a European intellectual, and Thalberg and Shearer, successful Hollywood celebrities, in their respective milieux to explore how each interpreted the

life of the eighteenth-century queen. He periodically challenges Zweig, questioning his conviction that Marie-Antoinette was sexually frustrated by Louis' impotence, for example, by alluding to evidence of "the range of techniques available to aristocratic women for sexual stimulation" (p. 62). And he demonstrates how and why Thalberg, Shearer, and a crowd of Hollywood professionals jettisoned so much of their historical evidence. Overall, however, this is a terrifically generous book.

It is, I would argue, too generous. Larkin is too often silent about the failings of *Marie Antoinette*, which is overly long and often risible in its depictions of king, queen, and court. Readers who have not seen the movie might nonetheless find themselves skeptical of Larkin's claim that Norma Shearer gave a "brilliant" (p. 241) performance after examining an accompanying movie still, in which her pose and expression seem more to foreshadow Glinda, the good witch of Oz, than Marie-Antoinette, the troubled queen of France (p. 244). Just as damning is a still that follows, in which Shearer raises her hand to her face in an exaggerated pantomime of shock that might be well placed in a silent film but which looks histrionic by the late 1930s (p. 247).

Addressing *Marie Antoinette's* shortcomings more directly might have encouraged Larkin to give a better account of its failure. For although critics complimented Shearer's performance, he tells us, they found the film's script and direction weak. Worse yet, audience reaction was so lackluster that the movie lost more than three-quarters of a million dollars at the box office. Was this disappointing performance due to aesthetic failings alone, or can it tell us something more about the relationship of popular concerns to the fabrication of myth? In other words, were Americans in the grip of economic depression just not interested in the romantic disappointments of a long-dead queen? In either case, can a fiction be said to become a myth if it fails to catch fire?

Reaching more broadly, Larkin might have asked why Marie-Antoinette remains such a persistent figure of fascination and how this relatively unsuccessful attempt to create a myth about her compares with others. He might have broached that subject by comparing the Zweig-Thalberg-Shearer queen with those invented by Jacques Demy (*Lady Oscar*, 1979), Sofia Coppola (*Marie Antoinette*, 2006), or Benoît Jacquot (*Les adieux à la reine*, 2012). How much are the differences between these films due to their unique conditions of production, or country of origin, or the concerns of the era to which they first spoke? How do the myths about Marie-Antoinette promoted by one of the modern world's most popular cultural forms, film, intersect with myths elaborated in the equally popular ephemera of the eighteenth century?

Similarly, Larkin does not return in a sustained way to the discussion of historical and biographical films with which he introduces his book. Although he provides a long list of other historical icons on film—from Paul Scofield's Sir Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons* (1966) to Hal Holbrook's plain-spoken president in *Sandburg's Lincoln* (1974-1976) and Sissy Spacek's proto-feminist Loretta Lynn in *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980)—he does not explore the relationship of those movies to the one he has told us so much about. How did different conditions of production for the other films shape histories they forged? How did their unique modes of distribution (one was a television series) and the different national origins of their subjects (only two were about Americans) affect their relative successes? How can that information help us better understand the production, reception, and relative failure of *Marie Antoinette*?

Such questions may suggest a different study than the one Larkin undertook, but they are meant less to outline further research than to encourage further thought. By speculating in a more

sustained way on Marie-Antoinette myths and the historical films that promote them, Larkin might have given us a broader historiographical context for his own labor. It is to be hoped that someone else might take up the many particulars he has shared about this Hollywood rendering of Marie-Antoinette's life and use them to reflect more exhaustively on other myths and movies about her.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, Dena Goodman, ed., *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of the Queen* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Dorothee Polanz, "Portrait of the Queen as a Celebrity: Marie-Antoinette on Screen, a Disappearing Act (1934-2012)," in *The Cinematic Eighteenth Century: History, Culture, and Adaptation*, ed. Srividhya Swaminathan and Steven W. Thomas, 28-43 (New York and London: Routledge, 2017).

[2] The urtext for the study of history and film is Natalie Z. Davis, "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8, no. 3 (1988): 269-283. See also Natalie Z. Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Robert A. Rosenstone, *Vision of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*; (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert A. Rosenstone, *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Marcia Landy, ed., *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Mike Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History: The Telling of Stories* (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2008). Even screenwriter Bruno Ramirez, who would presumably have a keener sense of the negotiation necessary to bring a story to the screen, tends to represent the films he discusses as a meeting of two auteurs: director and historian. See his *Inside the Historical Film* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014). One exception is, not surprisingly, a book focusing on history films made within the Hollywood studio system, where negotiation was greatest. See George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992). Antoine de Baecque periodically alludes to broader contexts of production in *Camera Historica: The Century in Cinema* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2012). See, in particular, the chapters "From Versailles to Silver Screen: Sacha Guitry, Historian of France" and "Peter Watkins, Live from History."

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