

# Sofia Coppola's Vision: Cool, Confident & Unwaveringly Female

The director shares her dark and deeply feminine take on the American Civil War in *The Beguiled*

**It's practically impossible** to imagine filmmaker Sofia Coppola at the helm of a *Star Wars* or *Justice League* movie.

"When it comes to bigger-budget studio movies, there's definitely a bias — it's harder for them to hire a woman," she said in an interview with *The Guardian* last July.

She's right, but there's more to it than that. Coppola's latest film, *The Beguiled*, debuted in the same year that director Patty Jenkins smashed box-office records with *Wonder Woman*.

Sofia Coppola



**M**uch was made of the fact that *Wonder Woman* was the first female-led stand-alone superhero movie born out of the ever-expanding Marvel and DC universes that dominate theatre screens year-round. The movie's massive success put doubting (read: sexist) naysayers in their place, handily proving that a superhero who occasionally dons heels and a dress can carry the weight of a franchise all on her own.

*Wonder Woman's* financial and critical triumph is likely to open doors for women filmmakers. But while the idea of a wider range of voices finally finding a place in the exclusive Hollywood movie-making club pleases Coppola, that particular door isn't one she's interested in walking through.

Her one foray into a studio partnership ended with the director making the tough decision to exit the project — Universal’s live-action re-imagining of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* — employing the opaque and overused entertainment industry excuse: The departure was due to “creative differences.”

“When people send me scripts occasionally, I just can’t even imagine it,” Coppola says. “The whole [process] starts with daydreaming about something.”

The director of six full-length features, she writes all her screenplays herself, taking liberties with history (*Marie Antoinette*), her own autobiography (*Lost in Translation*), and the original texts her films are based on (most recently with Thomas P. Cullinan’s 1966 Southern Gothic novel, *The Beguiled*).

The thread that ties them all together is Coppola’s singular and signature aesthetic. Her dreamy, filmy, pastel-filtered worlds are reminiscent of a honey-slow summer afternoon spent in an artsy teenage girl’s ideal bedroom, surrounded by a collection of poetry, records, fashion magazines, sketch books, and watercolour paints, softly lit by lace-curtain-filtered, late-afternoon sun. But don’t let that lull you into a false sense of security — Coppola knows that bad things can happen in beautiful places.

While the subject matter might take her from the French Revolution to the American Civil War, her films — even the brash, hyperkinetic *The Bling Ring* — are unapologetically feminine. It’s an antidote to the output of a conservative entertainment industry that prefers to bet hundreds of millions of dollars on movies about Spandex-clad champions of humanity that tell us very little about a person’s actual humanity.

Directors like Patty Jenkins or Kathryn Bigelow have found success working inside the parameters of a male-dominated industry. (Bigelow pioneered the bromance genre with the original *Point Break*, while Jenkins followed up her Oscar-winning serial killer movie, *Monster*, with a stint di-



Sofia Coppola on set

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recting episodes of the most male-centric series ever made: *Entourage*.) That kind of work, however, doesn’t interest Coppola. She finds inspiration in the films of Chantal Akerman or Jane Campion (who made the very Coppola-esque *Bright Star*, in 2009).

“I just feel like I have a feminine point of view and I’m happy to put that out there. We certainly have enough masculine ones,” Coppola told *The Guardian*. “In my first movie, I felt like making something for teenage girls. I looked at the movies they made for teenage girls and thought: ‘Why can’t they have beautiful photography? Why shouldn’t we treat that audience with respect?’ That was something I missed when I was that age. I wished the movies weren’t so condescending ... I guess I’ve always just made the films that I’d have wanted to see.”

Her commitment to that vision has come at a cost: *Marie Antoinette*, with its 18th-century French queen in anachronistic pink, high-top Converse sneakers, its cupcake-dotted mise-en-scène, and a soundtrack that included the Strokes, New Order, and the Cure, received jeers at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006. But by the time Coppola returned with *The Beguiled* (and left with the festival’s prize for Best Director plus a nomination for the Palme d’Or), the earlier film had been reassessed.

When Coppola’s body of work is looked at as a whole, it’s far easier to understand what she’s trying to accomplish as a filmmaker: telling women’s stories from a female perspective that a female audience can relate to. Coppola makes movies she hopes will appeal to women without patronizing them. It’s that kind of unabashedly female gaze that is exactly the kind of storytelling we need right now.

The Beguiled

