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CAPTAIN SPARKLEFINGERS, OR, IMPERMANENCE

FOR REASONS KNOWN ONLY TO GOD, and now presumably to Stan Lee as well, 12 AMC theatres (including one in Canada) took two days in April to stage a marathon screening of all 22 movies in the Marvel "cinematic universe," which was about 59 hours in total. IndieWire's David Ehrlich, a seasoned film critic who really ought to know better, reported on a shorter, 31-hour version of the same thing at about the same time last year, and his evaluation was mixed overall, although he confessed that the experience did force him "to awe at the connective tissue, and the architecture required for such an astonishing feat of world building."

Awe, I suppose, is what superhero movies are supposed to be about, but I cannot remember a time when so many seemed to take that quite so seriously. Awe, sure, but "world-building"? That implies a much higher level of engagement than anything superhero movies until the 2010s would have provided. Maybe it's a Marvel thing—that crowd always did seem a little more aware of their own pseudo-countercultural coolness. Maybe not, though, since about this time last year I used this space to try (mostly unsuccessfully) to puzzle out why *Wonder Woman* (2017) seemed to excite such passions amongst otherwise serious people—and she is a DC character, who is part of a pantheon of superheroes that most aficionados take to be way more square. Now another, much less heralded DC production poses the same question of why any of this should matter for understanding the state of contemporary popular culture, and I think it may also suggest an answer.

I am referring to *Shazam!* (2019), which features one of the least-known DC superheroes (first introduced in the lower-rent Fawcett Comics in the 1940s) and which I thus hoped would be one of the least pompous and overblown superhero movies. The first thirty minutes made me very wor-

ried, as it centralized some of the worst aspects of the genre. First, of course, came the shattered childhood stuff: the villain's dad was mean to him, and he never got over it, so he became evil, while the hero's mother abandoned him, and he was taken into a kind, multi-ethnic foster home that he couldn't quite embrace, damaged as he was. Simultaneous to this material was the convoluted mythology stuff: in an alternate dimension, demons representing the deadly sins somehow vie for power with an aging mystical wizard, with the villain and the hero rising above their stations to become stand-ins for a godlike battle over the fate of the universe, or something like that.

The long middle, on the other hand, is frequently hilarious, and for a time restored my faith that it might be a different kind of superhero movie. The adolescent hero is transposed into a body that is not only super but also that of a slacker doofus in his mid-20s (played by 38-year-old actor Zachary Levi). The misfit between kid mind and kidult body ends up emphasizing the childish essence of adolescence to a very agreeable effect. For long passages of the film, therefore, the self-importance melts away, leaving puddles of naïve giddiness and unworldly ineptitude. The scene where our hero, temporarily dubbed "Captain Sparklefingers" by his foster brother/sidekick, uses the lightning he can shoot from his digits in order to busk at the top of the Philadelphia Museum of Art as a crummy boombox plays "Eye of the Tiger" works on a number of levels. The tweens I had in my company thought it was abjectly funny, and I savoured the *Rocky* reference that was here filtered through the cheeziness of the 1982 Mr.-T-anchored enunciation of the franchise. During this mid-section it was as though the fog of adolescently self-important "world-building" had cleared away in favour of some serious silliness, at the same time childlike in its simplicity and appealing to the adults in the room as a fairly light-handed afterthought.

It was not to last, of course. The battle-for-the-universe stuff eventually came thundering back, as did the stuff about callous parents and the damage they inflict. This kind of material, as enunciated in a comic-book idiom, is nowhere even in the vicinity of real sci-fi-inflected mystical cinema, such as Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) or Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). Nor can it hold a candle to films that actually engage with damaged children, such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Outsiders* (1983) or Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011), to take only Hollywood examples. So what in the name of God (or gods) is the point of taking an otherwise skillfully childish riff on superhero themes down these ponderous rabbit holes?

The tendency towards self-seriousness evinced by even the most minor and ridiculous superhero projects is really more about the fate of middlebrow culture overall. Comic books, and the narratives they spawn in other media, now adopt the conventions of melodrama that until recently would have been confined to, well, melodrama. Over the last three decades era-defining films like *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) have given way to *Spider-Man* (2002 or 2012, take your pick) and *Suicide Squad* (2016). Just in the last few years *Creed* (2015), the wonderfully sophisticated and revelatory reboot of the *Rocky* franchise, made it possible for its director Ryan Coogler to make *Black Panther* (2018). I'm not offering a value judgment on any of these films but merely pointing out the degree to which the emotional energy that would have until pretty recently been widely invested in various kinds of melodrama is now being invested *very widely indeed* in superheroes, and I am suggesting that this might not tell all that happy a story about the popular viability of movies that do not have a basis in the immaturely sophomoric worldview of adolescence.

Okay, maybe I am offering a bit of a value judgement, as this tendency is in essence dragging down middlebrow melodrama towards the simplified pulp of comic books. The real crime is that it's also forced genuinely pulpy entertainments to adopt the most ridiculous poses of seriousness, which obscures the genuinely admirable workmanship that can define this sort of thing at its best, such as Taika Waititi's preposterously silly extravaganza *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017). *Shazam!* is funny enough often enough to suggest that its director, David F. Sandberg, is just this kind of craftsman. It makes you wonder what kind of superhero movie he could have made if he'd been serious enough to treat his material with less seriousness.

Even when I'm working as hard as I can to engage fully with current popular culture (as above), I am always aware of how ephemeral almost all of this material is. Will anyone really have much to say about *Thor: Ragnarok* in 2081? That would be 64 years from the year it was released, and I do not choose that number randomly. 64 years ago, Agnès Varda released her first feature film, *La pointe courte* (The Short Headland, 1955), and you better believe people still have a lot to say about it: about how it portrayed idealism around love, how it portrayed remote communities, and how it lived up to cinema's potential for representing and also making wondrous the rhythms of everyday life. Critics from all over the world spoke in just

those terms about her most recent film, *Visages Villages* (Faces Places, 2017). Over the course of seven decades of filmmaking, Varda built a world through her films, and it is no mere comic-book pomposity to put it in those terms. The world she built was a cinematic version of our own, full of politics and love and natural landscapes and twisty villages and cities and death and babies and desperately poor people and surly but idealistic judges and Black Panthers and vain but emotionally searching pop stars and eccentric artists and everyone in between. Varda died in March at the age of 90. She was one of the last voices of the French New Wave. Only Jean-Luc Godard, himself age 88, remains.

The comparison is illuminating. Godard released his first feature, *À bout de souffle* (Breathless, 1960). Two years later, Varda released her masterpiece, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Cléo from 5 to 7, 1962), and it is impossible for me to read it in any other way than as a response. Both are portraits of Paris rendered in a kind of detail made possible by cutting-edge lightweight camera gear. Both have young protagonists who are image-obsessed, as Godard's Michel (played by Jean-Paul Belmondo) wants to be Humphrey Bogart and Varda's Cléo (played by Corinne Marchand) wants to be a pop icon. But it's only Varda who can see this for what it is: alienation born of too much ease and plenty—an ease and plenty that she disrupts on the personal level (Cléo wanders around not knowing if she has cancer) as well as the social level (a key turning point is when she spends some time in a park with a young soldier about to ship out for Algeria). *À bout de souffle* is exciting and giddy, very much including the climactic sequence where the protagonist dies; *Cléo de 5 à 7* is joyful but melancholy, very much including the climactic sequence where (spoiler alert!) the protagonist doesn't die.

Varda has been enjoying a renaissance among youngish cinephiles these last few years, embodied by the Canadian online publication *cléo: a journal of film and feminism*. Like Werner Herzog, she transformed world cinema through feature films but in her later years worked almost exclusively in documentary—a form that had in fact always been part of her œuvre but had remained hidden in plain sight because (like Herzog's best early docs) they were often of slightly awkward lengths. Part of the reason this younger generation has developed such a passion for Varda's work is because more of it is easier to see in good editions than ever before through the Eclipse box set "Agnès Varda in California," which includes her 28-minute film *Black Panthers* (1968) as well as the French-produced but English-subtitled DVD

set "Varda tous courts," which includes the *Panthers* film as well as other short and medium-length masterpieces like *L'opéra Mouffe* (Diary of a Pregnant Woman, 1958) and *Salut les Cubains* (Hi Cubans, 1963). Films like *Cléo*, *Sans toit ni loi* (Vagabond, 1985), and *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (The Gleaners and I, 2000) are also well-known fiction and documentary features well worth another look from cinephiles wanting to re-experience her greatness. That's also true of lesser-known works like *Le bonheur* (Happiness, 1965), which is actually my favourite of her fiction films (and which is available in a good Criterion DVD edition), and *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (Jane B. for Agnès V., 1988), which is definitely her goofiest documentary (and which can be had as part of the English-subtitled DVD set "Two Films by Agnès Varda Starring Jane Birkin").

All to say, Varda is one of the very few filmmakers about whom we can make a very simple statement: her work is permanent.