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WONDERING ABOUT WONDER WOMAN: SUPERHERO FILMS OF SUMMER

“My father’s notions about the philosophy of Marxism were very primitive. Occasionally on Sundays, when there was a rotogravure section, he would buy the *Jewish Daily Forward* and read with an incredulous scepticism the theoretical articles which that journal featured. Invariably he would drop his paper with the helpless comment: ‘Hegel-bai-gal! The way these men do stir up a stew!’ Considered from the point of view of common sense, the thing was simply ludicrous.”

—A. M. Klein, *The Second Scroll* (1951)

A FEW MONTHS AFTER THE U.S. ELECTIONS, during a trip to New York for the annual New Directors/New Films festival (on which more in the second half of this chronicle), I picked up a copy of *The Forward* from a coin-op dispenser (\$3.50 in quarters!). Founded in 1897 as a Yiddish-language daily, *The Forward* is now published weekly in English and monthly in Yiddish. It was a bracing blast of social-democratic fresh air—just what’s needed in these overheated times. Their reporting and opinion pieces are tough, detailed, and pile-driving, and their cultural criticism is highly informed, curious, and erudite—all of it a wonder to behold in the modern North American mediascape. But here’s one thing that’s been surprising: they are a bit obsessed with Wonder Woman. By “Wonder Woman” I really mean Gal Gadot, the Israeli actress who portrays her in the blockbuster film currently tearing up the multiplexes. From what I can tell this began well before *Wonder Woman*’s summer release. An article from the online version of *The Forward* dated 26 October 2016, for example, is titled “Gal Gadot Says She Would’ve Pulled Krav Maga on Donald Trump’s Wandering Hands.” Gadot as Wonder Woman also graced the cover of their 23 June 2017 issue, with Sheerly Avni’s story “Wonder Woman: The Superhero We

Need,” which bore the subhead “She skewers the patriarchy with her powerful feminist history.” What the newspaper has mostly featured articles about, though, has been the question of whether Gadot, and by extension Israelis, and by extension Jewish people, can be considered white. Many, many articles on this matter have appeared in both the print and online editions (can’t say on the Yiddish edition).

I don’t really have an opinion on the matter either way. I must confess, though, that I found myself reading the theoretical articles on this matter with an increasingly incredulous scepticism. Considered from the point of view of common sense, the thing was, I wouldn’t say “simply ludicrous” exactly, but certainly a bit esoteric. I suppose it’s a sign of hope that an albeit impressively visceral but nevertheless utterly vapid superhero movie can provoke a multi-instalment, multi-platform argument on the degree to which whiteness is socially constructed rather than biologically or genealogically determined. In *The Forward’s* recent rotogravure section on everyone’s favourite Amazon princess, the theoretical arguments that have largely replaced those about Marxism were unspooling in vigorous prose and deeply-felt formulations.

Again, speaking purely theoretically, all to the good. Speaking concretely, though, I have found it *really* hard to avoid dropping my paper (I signed up for the deluxe subscription, print version included) with the helpless comment “*Tabarnak!* The way these critics do stir up a stew!” I’m sure this is mostly evidence of how my notions about the philosophy of gender and race are, *d’après Klein père*, very primitive. I’m not saying that in a “badge of honour” type of way: nothing to be proud of, I genuinely try to do better. But as cinema goes, *Wonder Woman* strikes me as an unlikely catalyst for an improvement of the situation. Gadot gives a good performance, as does Chris Pine: both are restrained in the right places and gently ironic in other places, and neither one plays it safe by winking or trying to show that they are somehow above it all. There are even a few surprisingly affective moments. The black-and-white photograph of the group of five (Gadot and Pine flanked by Saïd Taghmaoui, Ewen Bremner, and Eugene Brave Rock), which opens and closes the film and around which the story centres, is melancholy and stilted in just the right way and mysterious as hell. It’s an impressive little master-stroke—the kind of thing that reminds you that you are watching a serious and accomplished craftswoman (the only other feature film Patty Jenkins has directed is 2003’s *Monster*, a rip-roarer

about serial killer Aileen Wuornos that won Charlize Theron an Oscar), even though on balance there's not a whole lot of evidence of that right in front of you.

One of the oddest aspects of the film might seem to be its setting in WWI, although this is one of the aspects that paradoxically makes it feel much more contemporary than other superhero reboots. The title character first emerged in 1941, and her primary *raison d'être* was, of course, to fight Nazis. The shift to WWI moves everything outside of this now unspeakably clichéd narrative into a realm that is more morally ambiguous and very much on everybody's mind in this centennial year. It is actually one of the film's more fully-thought-out aspects; the war is squalid and nasty, one of the heroes is shell-shocked, and there is a sense of genuine futility that hovers over a lot of the fighting in a way that's impossible to imagine in a WWII action movie. When Jenkins uses this setting to its fullest she seems to be living up to her great potential as a filmmaker, making it seem fleetingly reasonable to compare her to Kathryn Bigelow—someone whom I think film history is going to record as one of the most versatile directors in American cinema. But inevitably *Wonder Woman* returns to its superheroic battles among demigods, and it becomes clear that 2017 will record Jenkins as the highest-grossing female director, which is great too, but hardly the same thing.

The question that this poses, of course, is why? *The Forward* is far from the only serious media outlet to ruminate extravagantly over the broader theoretical meaning of a slam-bang superhero movie. Most of the rest of the discourse focuses on gender rather than race, and for a few weeks in May and June that discourse was flying fast and furious. And yet *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) hasn't prompted widespread rumination on masculinity or Asian identity. (Wasn't the last one about Tokyo? No? That one's from 2006? Well, anyway....) Why *Wonder Woman*? That is to say, why exactly do we need her or, for that matter, a superhero of any description?

The answer, of course, has precisely to do with gender, with a sense that, very much in the manner of the 2016 *Ghostbusters* remake, sisters can indeed do it for themselves, and this is something to get behind. As I wrote in this space last year regarding that very remake, this is fine as far as it goes, but we're fooling ourselves to think that it goes very far. Gadot's edgy, krav-maga-inflected badassery is great fun in a trivial way and duly impressive in a command-of-the-craft way, just as Kate McKinnon's engineering-

inflected bohemia was last summer. But consternation over the meaning of watching the latter trap ghosts is no more elucidating than said consternation over the former's gymnastic vanquishing of baddies. It makes you wonder if arguments about the means of production and the dictatorship of the proletariat felt equally distant to a Yiddish-reading audience in the 1930s. *That's* something I'll be chewing over for a while, as soon as I make good on my New Year's resolution to get more up to speed on contemporary gender theory.

New Directors/New Films is in the ironic position of getting old. 15-26 March 2017 marked the 46th edition of this annual collaboration between the two powerhouses of New York film culture: the Museum of Modern Art and the Film Society of Lincoln Center. Its mandate is to showcase work by emerging filmmakers, which seems to mean people who have made a feature or two, maximum, with special attention paid to debuts. I won't discuss in detail what I saw there because so much of it is still in search of proper distribution. It is worth noting a title or two for people to watch out for, though, as some of this material is starting to circulate. Chloé Robichaud's *Boundaries* (2016) has already played a bit in Canada, and its melancholy tale of a made-up, North Atlantic francophone island microstate being taken advantage of by (francophone) Canadian politicians eager to exploit its natural resources is simply a wonder to behold and a major advance over her (already pretty fantastic) first feature, *Sarah préfère la course* (2013). It makes it clear that Robichaud is the most important young Quebec filmmaker to emerge in the 2010s. *My Happy Family* (2017), by Nana Ekvitishvili and Simon Groß, similarly shows this husband and wife team to be one of Georgia's most important new voices. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Georgian cinema was the Iranian cinema of its day—a series of extraordinary humanist visions emerging from a repressive state, which the British critic Derek Elley called a “light in the Caucasus.” The national cinema has struggled since independence, but this bittersweet and wonderfully detailed study of a woman's tentative break from her husband shows that, while the times they have a-changed, there are still Georgian filmmakers who can be counted among the most vibrant of contemporary European cineastes. (Their first film, 2013's *In Bloom*, which was about refugees from the war in Abkhazia, already made this clear, *Sarah-préfère-la-course-style*.)

One other aspect of the festival that is worth writing about, but tends to

attract less attention in such reports, is the work of the presenters. Festival introductions are a real art, as is the moderation of a Q&A session. About 95% of the time both are done in a manner that falls somewhere on the spectrum between indifferently and badly, and I speak here of the most well-regarded international festivals right on down to modest regional showcases. (I will spare names to protect the guilty, some of whom I may be asking to issue me press credentials in the near future, but trust me—I've been to plenty of events along the full range of the prestige spectrum.) New Directors/New Films featured quite simply the best introductions and Q&A moderations I've ever seen, particularly at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, where screenings were presided over by the intrepid Dennis Lim (formerly film editor of the *Village Voice*, he is now their Director of Programming). Lim's introductions told you things about the films and filmmakers you wouldn't have known otherwise but found yourself glad to have been informed about, gave the filmmakers a chance to say a few words, and were without fail finished inside of five minutes. His Q&A sessions all began as tightly-run interviews with probing, well-thought-out questions, which were without fail *in the form of actual questions*, before allowing some time (but not too much!) for audience questions, which, as is usually the case with such things, were hardly ever in the form of actual questions. In all cases he kept the films and the filmmakers themselves front and centre. It was really heartening to see the kind of public intellectualism that film festivals are supposed to be the guardians of alive and well and living on the Upper West Side.