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## **GHOSTBUSTERS: A CITY SYMPHONY**

I'VE NEVER SEEN A TEMPEST in a teapot quite like the recent pop culture uproar over the remake of *Ghostbusters*. *The New Yorker's* Anthony Lane remarked how strange it has been to see such bile spilled over a Reagan-era entertainment about ghosts by way of mentioning the oh-so-obvious misogyny inherent in hating so hard on a remake that swapped out men for women.

Lost in this kerfluffle is the question of what kind of film *Ghostbusters*, either one of them, really is. I am the perfect age to have passionate feelings about the first one: born in 1971, I was in junior high when it came out. Its special combination of the deadpan and the childish was, in essence, custom marketed to me. And indeed, for weeks after seeing it, I duly quoted my favourite line—"we came we saw, we kicked its ass!"—to anyone who would stand still. I had thus assumed over the course of the last 30 years or so it had become, like most Regan-era entertainments, unwatchable. Pulling it up on Netflix with my own children began as a pretty innocuous moment of "gee, that aged better than I thought." It quickly became an exercise in critical clarification that I found myself surprisingly able to explain to the boyos, the oldest of whom is nine. The film's story is, not to put too fine a point on it, ridiculous: overly complicated, utterly preposterous, and strangely derivative both of cheap horror and even cheaper *Saturday-Night-Live*-style sketch humour. But it's quite wonderful as a city symphony.

I refer to a small subset of the avant-garde cinema that reached its peak in the late silent era. The most famous of these films, and the one that gave the genre its name, was Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1930), made just on the cusp of the transition from silent to sound cinema. The other great example is Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), which created a kind of "virtual city" by shooting its urban "day in the life" in Moscow, Kiev and Odessa (linguistically sophis-

ticated viewers can have fun trying to spot street signs switch from Russian to Ukrainian and back again). These are only the most famous examples of a surprisingly large genre, one that has been the subject of a multi-year retrospective at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, the October film festival held in the small Italian town of Pordenone and devoted entirely to silent cinema. The 2015 edition showcased many modest but in their way wondrous films, some by filmmakers who went on to be major parts of world cinema, like Portugal's Manoel de Oliveira (whose kinetic 1931 portrait of Lisbon's docks *Duoro*, *Fania Fluvial* was his contribution to the genre and the film that made him so well known as the last living filmmaker to be part of silent cinema).

This is all to say that the 1985 *Ghostbusters* has lasting value not as a comic masterpiece or a triumph of acting or anything remotely like that. Rather, it's a full-immersion plunge into the look and feel of New York: its language, its architecture (*Ghostbusters'* most important spaces are a typically middle-class apartment building and a goofily deserted fire house), its streets and its bridges (my favourite image in the film is definitely the helicopter shot that follows the ghost-mobile across the Brooklyn Bridge). All the stuff about capturing ghosts feels like an excuse to bring us inside the New York Public Library in order to get slimed, up to Lincoln Center to watch Bill Murray ineptly romance Sigourney Weaver, or onto Times Square to watch all hell break loose.

The new *Ghostbusters* was a disappointment because it didn't have this same interest in the city for the sake of itself. We seem to go up and down New York in the remake, but there's not the same kind of languorous pausing in the place itself. The new *Ghostbusters* has a certain frenzy that makes it very difficult to enjoy as a city symphony and, really, that's the main way that it can be seriously enjoyed. I find the quartet of ghostbusting actresses just as funny and versatile as the original quartet of actors, and among those eight the funniest by far is Kate McKinnon, who gives the whole operation a pleasing bohemian edge, one that is defined by images of technical and scientific sophistication. That's all good stuff, as far as it goes, but we'd be kidding ourselves if we tried to argue that it went very far. Both *Ghostbusters* are basically inane and juvenile, but the first film has a substantial pleasure to it that is fully present after that inane stuff melts away.

What clarified this for me was seeing another even more juvenile film now on screens: *The Secret Life of Pets*, an animated film about the adven-

tures that our cats and dogs get up to when we're at work. Like most good children's entertainment, its pleasures are almost entirely non-narrative. Chief among these, of course, is the voice acting, and Louis C.K. is both dry and sweet, a pleasure to listen to. But like the original *Ghostbusters*, what makes the film watchable is the way that it slowly wanders up, down, and across New York. A brief sequence in Brooklyn is poignant not so much for the death-related subplot that it develops (the way in which nearly every contemporary kid's movie feels the need to deal with death is deeply annoying to me, reading now like a pious gesture that they are trying to treat kids with respect or some damn thing), but for the way that it shows us Brooklyn. Here that Dartmouth of New York is not seen as the hipster purgatory it has become, but as a racially integrated, middle-class haven of urban domesticity. That is Brooklyn's heritage, and that's the place that in pockets it still is. We see, in short, the Brooklyn of Paul Auster surviving the Brooklyn of Lena Dunham. And that's just one short vignette in the film: 10 minutes altogether, maybe 15. It speaks, though, to a secret *Secret Life of Pets*: a *Secret Life of Pets* as city symphony.

In making this argument, I'm not trying to "read against the grain" or anything like that. I'm a passionate devotee of Roland Barthes, but I can't think of any concept of the last four or five decades that has produced more criticism that looks to most civilians, very much including those who would otherwise be sympathetic to the broad project of criticism, utterly insane. Rather, enjoying these films as an exploration of place (partially an imagined one, of course) is to recover the most interesting part of what is there, subsumed though it may seem to be by animation or pyrotechnics, by sliming ghosts and talking dogs.

Jacques Panijel's "1962" film *Octobre à Paris* is a city symphony too, although a very different one. I put the film's date in scepticism-quotes to indicate that even though it was shot in 1962, it was denied a French "visa d'exploitation," which would have enabled domestic distribution, until 1973. Even then it didn't get a proper release; anything resembling that had to wait until 2011.

It's not hard to see why. The film is a chronicle of the massacre of Algerian demonstrators during an anti-war march on 17 October 1961, when

a still-disputed number (possibly around 200) were killed by police, many by being thrown into the Seine. The depth of French denial about this is the subject of Michael Haneke's 2006 film *Caché*. Panijel's work, though, is of a different order altogether. Rather than a fiction that presents the events through the eyes of the French haute-bourgeoisie, *Octobre à Paris* is mostly made up of a series of interviews with survivors of the march, who testify in plain, unvarnished language about what they saw, about what was done to them.

As I watched the subtitled DVD, easily available on Amazon.fr, I found myself offering the occasional bit of vocabulary help to my viewing companion, whose French is fine but maybe not super-deep. "Bidonville," I said at one point. "Shantytown." One remarkable aspect of *Octobre à Paris* is to portray in a high level of detail, almost without meaning to do so, a kind of parallel Paris, a Paris inhabited by Algerians who had simply been erased by all mainstream representations of the place. Panijel is presenting Paris not as the city of lights, but as a collection of dark edges, a metropolis whose size and depth makes it possible for neighbourhoods to rise, fall and rise again, all in the shadows of bleak squalor and shocking violence. When he shows us her broad boulevards, presumably far from those shantytowns, it's almost only at night, through photos and a bit of newsreel footage of when the demonstrations turned really violent. Paris emerges here as a city defined not just by violence but by the desire to hide that violence, to bury it. *Caché* would have been a good title.

English-Canadians with good high-school French, like my viewing companion, would do fine with it (as he did). Most of the interviewees are Algerian and they tend to speak in clear, precise "school French," since for so many it was a thoroughly-learned second language, largely free of urban slang or dialect. Brought to my attention during a recent conference of the Film Studies Association of Canada (the young scholar Matt Croombs is researching militant cinema of this period), I felt my understanding of the period thoroughly changed by *Octobre à Paris*. My understanding of the city was no less transformed.