

F I L M I N
R E V I E W



C H A R L E S T A Y L O R

A scene in Richard Lester's 1981 film *Superman II* points up everything that's wrong with today's superhero movies. Lois Lane (Margot Kidder) has guessed Clark Kent's secret identity, and rather than watch her age and eventually die while himself remaining forever youthful, Clark (Christopher Reeve) decides to renounce his super powers so that they can love and live together as mortals. It's an irresistible romantic conceit, the stuff of myth. But what immediately follows is a reminder that myth's power to affect us lies in its relation to the human. Dropping into a truck stop for a bite, Clark and Lois encounter a bully who comes on to her, and when Clark steps in, the bully beats him up. The scene ends with Reeve – so beloved now as a figure of tragedy we forget what a wonderful actor he was – wiping his bloodied mouth, looking at his hand and saying, “Huh, blood,” with an awful, crumpled laugh, the sound of someone realizing the joke fate has played on him.

I'll never forget watching that scene in a theater and feeling as if the floor of the world had dropped away: if Superman can't protect Lois, then the rest of us have no protection as well. The *New Yorker* critic Richard Brody might have been talking about

this scene when he wrote last summer of superhero movies: “In their often-blundering way, they bring together world-scale conflict and intimate dreams and failings. That is the very reason for their success. They represent, in cartoonish form, great fears, great hopes, and great yearnings.” The occasion for Brody’s comments was the declaration by the Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu that making superhero movies constitutes “cultural genocide.” This was especially rich coming from a man whose recent film *Birdman*, a serviceable backstage comedy tarted up with the kind of illusion-and-reality games that, for some, signify depth, depended on deprecating allusion to Tim Burton’s two *Batman* movies, whose poetry and grandeur Iñárritu has never begun to match. As his lead, a washed-up movie star most famous for starring as a superhero, Iñárritu cast Burton’s Batman, Michael Keaton. The irony was that the role gave Keaton no opportunity to reach the depths he sounded as Bruce Wayne’s alter ego.

Iñárritu, though, did have a point, which Brody granted: “The engine of [superhero movies’] commercial success is also the cause of their most common failing, and it’s exactly the one that Iñárritu cites: money. . . . The budget of the new Avengers film is estimated between two hundred and twenty and two hundred and seventy-nine million dollars. . . . There’s no reason to expect that a filmmaker will enjoy the same level of creative control over a project with a nine-figure budget that he or she would with a six-figure budget. The problem with superhero movies is built into the system of their production. The generally disheartening experience of watching them results from the lack of creative freedom that their directors enjoy while making them.”

When I tell people I’ve stopped going to superhero movies – as well as to most big-budget spectacles – they assume I’m saying that I find the content juvenile. That’s not it at all. I love superhero movies, and fantasy movies, which, at their best, work on us the way a great night at the opera does, by magnifying elation and tragedy and providing the pleasure of being swept up into something bigger than ourselves.

To achieve that, though, room must be made for human feeling within the mythic, and in superhero movies with quarter-billion-dollar budgets, the human no longer exists. Hell, movie stars don’t exist in these movies. Stars are no longer listed in the print ads or

billboards or in the previews for these movies, and they're often buried beneath masks or makeup in the movies themselves. Even when they're not, they might just as well be anonymous. After a couple of weeks of seeing an actress I thought was Jessica Chastain in the trailers for *Jurassic World*, I was informed that I was actually looking at Bryce Dallas Howard.

But there are exceptions, even amid the din of most pop movies. The smartly put together *John Wick* (2014) is carried by the reserves of mourning and deadpan wit that the perennially underrated Keanu Reeves brings to the title role. It's a modestly scaled action-revenge outing made by directors, Chad Stahleski and David Leitch, who take care to craft the action sequences: the shots are held long enough for viewers to see the performers in motion rather than having to glimpse the action through the Benihana editing so common in pop movies. But action movies that are both modest and well-crafted are in the minority.

It makes sense that the human element has been virtually eliminated in these movies because, along with characters, drama has been obliterated, too. The storylines are usually incoherent, and so is the direction. Action scenes are reduced to constant camera movement obscured by explosions and lighting effects, all edited so that shots last no more than two or three seconds, and during which it's impossible to figure out where anyone or anything is in physical relation to anything else. The studio has shelled out millions for CGI, and by God they're determined to show every cent of it onscreen. No one complains because the adolescents and people in their twenties who make up the majority of the current target audience have grown up with movies that exist only as spectacle. The incoherence doesn't bother them – it's the only kind of moviemaking they know.

You can't feel wonder when wonder has become commonplace. Go to any big-budget special-effects spectacular, and by the time the feature attraction comes on you've already sat through a half-hour of previews that are filled with equally spectacular special effects (and are just as loud and incoherent). It's all too easy to look down our collective noses at audiences who enjoy the crash and bang of these destruct-o-ramas. But watching a trailer for *San Andreas* (a disaster movie forgotten almost before it was released) and seeing skyscrapers collapse while horrified onlookers gape and

make futile attempts to find shelter, I felt as though pop culture had reached its nadir; it could not get more callous. Surely I am not the only person who never again wants to see a collapsing skyscraper presented as entertainment. And yet nobody around me seemed bothered. Sitting in a New York City audience watching a huge building topple to the ground while no one recoiled, I decided that Iñárritu had gotten it wrong: Hollywood moviemaking is about cultural amnesia, not cultural genocide.

The old studio heads, despite their love of gaudiness and sentimentality and their petty tyrannies, sought to make movies that would last. The accountants and marketing hotshots now in charge build disposability right into their products. The *Spider-Man* franchise – we now talk about movies as franchises, like Dunkin’ Donuts or McDonalds – is about to be started for the third time in thirteen years; it will not be continued with a new star, as 007 movies have been, but begin again from the beginning. For the mostly male teenagers these pictures are aimed at, the first incarnation in 2002 with Tobey Maguire is ancient history. Franchises, reboots, and remakes – with schedules mapped out five years or so in advance – now account for much of the studio’s output, and not even the studio expects these pictures to stay in the memory beyond the first few weeks of release. The publicity buildup ends with opening weekend, immediately after which the grosses drop off and the attention of the public and the industry watchers turns to the next blockbuster being trumpeted for the following weekend’s release. Less than seventy-two hours after a movie opens, it’s old news.

With increasingly fewer exceptions, Hollywood has become a habitat not of directors but of traffic cops, and not particularly competent ones at that. Even the fact that the latest Avengers film, *Age of Ultron*, was directed by Joss Whedon wasn’t enough to get me into the theater. Whedon was the man behind the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a rich and wondrous work of pop culture, as well as of the terrific and short-lived sci-fi Western *Firefly*. For the movies, Whedon has directed *Serenity* (the big-screen version of *Firefly*) and a lovely, literally homemade (it was shot in his house) version of *Much Ado About Nothing*. But it’s silly to think that any director will get to exercise creativity or vision on a picture that costs a quarter of a billion dollars. Too much money is

at stake not to follow the blueprint. Last spring, online commentators got themselves very worked up arguing that a woman should be given a chance to direct one of these behemoths. When I heard that I thought, “If she does, I hope she’s a hack.” Who wants to see a talented filmmaker forced to nullify his or her talent on one of these monstrosities? The announcement that Ava DuVernay, the director of the superb *Selma*, might helm a Marvel movie was awful news. Sure, it’s a marker of diversity – but without a name on the credits there’s no way to tell who made a Marvel movie. The studio would be better off offering a variation of the inspection slips tucked into the folds of dress shirts: Directed by # 37.

The hot online topic following the release of *Age of Ultron* was a scene in which Scarlett Johansson’s Black Widow bemoans the fact that her super powers keep her from being fully human, citing, as an example, that she can’t have children. Charges of misogyny flew at Whedon and at the movie. In the midst of this, on his blog *Some Came Running*, the critic Glenn Kenny summed up the depression and weariness that overtakes those of us at the realization that the new spectacle filmmaking has supplanted Hollywood craftsmanship:

Nabokov famously said that the first “shiver of inspiration” for *Lolita* was “prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: the sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage.” . . . This observation will not make me a lot of friends, but I think if you spend a great deal of time in earnest rumination over, say, the ostensibly anti-feminist compromises applied to Black Widow’s “character arc,” ultimately you’re just grouching about the interior decoration of your cage.

Paul Fussell, in a far more serious context than superhero movies, wrote, “It takes some honesty, even if that honesty arises from despair, to perceive that some events, being inhuman, have no human meaning.” When I read young critics condemn the anti-feminism of *Age of Ultron*, or proclaim the feminism of George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road* (a film as audaciously and clearly made as the blockbusters are not, very much the expression of a director’s vision and not a marketing department’s balance sheet,

and, with the exception of Charlize Theron's face, as devoid of human content as any of the superhero movies), I wonder whether it's not just Hollywood that's dead, but criticism. In effect, the generation of critics who believe something serious is going on in these movies is serving the studio as much as the fanboys clamoring for these pictures. Trying to discuss superhero movies as they're now assembled, or even a spectacularly made piece of junk like *Mad Max: Fury Road*, in terms of feminism is like discussing the multicultural makeup of the gang of average Joes in a beer commercial in terms of America's changing racial dynamic. Such a conversation is not going beneath the surface, it's acceding to it — but not because pop culture can't be discussed in terms of political or social realities, and not because emotional and mature art can't be made out of comic-book or pulp sources. It's a futile exercise because when both narrative and visual coherence are obliterated along with the personalities of the people onscreen, there's no basis for anything impinging on real emotion, real humanity. The young critics who discuss these movies as if such elements did exist are in essence functioning as another arm of the studio marketing department, giving the impression that they're talking about movies and not items on a balance sheet. They seem unaware that mainstream moviemaking ever meant something other than a studio's attempt to colonize the weekend box office.

But big-budget spectacles have colonized the critical mind as well. Even the young critics who populate many of the Internet sites and pride themselves on their independence and savvy seem more concerned with claiming their place in each weekend's critical pig pile than in looking for what other movies might be out there. It's a critical cliché to blame big-budget movies because little movies founder in their wake. The fact remains that at the same time that Joss Whedon and George Miller were being pitted against each other to determine which was the true feminist (I'll be in my room napping while you boys slug it out), only cursory critical attention was being paid to Albert Maysles's documentary *Iris* or to Bret Haley's lovely drama *I'll See You in My Dreams*. And given the ongoing acne-like eruptions of outrage over the way women are represented onscreen, and on the question of standards of beauty and depictions of older women, it's damn strange that the conversation didn't include a documentary about a fashion

icon who is ninety-three, and a romance in which a seventy-three-year-old woman conducts her love life by her rules and is attractive to a younger man as well as to her contemporaries. I don't want to reduce either of these delightful pictures solely to a discussion about their representations of women. (Asked about the representation of women in poetry, Elizabeth Bishop once said that as soon as you bring up that topic you're talking about something other than literature.) They're both modest films that offer a pleasant night out, and I don't want to oversell their charms. Their common thread and their significance is that when they were released, at the beginning of the summer movie season, in which the big releases are designed to clobber viewers, they reminded us of what it used to be like to go to the movies and be treated as a human being.

I'll See You in My Dreams is the sort of movie that critics find easy to dismiss, a small-scale character study with no showy technique, the type of picture usually belittled with the appellation "a Sundance movie." And yet, in the opening scenes, Brett Haley shows that the only technique worth having – in his case, subtle technique – is the one that serves the material.

The movie opens in the Los Angeles home of Carol Petersen (Blythe Danner), a seventy-something widow, as she starts her day. In a quick succession of shots, Haley establishes Carol's routine: wake early, coffee and the paper, watering her garden, and then lunch on her patio, all with her beloved golden Lab Hazel next to her. Then, having shown us this soothing routine, Haley disrupts it with one shot: Carol waking up and calling for Hazel, and Hazel not coming.

Usually there's no cheaper way to get an audience's sympathy than to kill off a pet. (Last year the acclaimed art-house picture *White God* got away with the hoariest and most manipulative kid-separated-from-pet clichés.) But Haley's handling of Hazel's death is so decent, so measured, that without making us feel abused or worked over, he captures something many of us have been through but that I've never seen so fully or accurately presented in a movie. The process of putting a pet to sleep is one in which you're both guardian and the one who needs to be guarded. It's the ultimate expression of your promise to care for and protect your pet and you need to be calm to keep your pet calm. All the while, though, you

know your composure is a thin measure of control over impending devastation. Haley cuts between Carol stroking Hazel, and Hazel looking at his [this Hazel is a he] owner as he lies stretched out on a table at the vet's. As the film shows it, Hazel is as much aware of this leave-taking as Carol is. The vet, a young Asian woman, is precisely the mixture of professionalism and kindness that we'd like to have in this situation, explaining every step of the procedure to Carol, her focus on making Carol understand that Hazel isn't in pain.

What follows Hazel's death is, in terms of the overall design of the picture, even more significant: the same shots we saw before of Carol going about her day, but now she is by herself. So much for the notion that *I'll See You in My Dreams* is a cozy outing for oldsters, a nice time-killer before the Country Buffet opens for the early-bird special. By putting Hazel's death at the beginning of the movie, Haley tells us we are seeing a film in which loss is the rule and not the exception, and that this is the irrevocable condition of aging.

In the sequences with Carol's bridge buddies (Rhea Perlman, Mary Kay Place, and June Squibb) the movie flirts with *Golden Girls'* codgerism (especially when they smoke dope and head out to the supermarket for munchies). We endure the scenes because we see how out of place Blythe Danner is in them. Not only because, at seventy-three, she is still lovely – still the willowy beauty of American acting, a mixture of lyricism and plain, grounded sense, Jean Arthur as Philip Barry might have portrayed her – but because they trade in a type of sit-com humor that Danner was always too witty for. Danner has had fewer good movie roles than any great American actress of her generation – this is her first top billing. Those of us who love her cherish her rare appearances (as in *Hearts of the West* and *Lovin' Molly*), or the times we get to see her onstage. You can sour your time at *I'll See You in My Dreams* thinking of how ill-used Danner has been by the movie studios. Or you can bask in her presence.

In her way, Danner has always possessed the straightforwardness that has long characterized great American acting. She's non-nonsense yet warm, the warmth usually expressed with a wry edge. It all comes out in *I'll See You in My Dreams* when the young pool cleaner with whom Carol forms a friendship (Martin

Starr, in an understated, slightly shy performance that never becomes shambling or remote) takes her to a karaoke bar and she gets up to sing “Cry Me a River.” Bobby Troup’s song, which was a hit for his then-wife Julie London, is the oddest of pop standards, not so much a melody as a musical monologue that the singer carries through as much on attitude as on technique. It’s been the subject of one great movie sequence: Julie London’s ghost appearing to sing it to Tom Ewell in Frank Tashlin’s wonderful 1956 comedy *The Girl Can’t Help It*. Here, Haley, as elsewhere, doesn’t try anything fancy. He just gives his camera over to Danner, who sings the song as someone who has gone through pain and now comes out the other side to say, not unkindly, “Welcome to the club” to the freshly wounded.

Along with her forthrightness, Danner has always had a dreamy streak, as if someone as tall and slender as she has naturally spent part of the time with her head in the clouds. The clouds in *I’ll See You in My Dreams* (a great, fatalistic title that Raymond Chandler might have gotten around to using) are sometimes dark ones. Carol is torn between being swept into the memories of her losses (not just of Hazel but of the husband she’s outlived by twenty years) and the joys life still offers. Here those joys are her new friend the pool cleaner and, especially, Sam Elliott as the attractive man her own age who makes no secret of his admiration for Carol.

Maybe it was fated that two of the greatest voices in the movies would eventually be paired off. Pauline Kael once compared Danner’s voice to a French 75: “You get the champagne through the chipped ice and cognac,” she wrote. Elliott, with his gray hair and cowboy’s mustache and sturdy frame, every movement the measure of a man completely at home in his own skin, has a voice that might be a dry-rubbed rib: rough as bark on the outside, juicy and succulent on the inside. Yes, we’re aware that we’re watching an idealized picture of senior life. If we could all look like either Blythe Danner or Sam Elliott, who the hell wouldn’t want to age? But now that Hollywood has relegated actors to special effects, we can no longer take for granted the pleasures of watching stars, the pleasures of seeing those idealized versions of ourselves.

And in *I’ll See You in My Dreams*, the idealization is peculiarly American. Maybe it’s the fact that Sam Elliott has done so many Westerns, but in a movie where his most heartfelt endearment to

Blythe Danner is “I think I like you a little bit” – an endearment that she understands as the big deal it is – you feel like you’re watching the two of them carry on the tradition of stoicism that has always been part of American heroes, whether westerners, private eyes, or the wisecracking and wised-up heroes and heroines of romantic comedies. There’s no gush in this attraction. They’ve gotten to an age where they don’t have to be coy about liking each other or enjoying each other in bed. (This is a rare American movie that is completely relaxed and nonjudgmental about sex.) *I’ll See You in My Dreams* is pleasant and civilized and carefully made and, perhaps, something even more hopeful: a sign that the casual, un sentimental tradition of American movie entertainment hasn’t been completely lost.

Before Iris Apfel, now ninety-three, became a fashion icon, with an exhibit of her vast apparel-and-costume-jewelry collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute, a cover spread in the hipster magazine *Dazed & Confused*, mannequins in her likeness adorning the windows of Bergdorf Goodman, and a steady stream of designers and photographers and tastemakers courting her, she was an interior designer and a businesswoman. With her husband, Carl, she ran Old World Weavers, a firm that reproduced no-longer-available antique textile patterns. Old World had a hand in the restoration of many grand American homes, and did work for the administration of every president from Truman to Clinton, with the exception of George H. W. Bush.

But Iris (it’s impossible – and rather stiff – to refer to her by her married name) became best known for the outrageous and inimitable fashion sense that took full flower in her later years. She was striking to begin with – slim and, it would appear, rather tall, her large angular features capped by a shock of white hair and adorned with her enormous round eyeglasses, which dwarf even the dowdy saucers Queen Elizabeth usually wears. At one point in the documentary *Iris* recounts going to the original Loehmann’s in Brooklyn, where Mrs. Loehmann herself told her she would never be beautiful but that she had something better: style.

There’s no easy definition of the Apfel style. Iris tells Maysles that if she had any rules, she’d break them. And yet there is an interior logic to each ensemble, arrived at solely by instinct, by seeing what piece goes with what, what strikes Iris’s fancy that

day. Each outfit is a mixture of the rarefied and the quotidian. A couture item might be paired with a vintage piece that could have come from an upscale resale shop or a suburban flea market in any part of the world (Iris and Carl did extensive traveling for their business). Every outfit is accessorized from Apfel's collection of costume jewelry. Vintage bakelite bracelets or beaded African bangles discovered at a shop in Harlem might go halfway up her arm as if in unconscious (or even conscious) homage to Man Ray's famous photograph of Nancy Cunard. Three or four necklaces consisting of huge strung-together balls might surround her neck in a funky approximation of a Renaissance ruff. In one scene, Apfel happily fills a shopping basket at one of the cheap costume jewelry stores that dot Manhattan. Picking up a rhinestone dragonfly brooch for four dollars she tells Maysles that she gets a bigger boot out of this than if her husband took her to Harry Winston's.

Iris's manner might be best described by the Dorothy Parker anecdote about seeing an arm emerge from the rear window of a limo driving through Beverly Hills. The arm was swathed in ermine and in the hand was a bagel with a bite out of it. In the course of the movie we watch Iris hobnob with all manner of fashion swells. But fashion, for Iris, is everywhere: in a shop in Harlem, an outdoor swap meet in Florida. It might be a Missoni necklace she finds at a discount store or a Mexican jacket with felt cutouts adorning the back. In one of the movie's best sequences, she styles several young African American women who come to her in-store appearance at Loehmann's. One of the women, a tall beauty with big earrings, is sitting in the audience when Iris, sensing a great model, beckons her forward. In all these encounters, the polite, well-brought-up Jewish girl from Astoria is always present. When the *New York Times* photographer Bill Cunningham snaps her on the red carpet, she pulls him aside and tells him she wants him to come to the dinner being held for her afterward. When an elaborate sketch of her is revealed in the lobby of her Park Avenue apartment building, she insists on having her picture taken with her doormen, one of whom affectionately takes her hand as she heads out to some event and tells her to make sure the people in charge take care of her.

That exchange is a key to the undercurrent of loss and the

consciousness of time's passage that underscores *Iris*. Albert Maysles, who along with his brother David was the most celebrated and controversial of American cinema-vérité directors, died this past March at age eighty-nine. He lived to see *Iris* completed but not released. Following the credits, there is a lovely final shot of Iris in which she interrupts Maysles in the midst of his filming (which took place on and off over several years) and invites him to sit down and join her in a cup of tea and a nosh. In this moment, the two are not filmmaker and subject but comrades navigating the unknown land of age.

Except for accessories, she tells us, she has stopped collecting and has begun making yearly donations of her wardrobe to the Peabody-Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. When she's asked if the thought of what to part with keeps her up at night, she answers, "Oh God no. I have other things to keep me up at night." Pressed, she answers discreetly, "Matters of health" in a way that signals, politely, that she doesn't wish to elaborate. In the course of the movie we see her husband, Carl, turn one hundred, and Iris confides that she kept him in the dark about a broken hip that resulted from a fall she took. And yet as much as *Iris* makes us aware of the infirmities of old age, it also gives us a sense that Iris herself is fighting the expectations of a society that, no matter how much it admires her, does not expect vigor from the elderly, is even alarmed by it. I saw *Iris* with my eighty-five-year-old widowed father (he was dressed in an Indian-print paisley shirt for the occasion), who, a couple of times a year, comes to New York to visit me and the friends he's made here. And before every trip there are at least a few well-meaning relatives who cautiously ask him if it's wise for him to make the trip. "What do they want me to do," he always asks me, "sit home and wait to die?" You can hear something of that caring but smothering concern in interviews with Iris's nephew, who says that in his opinion his aunt doesn't relax enough. He's right. She doesn't. But those who worry about the pace kept by the vigorous elderly never concern themselves with what the health effects – mental and spiritual as well as physical – of indolence might be. A recliner and shawl might be great for an ocean liner. Iris's pace and enthusiasm are a way of saying that in New York City they spell death.

In the past few years one political documentary after another

has confronted us with some issue we're told is too important to ignore (to the point where one begins to envy the people who pay no attention to politics at all). But fashion documentaries, the best of them, have connected us to the fabric of life. *Valentino: The Last Emperor*, chronicling the couturier's experience as his fashion house is taken over by a conglomerate, is a meditation on the future of craftsmanship in the world of takeovers and consolidation. (It's a fashion movie a Teamster could love.) *Dior & I* shows us that same craftsmanship, taking us into the workrooms where couture is still handmade. (The mindboggling attention to detail is the answer to people who don't understand why this stuff costs so much.) Best of all, *Bill Cunningham: New York*, a movie to which *Iris* is close spiritual kin, chronicles the elderly *Times* photographer who, traveling the city by bike and snapping whoever catches his eye, has for decades now been creating a pointillist documentary of street fashion as a barometer of the city itself. At one point in the film we see footage of a sixty-year-old Cunningham in 1989 trying to define why fashion is so important. "Fashion . . ." he begins, and then stops, struggling to find words before coming up with "is the armor to survive the reality of everyday life." Doing away with it would, Cunningham goes on, "be like doing away with civilization."

And, really, that's it. *Iris* chimes in with her own version of Cunningham's wisdom when she notes that life is gray enough. Let's bring some color to it. For *Iris*, as for Cunningham, fashion isn't an escape from life but an acknowledgment of it. It's a statement of faith that life as it exists at the moment is worth living, and a statement of faith in the future as well. Because we still have to make a case for fashion as an art worth honoring, studying, writing about, it's easy to confuse glorying in fashion with the dandy's narcissism. (In a *New York Times Book Review* review of a memoir by the fashion journalist Kate Betts the reviewer feels the need to inform us that "fashion and self-examination – froth and wisdom – might seem like odd bookfellows." Can you imagine this being claimed about the practice or reporting of any other art?) But as carried out by *Iris Apfel*, it's a version of the sentiment expressed in the spiritual "Brighten the Corner Where You Live." It's an act of kindness toward our fellow beings, a small prayer of thanks for the pleasures a hard world can still offer.