

Marriage Is Punishment For Shoplifting In Some Countries #1

(sorry about all the endnotes)

I suppose my favourite film is Wayne's World. What's yours? "Favourite" is almost as confusing a concept as "best", I think. (1) It's still trying to fit a comically subjective notion into a grid of unseen and unwritten rules, because the fact is, there are some things which it is acceptable to choose as a favourite and others which you just can't, even if they're good. (For example, the KLF, although they are surprisingly problematic vis-à-vis their relationship to both contemporary art and collectivist politics, remains a solid answer to the question "who's your favourite band". The Velvet Underground, on the other hand, is a terrible answer.) This acceptability operates in a space quite separate from the merits of the work. Having a favourite is also not a critical position, since your favourite anything is generally something which you have long ceased to have any critical faculties about. (2) That's where I find myself with Wayne's World. I've no idea whether it is more, or less, gauche to say Wayne's World is your favourite film (3) compared to, say, Fitzcarraldo (actually, I do, I'm going with less – furthermore, it is *post-gauche*, the most interesting cultural space of all) but it feels right to me. So now here we are: I'm finally ready to tell you what I've learned since I was 11. (4)

Stacy: Well, don't you want to open your present?

Wayne: If it's a severed head I'm going to be very upset.

Stacy: Open it.

Wayne: What is it?

Stacy: It's a gun rack.

Wayne: A gun rack... a gun rack. Shyeah! Right! I don't even own a gun, let alone many guns that would necessitate an entire rack. What am I gonna do... with a gun rack?

Stacy: You don't like it? Fine. You know Wayne, if you're not careful, you're going to lose me.

Wayne: I lost you two months ago. We broke up. Are you mental? Get the net!

The scene we're going to talk about today is the one we were always, inevitably, going to start with: with Stacy, and Wayne's cruelty. [You can watch the pair of them here, before we go on.](#)

Stacy is Wayne's ex-girlfriend, and she's waiting for him with a large present in Stan Mikita's Donuts. She's significantly better-looking than Wayne, and based on this exchange she is kinder too. Everything about Stacy's appearance and behaviour can be used against her, to better level the playing field. Stacy presents as basic, un-rock, uncool, uncritically feminine. Stumbling in her heels and prom-pink dress, she projects an

eagerness to please that is entirely counter-productive since it seems to please nobody. She is pitiable, an injured puppy; but in order for Wayne to be set up as Aurora, Illinois' local hero, someone who punched above his weight and triumphed, needing to punch higher and higher still, she is an adversary.

A few years ago, Gayatri Spivak's concept of radical vulnerability started gaining a lot of ground - on Tumblr, mostly. The internet is so alarmingly fast at turning out these karaoke-versions of theory concepts. So, what began as a postcolonial theory tool to open up dialogue between groups, particularly in cross-border situations (by opening oneself up to criticism etc etc) quickly morphed into a hashtag for people to medicate their bad breakups with feminist theory. This is not a bad thing, I don't think! Anyway, it got repurposed as a sort of way forward in art and literature, on that new sincerity axis, you know. (Jerry Saltz wrote a column about it which, pinkie promise, you don't need to read.) It's a theme in Wayne's World, throughout - from Garth and Wayne's tested friendship, to their friend Terry's regular proclamations of "I love you, man", to which no one knows quite how to respond (the right answer turns out to be "thank you"). But I think the Stacy-Wayne relationship can offer the most insight into it.

Stacy's brought Wayne an anniversary gift, a gun rack. The gift casts her in a bad light, it's true. It is...not a good present. Almost certainly something her dad would like, it makes us feel less guilty about laughing at her. But her gift is bigger than it looks, and far less egocentric. Presenting Wayne with the gun rack, Stacy is handing him America itself, gift-wrapped. Rejecting it makes Wayne grow powerful. Although the pain Stacy feels at rejection is real, she will realise in time that Wayne's acceptance or otherwise of the gun rack is entirely incidental. Giving Wayne this power, the power to refuse, to reject both it and her, is *part of the gift* too. Meanwhile, Stacy's power is greater still: it comes from being able to stand there and just give. This is where Stacy's vulnerability is radical – when you abandon your ego, and your expectation of reciprocity, loving becomes basically an extreme sport. Stacy has utterly, recklessly abandoned self-care, trading in her personhood to become something selfless, otherworldly, radiating love like the brightest light. I mean, I wouldn't recommend it, but then I wouldn't recommend foraging for edible mushrooms without a very thorough guide book either. It doesn't mean it's not brave! What a goddess.

What's more, I can't shake a nagging doubt that there is more to Stacy and Wayne's story. I mean, Wayne says they've broken up now, but we have no way of knowing what he has said to Stacy in private and the extent to which they interact away from the group. We have every reason to suspect that his masculinity in front of his friends is a pure performance. (I would bet you anything that they are still sleeping together.) Stacy's

lingering presence in Wayne's life echoes the other ultimate ex-girlfriend of literature, Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre (given the dignity of agency and a backstory as Antoinette in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*). As Spivak notes, Antoinette: "must play out her role, act out the transformation of her "self" into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction." But there's no house for Stacy to burn down. And who is it that gains when Stacy loses?

If we're going to unpack what a *Wide Sargasso Sea* of Wayne's World would look like, we need to understand Stacy's motivations. In "The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies", Siegfried Kracauer writes of the circular desire loop of everyday life and cinema: "there is no kitsch one could invent that life itself could not outdo...Sensational film hits and life usually correspond to each other because the Little Miss Typists model themselves after the examples they see on the screen. It may be, however, that the most hypocritical instances are stolen from life". With her girlish desires of an idealised romance, Stacy represents both Kracauer's little shopgirl, and also the movies itself. Wayne's World emerged at a point at the beginning of the 1990s when Hollywood turned on itself: such a small and slight Saturday Night Live sketch turned into this massive blockbuster filled with meta-gags about the industry, and multiple endings. It's fitting, then, that Wayne's triumph over Stacy parallels Wayne's World's triumph over Hollywood itself. A victory for the scruffier, smarter, more cynical TV over the midcentury dream factory. We're at a point, in 1992, on the cusp of grunge supplanting rock, at the beginning of the irony wars that would define the rest of the decade. Wayne walks a line here. His aesthetic is old rock but his sensibility is all modern. His dreams are MTV, not Hollywood. The moral of Wayne's World, in its proper ending at least, is in a rejection of being the idea of being swept off your feet in favour of finding happiness at home with your friends. Stacy is a casualty of the coming decade, her unguarded vulnerability rendered unfashionable and passe.

None of which helps Stacy much. She's just left, hanging there, with too many feelings. But is the aim of life just to get to the end without making a fool of yourself, or is the aim to achieve perfect shimmering transcendence? Dignity is a delicate balance: value it too little and you might end up so paralysed by embarrassment at your past indignities that you shut down, unable to see beauty anywhere. Too much, and you'd never take any risks at all. Now, I wouldn't claim that Stacy is modelling ideal behaviour here, and Cassandra may well be right when she later notes "she has very nice legs, but no self-esteem" (we will return to this another time). She might even be exhibiting some symptoms of complex-PTSD. Nonetheless, it still seems that Stacy is further along on the road to transcendence than she would be if she politely followed the rules of correct, non-embarrassing

behaviour.

The trouble is, I suppose, that Stacy's emotional courageousness doesn't operate in a neutral space. Even a supposedly charming/disarming act like telling someone you like them, even platonically, is fraught with danger, obligation, guilt. (5) It can unwittingly invite bad stuff, structurally violent stuff, like how poltergeists get attached to teenage girls. But the male/female chirpse-dialectic is like rotten driftwood, and I don't think it'll take much to collapse it. Wayne has a lot to learn but he is not a villain here, not really, and in some ways he's pushing away at these decaying structures too. When Wayne meets Cassandra, he settles into a role as the tugboat-partner, and though he struggles with the power dynamic initially, he ultimately finds some sort of relaxing sublimation in the groupie role.

There will be something growing inside Stacy from now on, a new consciousness, a chant inside her head that grows stronger and stronger, and more insistent. Soon she'll realise that Wayne has just been a catalyst and isn't really all that important. Now, Joni Mitchell's *Blue* is sweet and true, but *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* is much closer to my heart, and closer to the experience of what it feels like to have a heart, and to be a person with a body in which a heart is trying to make itself heard. The reason I mention it is I have a feeling that the internal dialogue about to crystallise in Stacy's head will sound a lot like [Don't Interrupt the Sorrow](#), since it's the most vulnerable possible song about being tough. (6) I guess it's about a conversation with a man, where you're really having a secret conversation with yourself that the man can't hear. *I've got a head full of quandary and a mighty, mighty, mighty thirst.*

I'm amazed Stacy can hear what Wayne is saying at all, over the sound of her own song.

I suppose that's the heart of it. Sometimes loving, especially as early in life as these two, is about process, not object. The love you generate is just packing peanuts, just something you wrap yourself in to keep yourself safe. If I'm right, and that's what is happening here, then the real romance is between Stacy and her own internal dialogue, and what she will use this situation to eventually create. I honestly think she'll be fine, I really do.

I hope you're well, anyway.

I'm sending this from the kitchen, where I am cooking [the first recipe here](#). It's so great, and less of a performance than it looks like, honest. If it makes your life easier, you have my permission to substitute red onion for shallots, regular lemon for preserved, and for your hand to slip as you're tipping in the rosewater, because you absolutely need at

least three times as much as they say. (You should have rosewater in your cupboard anyway, you don't need me to tell you that. Definitely put it on your bircher muesli in the morning.) You need to be kind to yourself, and to any Stacys you know.

Love,
Tess xx

Endnotes

(1) The exception I'd make is for vegetables: 1. aubergine 2. cavolo nero 3. butternut squash. I would have been able to rank lipsticks too once upon a time, but my entire top 5 has been redacted for reasons including "Taylor Swift has ruined red", "can't wear anything Tom Ford without scowling because I hated Nocturnal Animals so much", and "have recently found out the company still test on animals even though it is literally 2017AD". What does that leave me with? Goose fat on a fingertip, basically.

(2) As to whether you should even have a favourite film – well, I guess we're all just trying to understand what we are, and create assemblages that represent us, whether it's some past timey war belligerents making a really sick coat of arms, or me when I was 14 looking down at my charity shop typewriter and Stargazer glitter dust and copy of Salome by Oscar Wilde and thinking smugly to myself that it meant something (!). Still, I'm not sure that a list of bestest things is even a particularly fun way to reify your personality, especially now we don't even have Myspace. Suppose it's useful if you need to make an internet dating profile: I do at least enjoy these as a genre of writing. (My own brief dalliance in this world is now just a very distant source of semi buried shudder-memories, but I've occasionally tried to offer my services writing profiles for single friends: "sexual tension fetishist seeks hundred years' war", "shut up about your stupid wife". These efforts have been met with nothing but horror and disbelief, but this is because their hearts weren't in it and people can just tell.)

(3) Further-furthermore, I've straight-up copied the answer off my friend Kate, who has, to my knowledge, never doubted for a second that Wayne's World is her favourite film, although we once found her watching Good Bye, Lenin! on the hottest day of the year with the curtains drawn.

(4) I thought I'd been to see Wayne's World with my cousin Louise but the maths doesn't add up - too young. So what was it I saw with her when I was about 12/13? I'd just got into the passenger seat to go home when her ex-boyfriend approached the car. I could only see the pair of them from the neck down, but still saw Louise punch this boy square in the face, for some late teenage transgression or other, which as we sped away past the Megabowl I was assured that he deeply deserved. At the time, schooled in Press Gang and its heavy reliance on a slap-slap-kiss sort of screwball dynamic, I assumed this was normal, or at least would seem normal when I was older, but with hindsight I am actually really shocked! I have never come close to punching anyone in the face. Good grief. The early 90s was, as far as I am concerned, the true golden age of cinema-going entirely because of [the Warner Brothers chain's bespoke "how to behave in the cinema" cartoon at the beginning of each screening](#). Surprisingly the Youtube commenters reckon it actually is Mel Blanc doing the voices here, but they've sped him up so he sweetly sounds like he's doing Bugs Bunny for the first time, although it was probably nearer the last. (It also sounds like he is saying the word "theatre" when he's only ever seen it written down, but maybe that's cultural differences). It was a golden era for buying surprisingly well-made tat with Marvin the Martian on, so the gift shop is just burned into my brain. Point is, if your local cinema wasn't a Warner Brothers in the 1990s you really missed out.

(5) Reminded of an exchange in Achewood, which is a comic about cartoon cats that I just really like, okay? One cartoon cat (Ray) asks another cartoon cat (Roast Beef), "how do you even get to be a king, anyway?". Roast Beef replies "just punch hell of suckers in the mouth and tell chicks straight up that you like them".

(6) A line I can never shake off from this song is "And he chains me with *that* serpent, to *that* Ethiopian wall". My applauding italics. What's the word for how this sentence hangs so oddly, with those *thats*? Is this deixis? I'm never sure. Linguists please @ me.