

Captain Marvel: Money, feminism, militarism and previously “independent” filmmakers

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Directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck; written by Boden, Fleck and Geneva Robertson-Dworet

The production and release of *Captain Marvel*, the new science fiction superhero adventure from Marvel and Disney, has a number of remarkable features, but none of them involve the film’s drama, action or characters.

Briefly, *Captain Marvel*, in convoluted fashion, follows US Air Force pilot Carol Danvers (Brie Larson) who absorbs an awesome energy source, making her *potentially* “one of the universe’s most powerful heroes ever known,” according to the film’s publicity.

However, six years later, she is suffering from amnesia, doesn’t know who or what she is and has become a member of the repressive Starforce Military under her mentor Yon-Rogg (Jude Law). The shapeshifting Skrulls, the apparent enemy, force Danvers to crash-land in the US in the mid-1990s. But all is not what it appears. Danvers discovers secrets about herself and about a “galactic war” between two alien races.

Not much of this is interesting, although it is noisy and “action-packed.” *Captain Marvel*, as a film, is predictable, empty and tedious. The more “sensitive” scenes on Earth, focusing on Danvers and her African American friend Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch) and daughter (Akira Akbar), are possibly the most contrived and least convincing.

The first genuinely noteworthy fact about the new film, not surprisingly, concerns money.

Disney, the film’s distributor, is the world’s largest media company, with some \$100 billion in assets. With a market value of \$152 billion, it ranks as the 53rd largest company of any kind in the world, just behind Total (oil and gas), Merck (pharmaceuticals), the Bank of China (one of the four leading state-owned commercial banks in China), Unilever, DowDuPont and BP.

Media reports place *Captain Marvel*’s combined net production and global marketing costs at \$300 million. To date, the film’s global box office stands at \$774 million.

Captain Marvel is truly “corporate entertainment”—i.e., the very process by which it came into being prevents it from being entertaining or enlightening in any meaningful fashion.

This type of large-scale, officially sponsored filmmaking, whose success is avidly promoted and tracked by the media and business publications in particular, inevitably intersects and overlaps with other aspects of American establishment culture. In the case of *Captain Marvel*, this means militarism and feminism specifically.

The US Air Force was involved in the production of *Captain Marvel*.

In fact, *Task & Purpose* reported that Marvel Studios launched the

official start of production “with a photo of Larson, and Air Force Brig. Gen. Jeannie M. Leavitt, then-commander of the 57th Wing and the service’s first female fighter pilot, atop an F-15 at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada.”

“To prepare for her role, Larson,” according to *The Wrap*, visited the Air Force base “to join simulated dogfights. The film’s red-carpet premiere included testimonials from Air Force men and women and a flyover by the Air Force’s Nellis-based Thunderbirds.”

Task & Purpose, a website that follows the American military, also cited the emailed comments of Todd Fleming, chief of the Community and Public Outreach Division at Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs: “The Air Force partners on any number of entertainment projects to ensure the depiction of Airmen and the Air Force mission is accurate and authentic. Our partnership with ‘Capt Marvel’ [sic] helped ensure the character’s time in the Air Force and backstory was presented accurately. It also highlighted the importance of the Air Force to our national defense.”

“[*Captain Marvel*] is not part of a recruiting strategy but we would expect that audiences seeing a strong Air Force heroine, whose story is in line with the story of many of our Airmen, would be positively received,” Fleming said.

The issue of female recruitment is no small matter. American imperialism, recklessly gearing up for war against Russia, China and other rivals, needs vast new supplies of human fodder. *Task & Purpose* explains, “The spotlight on airmen [in *Captain Marvel*] comes at a time when the Air Force, like the other services, is hunting for the next generation of pilots. The Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps are all short 25 percent of their pilot billets, according to a GAO [Government Accountability Office] report published this summer; the Air Force in particular has doled out cash incentives like candy in a vain effort to prevent pilots from defecting to the private sector. Indeed, the branch’s plan to increase its number of squadrons by 76 to Cold War levels will require an additional 40,000 personnel, further straining the service’s recruitment capabilities. At the Air Force Academy, female cadets are increasingly encouraged to vie for pilot spots to help bridge that gap.”

Larson, who has made all sorts of useless (or worse) comments about #MeToo, alleged sexual abuse and her own “social activism,” like most of affluent Hollywood, is entirely oblivious to the criminal role of the US military, the greatest source of terror and “abuse” on the planet by an order of magnitude of 100 times or more.

The female heroism in *Captain Marvel*, of course, has been greeted with plaudits. *Entertainment Weekly* noted excitedly that the film would “mark the first time a woman will be headlining her own solo superhero movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It also marks the

first time a woman will direct a superhero film for Marvel Studios: Anna Boden will co-direct with her *Mississippi Grind* partner Ryan Fleck.”

The hope is that *Captain Marvel* will do “for women” what *Black Panther* did “for African Americans”—which is, of course, nothing whatsoever, except for a small layer of prominent studio executives, writers, performers, etc.

This comment from *Deadline* is typical: “One film finance source believes that it’s pretty much certain that *Captain Marvel* will see \$1 billion around the world and break the glass ceiling for female-led pics at the global B.O. [box office], dashing past *Wonder Woman*’s final global of \$821.8M.”

As is this *Vox* headline: “Why Captain Marvel’s milestone status creates so much pressure for it to succeed—Why Captain Marvel represents more than just a superhero movie.” The article proposes to answer these important questions: “What does a woman superhero mean for Marvel Studios and the MCU [Marvel Cinematic Universe]? What are the takeaways from *Captain Marvel*’s already overwhelming box office success? What does the film have to say about feminism? What might have happened if it had flopped? And who gets to shape the conversation and narrative surrounding it?”

The final and perhaps most remarkable feature of *Captain Marvel* involves its writer-directors. (And, secondarily, its performers. What are Larson, Jude Law and the talented Australian actor Ben Mendelsohn, whose acting in *The Land of Steady Habits* we recently praised, doing in this rubbish?)

We have made the point previously on more than one occasion about the objective significance of the “long march” of numerous so-called independent or art filmmakers toward empty-headed, “blockbuster” movie-making. We noted the examples of Steven Soderbergh (*Ocean’s Eleven*, etc.), Alan Taylor (*Terminator Genisys*), the Russo brothers (the *Captain America* and *Avengers* franchises), Kenneth Branagh (*Thor*), Christopher Nolan (*Batman Begins*, etc.), John Singleton (a *Fast and Furious* installment), Lee Tamahori (*Die Another Day*, one of the James Bond fantasies), Marc Forster (another of the Bond films, *Quantum of Solace*), Sam Mendes (yet another Bond film, *Skyfall*) and Patty Jenkins (*Wonder Woman*).

To that list, one can add the more recent examples of Jon Watts (two *Spider-Man* films), Taika Waititi (*Thor: Ragnarok*), Ava DuVernay (*A Wrinkle in Time*) and Ryan Coogler (*Black Panther*).

In a number of these cases, the filmmakers had earlier indicated vaguely oppositional political views or a certain concern at least for the fate of broader layers of the population.

The lure of large amounts of money is obviously an issue. But perhaps the more pertinent question is: what are the social and ideological conditions that make writers, directors and performers susceptible to this “lure”? It is not inevitable. Artists, including in the US, have been known to repudiate such offers with contempt. Almost inevitably, however, such resistance has been rooted in political and social conceptions and opposition of a left-wing character, sustained by a confidence in the better instincts of the population and its willingness to struggle. Those conceptions and that confidence are sorely lacking today.

The directors of the dreadful *Captain Marvel*, Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden, should not be entirely unfamiliar to readers of the WSWS, although the context—big-budget Hollywood—may be unexpected. We have reviewed two of their films in the past, *Half Nelson* (2006) and *Sugar* (2008).

The *Atlantic* notes with surprise that Fleck and Boden “until now

have worked in the realm of quiet, sensitive indie films.” More than simply “quiet” and “sensitive,” *Half Nelson* centers on an obviously left-wing high school teacher working at an inner-city school in Brooklyn.

A 2006 *New York Times* article about the making of *Half Nelson* is worth citing. The Fleck-Boden film, wrote Dennis Lim, “is a political allegory, a film about a would-be visionary who wants to change the world but can’t get his act together and is often his own worst enemy. It’s not a stretch to read it as a comment on the sorry state of the American left.”

“‘That was more or less conscious,’ the film’s director, Ryan Fleck, said of the political subtext.” Fleck and Boden “started writing *Half Nelson* ... four years ago, as the Bush administration was preparing to invade Iraq and the antiwar movement was gaining momentum. ‘It felt like we were going to protests every other week,’ Mr. Fleck said recently. ‘But ultimately you don’t have the energy to do it all, and you feel like you’re doing very little. A big part of the frustration was the inability to make meaningful change.’

“The activist spirit comes naturally to Mr. Fleck, who was born to socialist parents on a commune in Berkeley, Calif. As a child he was taken to rallies and protests. As a teenager he read Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn.”

In an interview with *Slant* magazine, Fleck, asked about religion, replied jokingly “I was raised communist.”

Fleck and Boden’s *Sugar*, about a Dominican baseball player playing in the minor leagues in the US, the WSWS commented, was “about immigration and acculturation, capitalism and exploitation, hospitality and loneliness.”

Now, a decade later, *Captain Marvel*.

The same 2006 *Times* article referred to above contained this passage:

“Mr. Fleck said he hoped that their future projects would remain, however obliquely, rooted in a sense of social justice. ‘Filmmaking is kind of a vain hobby when maybe we should all be taking to the streets,’ he said. ‘But it seems irresponsible not to be informed by politics in some way.’

“Ms. Boden’s idealism is more tempered. ‘I don’t have an inflated sense of what a movie can do,’ she said. ‘But you can at least try not to put something out there that you don’t believe in.’

“Mr. Fleck added: ‘That’s a rule we try to follow, to not put garbage in the world.’”

Unfortunately, they have now.



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