

Swinging sixties spies in comic book guise! Fathom and Modesty Blaise

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Swinging sixties Spies in Comic Book Guise!

Diane A. Rodgers

Fathom (1967) Leslie H. Martinson
DVD, region 1 release, PG, running time 99 mins

Modesty Blaise (1966) Joseph Losey
DVD, region 1 release, PG, running time 119 mins

By the mid-1960s, swinging espionage flicks and the James Bond franchise had become firmly established at the box office, perfect for the playboy pop-art era. Bond even jumped feet first into the groovy new times with its own version of psychedelic surrealism in 1967's *Casino Royale*, using it-girl Twiggy in marketing campaigns, and the story including a number of strong female secret agents (including Ursula Andress as Vesper Lynd and Joanna Pettet as Mata Bond). Despite a lukewarm critical reception, *Casino Royale* was still successful enough to turn a decent profit, and a number of other espionage-action-adventure-parodies popped up, including some that were steadfastly female-led and suggestive of the politically progressive times. *Modesty Blaise* (1966) and *Fathom* (1967) are two such films, led by Monica Vitti and Raquel Welch respectively. Though both films are lumped together in 20th Century Fox's 'swinging spy spoof' collection (it is a nice touch that the differently-coloured pop-art neon boxes of the region 1 DVDs make a stylish set, along with *Our Man Flint*, 1966, and *In Like Flint*, 1967), *Modesty* and *Fathom* are very different breeds of spy indeed.

Taking the films in reverse order of release, one thing is clear about *Fathom* from the outset: this film is no champion of the burgeoning late sixties feminist movement, but an unashamed excuse for the audience to gaze upon Raquel Welch's body. From the tagline "feast your eyes on Fathom", to the trailer giving Welch's body measurements through to the opening scene of the film which includes lingering close-up tracking shots of her skimpily-clad torso, it is made clear where our eyes should be. For an audience in 2018 (even those who are '60s spy and pop ephemera enthusiasts), it is difficult to overlook modern feminist sensibilities, and *Fathom* therefore, provides at times uncomfortable, and fairly flimsy, viewing.

Welch plays the eponymous Fathom, a dental hygienist-turned sky diver (although why there is even the briefest mention of her dental hygienist job is unclear, it's not usefully made relevant to anything whatsoever), who is used to receiving as much attention for her looks as her skydiving. She takes this all in her stride as one male skydiving colleague expresses envy at the fuss the press make over her: Fathom shrugs her shoulders and retorts "you should let your hair grow longer".

The preposterous plot revolves around Fathom being recruited by a top secret agency of the British government (in the form of Ronald Fraser and Richard Briers) to help trace a supposed H-bomb detonator called the 'Fire Dragon'. The premise, based upon the idea that it is preferable to teach a hobbyist skydiver to work undercover in a complex piece of espionage (albeit a parody) induces as much hair pulling as does 1998's *Armageddon* which assumes it is easier to teach Bruce Willis and Ben Affleck's blue-collar deep-core drillers to be astronauts than to train astronauts to use drilling machinery.

Fathom becomes embroiled in the midst of three or four different agencies, each after the 'Fire Dragon' and each with their own reason why she should trust them above the others. They invariably all have an immediate lustful infatuation with Fathom and desire to recruit her, despite the fact that she doesn't really seem to know anything useful about anything (other than skydiving) and is simply buffeted from one ridiculous set-piece to the next. Clive Revill provides the most amusement as monocled cartoonish Russian eccentric Serapkin. Mistaking Fathom for his hired 'companion', Serapkin and Fathom become involved in a Bond-style speedboat chase with Richard Briers, an unlikely but quite charming action hero. Tony Franciosa as Merriweather, war defector and private investigator-cum-spy also has a run at Fathom's affections, which is confusing as there are significant vagaries as to whether his grumpy female spy colleague (Greta Chi) is his wife, and whether children involved in an early scene are theirs. Tom Adams as hotel owner Mike is another creepily interested party: when checking in to the hotel, a woman warns Fathom to keep her door locked at night, to which Mike comments, suggestively, "no use, the proprietor has a key". Of course one expects a measure of sexist humour and perspective from films of this era but, when it's done well, it can at least be amusing in context, or is done with a bit of a wink to camera à la James Bond. The comedy of *Fathom*, however, falls pretty flat and examples like this are just a bit too, well, rapey.

A recurring 'gag' about how Fathom got her name never really pays off and is left to tail off half way through the film. The plot twists and turns as we find out the bad guys might be the good guys, but then they might just be the bad guys again, and so on. Fathom is an innocent caught in the middle of various events which unfold in one set-chase-piece after another, a number of which simply drag on for too long and feel like filler. Some dubiously-matched day-for-night scenes and 'interesting' back projection choices, alongside a raft of plot holes, don't really help improve the overall sense that this is a quickly rushed-out afterthought merely to get Welch on screen as much as possible. Director Leslie Martinson, having both feet very firmly planted in television, and with comparatively few films in his credits perhaps explain the drawn-out TV-movie quality here. However, one notable film credit for Martinson is 1966's *Batman: The Movie* which shows he is well placed to understand the era's pop-art comic book palette and campy brand of humour but one wonders, in working on *Fathom*, how often he may have wondered "some days you just can't get rid of a bomb".

In *Fathom's* favour, there is some great music courtesy of John Dankworth in the form of some lovely lilting '60s pop tunes peppered throughout the score. Lots of bright colours from the pop art palette of the era decorate the mise en scène, largely in Welch's costumes (the skimpiest of which is a neon green bikini, which gets its own credit in the publicity notes and at least comes with matching earrings that are relevant to the plot). At the time of *Fathom's* production, Raquel Welch was still relatively untrained in acting, known for being the *One Million Years B.C.* (1966) pin-up girl; there was very little in the role of Fathom for Welch to play with, which she herself described in an interview as "a blown up Barbie doll".

Modesty Blaise presents us with a different approach entirely. Played by Monica Vitti, who had already made her mark winning awards and nominations for her performances in acclaimed Antonioni films such as *L'Avventura* (1960) and *L'Eclisse* (1962), *Modesty* breezes in with much more of a European art-house swagger than the comparatively staid television drama tone of *Fathom*. Loosely based on Peter O'Donnell's comic strip, everything

about the film is a pop-art explosion of design and colour, in the most glorious sense. The opening scenes, in contrast to *Fathom*, sees Modesty modestly clothed, like a Roman goddess in her heavenly white space-age pad, surrounded by whirring blinking computers which send her details of tasks, which she playfully mocks. The titles see tilted angles of a mirrored modernist building with surrealist reflections of clouds, graphics designed to match with another score by Dankworth revelling in sixties pop and Modesty's very own theme tune.

Director Joseph Losey, with films like *The Damned* (1963) and *The Servant* (1963) recently under his belt, brings frequent collaborator Dirk Bogarde back to the screen as arch-criminal Gabriel, who has a stunningly decorated villainous lair: a remote island villa which seems to have had every interior wall painted by Bridget Riley. Other central cast includes Terence Stamp as Modesty's cheeky-chappie loyal sidekick Willie Garvin, and Harry Andrews as Secret Service Chief Sir Gerald Tarrant. Sir Tarrant hires Modesty Blaise to help outwit jewel thieves who are plotting to steal the British Government's payment in diamonds to oil Sheik Abu Tahir. Sheik Tahir is another international role for character actor Clive Revill in which he absolutely chews the scenery with comic delight (as with Russian villain Serapkin in *Fathom*), but here he is in not just one but two roles, also playing Gabriel's stereotypically penny-pinching Scottish financial advisor and sidekick, crawling across the floor in full kilt and sporran to aid Gabriel, staked out in the sun, who is weakly calling for "champagne!". As an aside, a recurring visual gag (never overtly commented on) about disparate glass shapes and sizes in which Gabriel and his guests' drinks are served is one of the best on-screen eccentricities ever.

The plot of *Modesty Blaise*, as in *Fathom*, is rather all over the place at times and, at 119 minutes long, has its fair share of interminably drawn-out chase sequences. Modesty and Willie are sent on somewhat of a wild goose chase from Amsterdam to Naples, are captured by criminal mastermind Gabriel and imprisoned in his island fortress where he tempts Modesty to join his side. Modesty and Willie, thanks to some elaborate disguises, miniature gadgets, and a 'sonic' seagull on a string manage to contact Tarrant and the Sheik, leading to more scrapes before the story reaches its conclusion.

The most interesting contrast between the two films is the treatment of the central female role by those around her: Vitti as Modesty Blaise is stylish and gorgeous throughout the film, but her looks are barely mentioned in the dialogue. Her appearance and dress speak for themselves rather than being spoken about, Vitti is often clothed in the highest of period fashions which, though often outrageous, are never skimpy or overly revealing: she is 'cool' rather than just 'sexy'. Modesty is praised for her skills and her 'manly' qualities rather than her looks: Sheik Abu Tahir has adopted her as his "son", stating "she is too fierce to be a daughter". On the few occasions her appearance *is* remarked upon, it is for surrealist or comic (book) effect, changing her style and hair colour in the blink of an eye, as if changing outfits from one panel of a comic strip to the next. O'Donnell's comic (and illustration by Jim Holdaway) is referenced throughout, in one amusing scene we see a copy of the *Modesty Blaise* comic lying on a sofa, featuring Modesty on the cover. Later in the same scene, real-world practicalities and comic book design are at amusing odds when we see Vitti as Modesty, dressed in the same skin tight black outfit replete with a kind of weapon-strap-cum-gun-beltas on the comic cover. When she and a lover are attempting to get intimate, neither of them have any idea how to get her out of the outfit, which he asks Modesty not only "how do you get it off?" but also, incredulously: "how did you get *into* it?".

A significant change from the original comic and screenplay (Peter O'Donnell wrote the first draft but was later heavily revised) was that a romantic link is suggested between Willie and Modesty, even though the comic strip firmly established only a platonic relationship between them. This is introduced in a rather inexplicable song reminiscent of a Jacques Demy musical (so out of place, the viewer is led to wonder out loud if they are *really* going to sing) in which the pair sing about how they could have been lovers but aren't, but probably should and eventually will. This shift in the relationship seems to be the main stumbling block for many fans of the original comic, but Modesty Blaise is routinely praised for, despite being inherently sexual, a character whose sexuality is used sparingly, always in narrative context, and with far greater subtlety than we sometimes see today.

The politics in *Modesty Blaise* feel well balanced towards everyone, in fact. The film includes many elements controversial in the mid-1960s (some still seem progressive today!) but are not made controversial or ridiculous within the film: a key scene sees a mime walking past rows of men at work in 'available for rendezvous' sex booths, but they are not made campily absurd; middle-Eastern Muslims are not only comrades with the British in the film but play a major part in saving the day; Gabriel the villain is gay, but he's not presented as seedy or repulsive, he doesn't die, in fact he retains dignity throughout, and he's actually rather likeable. The fact that the screenplay was written by Evan Jones, an Afro-Caribbean man (born in Jamaica, later graduating from Oxford in 1952) and that director Joseph Losey had been blacklisted for communism means that plenty of those behind the scenes were well aware of what it feels to be an oppressed political outsider. Everyone has their equal place in *Modesty Blaise*, including the eponymous hero, whereas *Fathom* serves up just one purpose: to gaze upon the female form.