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Wendy and Lucy

Abstract

This is a review of *Wendy and Lucy* (2008).

A couple of months ago, film scholar and critic David Thomson spoke on NPR during the height of the Presidential election. He and the host could not ignore the troubling times in which we are living, and Thomson speculated that filmmakers would not turn their cameras away either. He cited the, ironically, positive effects that such difficult times can have on filmmaking, looking back at the wealth of lasting films created during the Great Depression or in the late '60s and early '70s. Thomson discussed the possibility of seeing more honest filmmaking emerge from the difficult times in which we now find ourselves. Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy* is one of the first of these much-needed films.

We meet Wendy (Michelle Williams) at the very beginning of the film as she walks through a wooded field playing fetch with her dog Lucy. Lucy wanders into a group of what appear to be homeless twenty-somethings gathered around a campfire. Through her conversation with them, we learn that she is going to look for work in Alaska because she hears that "they need people up there." Wendy sleeps in her car in a Walgreen's parking lot, only awoken by a security guard who tells her that she can't sleep there. Her car fails to start when she tries to move it, and he helps her push it to a spot on the street.

To kill time until a repair shop opens, Wendy and Lucy walk to a local grocery store to get some food. When Wendy tries to leave with stolen dog food, a young clerk busts her. She is taken to the local jail, booked, and released on a \$50

fine. When she returns to the store, Lucy is gone. For most of the rest of the film, Wendy desperately searches for her dog and tries to have her car repaired with precious little help, save from the distracted mechanic (Will Patton) and the kind, but somewhat distant, security guard (Wally Dalton).

Reichardt's filmmaking is desperately quiet and understated with brilliant subtleties that complexify a seemingly simple story. If you don't pay close attention, you will miss the fact that the grocery store clerk that stops Wendy is wearing a gold cross around his neck. When he presents his thief to his manager, he unbendingly and uncompassionately enforces the rule of law, even as his boss appears to take a sympathetic view of Wendy. Sure, Wendy must make amends for her attempted theft, but the clerk makes no attempt to hear her need. One could suspect that his Christian obsession with justice blinds his Christian duty to compassion and charity.

In his insightful review of the film, New York Times film critic A. O. Scott touches on the ways in which the film elicits our sympathies for the characters:

I think the film's neutral, nonexpository style [allows] the more conventional-minded among us to wonder if driving to Alaska is really the best idea, or to question the wisdom of other aspects of Wendy's plan. Disapproving of Wendy's choices is one route to caring about her, which in

turn leads to some difficult, uncomfortable questions. What would any of us do in her situation? What would we do if we met someone like her? How can we be sure we haven't?¹

Many viewers will readily hear scriptural echoes, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat..." (Matthew 25:35-40). In one of the most tender scenes in the film, the security guard secretly passes Wendy some money so that his girlfriend won't see. As he drives off, we suspect a significant sum only to see that it is seven dollars. A small amount, in a way, but given the lack of employment and the destitute appearance of the small Oregon town where Wendy is stuck, it might be more than we can know.

Nevertheless, the act of charity is one that has come without any questions or judgment. Reichardt refuses to tell us what brought Wendy to this place, thus rendering it impossible for us to judge her. In interviews about the film, Reichardt refers to it as a post-Katrina work, so we might speculate on the events that brought Wendy to where she is now. When she tries to connect with her sister and brother-in-law, they suspect she is calling for money...money that they themselves do not have. As such, their financial hardship blocks their capacity for emotional support as well.

In a time where many films run too long, *Wendy and Lucy* is much too short. But in that short time, Reichardt's prophetic directing and Williams' stunning performance place great challenges before the audience and holds up a mirror to a society that is more broken than many of us want to realize. A.O. Scott's opinion of the film's rating says it all: "*Wendy and Lucy* is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has some swearing, a little drug use and a brief implication of violence, but no nudity, sex or murder. The rating seems to reflect, above all, an impulse to protect children from learning that people are lonely and that life can be hard."²

¹ A.O. Scott, "Wendy and Lucy (2008): This (New) American Life," The New York Times (December 10, 2008), available from: <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/12/10/movies/10wend.html>. Accessed on February 6, 2009.

² Ibid.