

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM ITALIAN NEOREALISM
TO AMERICAN INDIE:
TRANSCULTURAL HERITAGE
IN KELLY REICHARDT'S
WENDY AND LUCY (2008)

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Introduction: Neorealism, a Living Touchstone

From very early on, the neorealist movement proved adept at crossing national borders. As Chárraga and Vera Soriano averred, in the aftermath of Cesare Zavattini's visit to Mexico in the early 1950s a range of national cinema industries—in particular, those based in the most deprived countries—realized the extraordinary potential afforded by an approach to filmmaking that refused to falsify reality and insisted on “simplicity and sensitivity of expression” (Chárraga and Vera Soriano 2006, 130).

Sixty years later, the influence of the neorealist movement may still be traced in the work of a number of filmmakers and in a range of filmmaking traditions. Given this view, the purpose of this chapter is to explore the various ways in which *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) may be said to share a family resemblance in ethical and aesthetic terms with the foundational filmography of neorealism. This family resemblance, a cinematic trace element as a specific form of cultural transfer, was first highlighted by *The New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott: his essay “Neo-Neo Realism” (2009a) describes it as an emblematic feature of a certain current in recent independent cinema in the US. Scott argued that as neorealism had endeavored to do in the impoverished Italy of its time, neo-neorealism spurns the escapism prevalent in mainstream American cinema so as to face head on the “dismaying and confusing real world”. The neo-neorealists set out to make cinema that takes a realistic view of a

broken society, still struggling in the wake of 9/11, plunged into an economic, social and even existential crisis, caused in the first instance by the terrorist attacks and intensified thereafter by the financial crash, which in turn had such a marked effect on unemployment among young people.

Scott's line of argument prompted Hall to draw a distinction between the "smart cinema" produced by such filmmakers as Wes Anderson, Noah Baumbach and Spike Jonze, and the "Neo-Neorealism" of Debra Granik, Courtney Hunt and Kelly Reichardt. Whereas the former wear ironic distance and a cool sensibility as badges of their cinematic identity, the latter (all female filmmakers in the sample cited here) evince a more explicitly critical political intent which, in the case of Reichardt in particular, echoes the social-realist tradition of Italian neorealism (Hall 2014, 15-16). In a similar vein, Lima Quintanhila has characterized *Wendy and Lucy* as the portrait of a deeply disturbed society in constant flux, a throwback to the climate of fatalism in the post-war period from which the social principles of Italian neorealism arose (Lima Quintanhila 2014, 149).

In no sense need this transcultural dialogue imply that Reichardt's film is a pastiche, a deliberate imitation of the key features of the pioneering neorealist films¹. The kind of intertextual linking outlined by Scott seems more apt: a specific "process of appropriation and modification" by means of which the borrowings set in a new text "are not acts of imitation or homage but rather attempts to absorb and extend what other filmmakers have done". *Wendy and Lucy* articulates the voice of its own maker, the vision of Kelly Reichardt. As does the work of Tarantino, Scorsese, Coppola and Woody Allen (Ezra and Rowden 2006, 2), her filmmaking acknowledges the influence of cinema made in different cultural, geographical and historical contexts—that is, it embraces the hybridity that defines transnational cinema as such.

Kelly Reichardt herself has noted the significant bearing that neorealism had on the development of her film, although it was not the only cinematic influence. In an interview with Gus Van Sant (2008, 78), she referred to the ways in which concern for individuals who are no longer regarded as being of use to society and the limits on social solidarity recall the

¹ The most notable films of De Sica and Zavattini set the standard of reference for much of the analysis carried out here. At the same time, however, in certain stylistic terms, *Wendy and Lucy* differs significantly from them: for instance, Reichardt does not overlay extradiegetic, melodramatic music or punctuate her movie with crowd scenes.

neorealist school of thought. A. O. Scott raises these issues in his second article (2009 b, 2-3)², where the thread common to neorealism and “neo-neorealism” is neatly summarized as “a cinematic ethic”. Like the great neorealist films of the past, *Wendy and Lucy* endeavors to identify with people experiencing problems and, as a result, appeals to values such as solidarity and compassion in a radically individualistic social context. The family resemblance across films referred to above takes shape in this view of the human heart, in the universal acknowledgement of these values. Like the main characters in the emblematically neorealist films made by the director Vittorio De Sica and screenwriter Cesare Zavattini between 1946 and 1952, that is *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief*, 1948) and *Umberto D* (1952)³, *Wendy and Lucy* centers on a person (young Wendy) marginalized in spite of herself, whose life enacts the serious financial and social problems experienced by her fellow countrymen, leading to a radical sense of disenchantment and a painful feeling of emotional vulnerability.

Although the focus of analysis here is the textual dimension of the film, along with related aspects of the narrative, the neorealist scope of *Wendy and Lucy* also encompasses other elements of the movie’s production design including a limited budget (\$300,000), a cast that features both professional and non-professional actors, and the choice of a subdued, naturalistic visual aesthetic shot in un-dressed locations. The textual analysis carried out below underscores the apparently unintentional intertextual links between *Wendy and Lucy* and emblematic neorealist films, especially the masterpieces produced by De Sica and Zavattini cited above. The primary focus of inquiry refers to two screenwriting practices: character development and thematic exploration. These elements capture and express the universal values that make possible the transcultural transference from neorealist films to *Wendy and Lucy*. Furthermore, the formal composition of this neo-neorealist film, which will be addressed at the end, will reinforce this family resemblance.

² Scott’s purpose in this second article was to respond to the sharp criticism to which had been subjected by Richard Brody (2009), a film critic at *The New Yorker*, who felt that Scott had overlooked the rich vein of realism in the history of American cinema; and, to a lesser extent, by David Bordwell (2009), who in his blog also called Scott’s essay into question on the grounds that the term “neorealism” may be rendered less meaningful by its removal to historical contexts other than its own.

³ Hence, for instance, *Miracolo in Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, 1951), whose tone is markedly altered because of its narrative appeal to fantasy, is not addressed here.

***Barboni*, or Homeless, in America**

The plot structure of *Wendy and Lucy* is straightforward: with her faithful canine companion Lucy, Wendy is driving across America to get to Alaska and find a job in a fish factory there. In small-town Oregon, however, her old Honda breaks down, a repair for which Wendy cannot afford to pay. There is a further twist of fate when Wendy is caught shoplifting a can of dog food in the supermarket: Lucy is taken from her and, following a trip to the police station, Wendy sets out to find her dog again.

This brief outline discloses a clear similarity between *Wendy and Lucy* and *Umberto D.* The main characters in both films—Wendy and the old man, Umberto—are very attached to their dogs, Lucy and Flike; at the end of the day, their pets are the only beings with which they share their lives. Indeed, Reichardt’s movie underscores the harmony of the shared routines of one woman and her dog: playing, sleeping and eating. Were it not for their companion animals (companions, as it turns out, in the truest sense), the loneliness of Umberto and Wendy would be absolute: there is no sign that Umberto has a family, and although Wendy has a sister and brother-in-law, they choose—as do Umberto’s old acquaintances—to ignore her plight and problems. The characters respond to the indifference they face in the hostile world in which they live and move by investing wholeheartedly in their relationship with their dogs, Lucy and Flike, making them the object of their generosity, care and concern. Wendy lives up to the etymological meaning of her name: “true friend”. Reichardt’s film highlights how Wendy’s anthropomorphizes her dog in a variety of ways; only with Lucy does Wendy show herself to be less introverted and more open and warm (Murphy 2011, 169). As the scene in which they say goodbye discloses, the bond between Wendy and her dog is richer and deeper in feeling than any relationship Wendy has with another human being. Lucy is her only family, as Flike is the only family that old Umberto knows. As was the case in *Shoeshine*, the plot of the movie is a narrative of ruin (Smith 2014, 34): the unwinding of the only meaningful affective relationship—of companionship, of friendship—in a person’s life, the bedrock of their existence.

The loneliness of Umberto and Wendy is bound up with the impossibility of finding a home of their own. By the time of the film, Umberto has lived in a boarding house for many years; and nothing is known of Wendy’s

living circumstances before the time of the film's setting⁴. The plot twists in De Sica and Zavattini's film turn on the drastic measures Umberto must take to pay his debts to his landlady, thus avoiding eviction from his room and a vagrant life of reliance on charity. Similarly scrupulous financial accounting is kept in Reichardt's film too, as Wendy notes down every one of the outlays she makes. Such close monitoring of money comprises a kind of personal goal for Wendy: she cannot afford to run out of cash before she gets to Alaska, a remote place where she can set down roots, make a new life for herself, a twenty-first century pioneer trekking North rather than to the warmer climes of California, the "promised land" of times and pioneers past.

The eponymous character in *Umberto D* is likewise in search of a home for Flike, when he is put out on the side of the road. In contrast to his fellow countrymen, Umberto's attitude is disinterested: he works for the animal's welfare, to ensure that it has the food and care it needs to live. Nevertheless, his search proves fruitless: the only new potential owners that he finds for Flike are willing to take the dog only in exchange for money, and the life awaiting the animal in their care would be one of indifference, neglect and cruelty.

Wendy, on the other hand, is not planning to let Lucy go. She knows that Lucy is hers, that their bond is mutually loyal, that no one could care for and love the dog as she herself does. But from the time she is stranded in Oregon onwards, Wendy's steps are dogged by a darker fate, as was the journey of Antoine Doinel in *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (400 Blows, 1959), and earlier still, the life of Pasquale, the young central character in *Shoeshine*⁵. The milder episodes she experiences—including her search for Lucy at the municipal pound, which mirrors Umberto's visit to a dog shelter—are overshadowed by the darker circumstances of her personal situation, and sow the seed for the bleak discovery she makes when she finally tracks down her pet. Rescued by others, Wendy sees that Lucy now has what she needs: a home—a space of care and protection; a sense of

⁴ The film is based on the story *Train Choir* by Jon Raymond, Reichardt's regular screenwriting partner, as he is on *Wendy and Lucy*. The reason for her leaving home is given in the story: Wendy lost her house to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, a further symbol of the travails afflicting present-day America. Moreover, the story also explains that she is travelling to Alaska for work and so that she can have a house with a small garden to call her own (Murphy 2011: 169).

⁵ There is not enough space in the present work to address the many modes of communication that may be traced in these film narratives.

wellbeing that Wendy can neither provide her with nor deny her. As generous as Umberto before her, Wendy makes her sorrowful sacrifice, a heartbreaking act of love: she gives up the only thing she has. Separated by a fence, the mirror nature of their link is made clear: who will care for Wendy now, who will welcome her, who will give her a home? (Smith 2014, 34). Paradoxical though it may seem, the fence keeps Lucy safe from the hostile outside world in which Wendy remains “trapped” (Murphy 2011, 167), a world in which she is doomed to be a stray dog, a creature left to its own devices.

The final frames of the film are especially striking in this regard. Echoing iconic scenes of hobos riding the rails in the Great Depression (Murphy 2011, 166), Wendy is shown climbing into a train to continue her journey alone: her isolation and the lack of any shelter seem absolute. No longer does the train, a recurring motif on the movie’s soundtrack, symbolize a journey to a better future, a commonplace in pioneer narratives; rather, the whistle of the train sounds a shrill note of anguish in Wendy’s plight⁶. Wendy’s direct gaze into the camera in the final frame enacts an unmediated appeal for the audience’s commitment to the uncertain future from which Wendy herself is excluded. Like Umberto, a former civil servant, Wendy is trapped in a downward spiral of social decline and seems doomed to become *barboni*, homeless. A subtle omen of her own fate, Wendy’s encounter at the start of the story with a disheveled group of young people on their way back from Alaska is no coincidence: one of them—Will Oldham, the only professional actor in the cast⁷—recounts how the promise of work had come to nothing there.

Like the depiction of the main characters in the neorealist films of De Sica and Zavattini, Reichardt’s film also reflects a determination to acknowledge the dignity of an individual fated to live life on the margins of society. The film encompasses an appeal to the audience to overcome their prejudices with regard to the socially marginalized, to reassess their status as people, as well as the causes of their social exclusion. As was the case with Pasquale and Umberto, and with Antonio Ricci in the *The Bicycle Thief*, the audience’s empathy for Wendy is inversely proportional

⁶ It is difficult not to recall *Umberto D* again at this juncture: the narrative climax sees the desperate old man standing on the railway track in the path of an oncoming train.

⁷ In *Old Joy* (2006), Reichardt’s previous film, Oldham is a character who experiences downward social mobility: stripped of home and any real affection, a life of vagrancy seems to await.

to the indifference and cruelty with which they are treated by almost everyone they encounter on their way. Not only is such empathy prompted by Wendy's virtues as a character in the care she takes of Lucy; but Wendy also proves to be a person who could never be accused of failing to do everything in her power to build an honorable future. Like her neorealist forebears, Wendy faces the difficulties that come her way with strength, determination and resilience. Indeed, she is so refined as to avoid causing others to feel pity for her and to hide her moments of weakness from them. Thus, the conclusion that Sam Littman reaches is also relevant in this regard: "*Wendy and Lucy* is much the film that Bresson would have made today. A concise, eloquent, and unflinching depiction of noble suffering" (Littman 2014, 6).

Wendy is an ordinary girl fallen on hard times. Her androgynous appearance suggests that her personal drama might be interpreted as that of any young person, irrespective of their sex. In the spirit of neorealism, the film spends screen time on apparently banal narrative sequences such as her morning wash in the gas station restroom. In his commendable book on De Sica's work, Henry Agel held that the image of Umberto dressed in a suit was more scandalous for society than the portrait of rags-and-tatters down-and-outs (Agel 1957, 137). This observation may be extrapolated to Wendy, whose ethnic and sexual identity disrupt the stereotypes generally associated with homelessness—dishevelment, dirt, alcoholism, vagrancy (Hall 2014, 96)—and may force the audience to question their prejudices in relation to the homeless. Viewers may well identify with one of the young people passing the car in which Wendy is sleeping, who says that such a situation should be illegal. In a similar way, and in light of Anita Harris's argument, Hall defines Wendy as an "at-risk girl"—in other words, someone "who may have professional aspirations but lacks the support structure to achieve those goals" (Hall 2014, 103). Wendy's life is vilified in a society where the prevailing ideology sees success and failure as prerogatives of the individual alone (her choices, efforts and ambitions), and in which the limitations and injustices due to society are overlooked or ignored (Hall 2014, 103-104).

Solidarity as a Thematic Pattern

Henri Agel noted that as early as *Shoeshine* "an overwhelming societal indifference to the suffering of the individual" (Agel 1957, 75) emerged as an underlying theme in neorealism. Similarly, with regard to *The Bicycle Thief* he referred to the "murky morality of the many in relation to the

misfortunes of the few” (Agel 1957, 91), and in a section on *Miracolo in Milano* he recalled De Sica's observation regarding his “ethics of fragility”: “The true meaning of my movies comprises an exploration of human solidarity, the struggle against selfishness and indifference” (Agel 1957, 123). Indifference and solidarity comprise an opposite pair that frames the thematic core of *Wendy and Lucy*, as averred by the following quotation from the press-book for the film: “*WENDY AND LUCY* addresses issues of sympathy and generosity at the edges of American life, revealing the limits and depths of people’s duty to each other in tough times”.

As in *The Bicycle Thief*, the narrative structure of the plot of Reichardt’s film is a search for things that may seem of little significance: a bicycle in De Sica’s movie; a dog and a broken-down car in *Wendy and Lucy*. In both stories, the fate of the main character rests on an apparently insignificant situation, which takes on unexpected importance in a context of financial shortage and instability: without a bicycle, without a car, these individuals cannot engage in economic activity and, as a result, are likely to sink below the poverty line. In both movies the main characters break the law, prompted by a lack of money or a sense of desperation: Wendy steals a tin of dog food for Lucy from a supermarket; and Antonio Ricci steals a bicycle that may enable him to regain his job and livelihood. Wendy’s minor breach of the law marks a key moment in her fate: she spirals down into a ruin that is as slight in its signs as it is devastating in its effects. Sparked by a small personal mistake, this spiral of ruin is fueled and amplified by the legal and financial systems of a society that has lost any sense of charity.

In De Sica and Zavattini’s most emblematic films, the lack of empathy or solidarity with the drama of other people’s lives, especially the suffering of the less fortunate, is often highlighted in the portrayal of characters who represent institutions responsible for administering social welfare. *Shoeshine* depicts the devastating effects of an inhuman, unjust system of “codes and sanctions” (Agel 1957, 74). The hardship experienced by Pasquale and Giuseppe in *Shoeshine* likewise stems from a misdemeanor which to all intents and purposes they were forced to commit; their prized childhood friendship is undermined by uncompromising law-court bureaucrats (Aguilar and Cobrerizo 2015, 152). At best, the latter seem indifferent to the fate of the two boys; at worst, they deliberately manipulate the situation to poison the boys’ relationship. The characterization of other institutions of social order (the police) and charity (the Church) is also ambiguous, although the overall view is one of

disillusionment: the opening scene of *Umberto D*, when the police act without reserve to disperse a harmless crowd of retired people protesting for their rights is relevant in this regard; as is the indifference of the pious believers in the face of Antonio Ricci's anguished desperation to find the man who has stolen his bicycle.

Although the main characters generally encounter a lack of empathy from those around them, leading to despairing and tragic outcomes, De Sica and Zavattini do occasionally allow their ordinary heroes to enjoy the solidarity of others. In *Shoeshine*, for instance, while acknowledging the cruelty the boys in the correctional facility may inflict on one another, the film also leaves space for situations in which they look out for one another (sharing food, preventing food from being stolen from someone who is sick, raising the roof together when the guards beat up one of the boys). In *The Bicycle Thief*, Antonio Ricci is joined in his search by a group of friends who run a rubbish truck; and although the incident as a whole is humiliating, the owner of the bicycle Ricci steals forgives him for his desperate measure. Old Umberto, perhaps the most forsaken of all these characters, finds some slight support from another person browbeaten by the prevailing social order: Maria, the maid, whom Umberto likewise advises and aids. Both have "a sense of their neighbor", which enables each to escape for a while from their individual misfortune (Agel 1957, 139).

Wendy and Lucy evinces a similarly careful orchestration of the cast of characters in relation to Wendy's fate. A general distinction may be made between those who remain indifferent to her situation and those who play some (albeit small) part in how her life may turn out. The former includes the police officer who does not think twice about hauling Wendy off to the station, thus separating her from Lucy, and whose incompetence ensures that her release from custody is delayed; the car mechanic, a representative of the middle class, who thoughtlessly gambles his money away, in stark contrast to Wendy's pitiful penny-pinching; and, above all, the shop assistant in the supermarket who shows Wendy no mercy when she catches her shoplifting—her insistence on the enforcement of the rules is inhumane, legalistic and relentless, disregarding the particular personal circumstances at play, and effectively spinning Wendy into a spiral of downward social mobility.

Those who show some degree of solidarity with Wendy are people from a lower, if not marginalized, social class. The down-and-out who collects cans to make a little money is one such character: he promises to let

Wendy know if he hears anything about Lucy. Especially noteworthy in this regard is Wally, the shopping center car-park attendant who becomes Wendy's mainstay during her time in Oregon. Although he can do nothing to untwist the fate awaiting her, he does what little he can in a number of ways. He is generous about lending her his telephone several times; and he also gives Wendy a few dollars, without telling his partner who would surely disapprove. In psychological terms, Wally tries to inspire some hope in Wendy following the loss of Lucy, just as Antonio Ricci's poor friends try to do in *The Bicycle Thief*. Wally's story about how he too once lost a dog is likewise significant. Like the characters in De Sica and Zavattini's films who seek out fortunetellers in search of unlikely hope, prompted by their desperation or a need for some kind of consolation, Wendy asks Wally to tell her how his story ended, which shows her own need to imagine a happy ending to her own crisis situation. Moreover, although Wally's role as a car-park attendant is similar to that of the supermarket shop assistant—to ensure that the rules are obeyed—his attitude to his work is radically different: when Wendy parks in the wrong space and she cannot get the engine started to move it, Wally is patient and helps her to do so. Wally, whose name rhymes with Wendy, is a kind of guardian angel; he personifies the value of solidarity, and reflects the need for those at the bottom of the social pyramid to care for one another.

Whereas neorealism repeatedly depicted children as victims at the hands of adult characters—see *Shoeshine*, *Germania, anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1948) and *Bellissima* (1952) for representative examples—*Wendy and Lucy* presents the cold cruelty of the young shop assistant who insists on calling the police, despite the more tolerant silence of his superior. If this incident is read in conjunction with the scene in which other young people make derogatory remarks when they see Wendy sleeping in her car, the film seems to come to a pessimistic conclusion as regards the ability of younger people to understand or empathize with the suffering of others.

Given the general scenario, any sign of solidarity is a kind of an oasis in a social wasteland stripped of charity. Wendy's experience mirrors Ricci's, when he sees that, in a time of personal misfortune, "his peers are not willing to give him what he needs: their understanding, which would normally translate into more or less immediate help" (Agel 1957, 92). And with the exception of Wally, her fate is like that of Umberto, too: "a detailed portrait of a man [a young woman], alone, friendless, without understanding or hope, overcome by his [her] circumstances, who seeks out [without saying so] the solidarity of others to no avail, and who struggles on in an effort to retain his [her] dignity" (Aguilar and Cabrerizo

2015, 180). The story of *Wendy and Lucy*, like those of *The Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D*, is the narrative of a person and a nation, where shortage of money opens an unbridgeable divide between individual and community, leading to social exclusion for the individual. Ricci is one of many Italians reduced to pawning their linen for a small amount of ready money that may prevent them from sliding into absolute poverty. Umberto represents the many retired people whose economic rights are trampled upon and who, beset by debt, are marginalized by society. Wendy is one of many young people who are likewise strapped for cash, for whom the promises of the American Dream (a good job, a home of one's own) are unattainable. One of the conversations between Wendy and Wally is an explicit critique of liberal capitalism, which sets up walls that the poor cannot scale, thus preventing their progress and development (Hall 2014, 110).

In this context, when solidarity is shown in dribs and drabs, the stray image of a disabled man driving down an empty street is especially evocative; as is the social rootlessness of military veterans, some of whom, become homeless madmen, strike terror into Wendy's heart when she is sleeping out in the forest; and the way in which characters tend to appear alone—or with one other person at most—in the frame. Likewise, it is noteworthy that the only individuals who have formed a group are the glue-sniffing punks Wendy comes across on her first night in the forest, the space to which those marginalized by a materialist society retreat (Van Sant 2008, 77).

Aesthetic Parallels

Just as neorealist cinema set out to “rediscover the real Italy” (Quintana 1997, 28), *Wendy and Lucy* was inspired by a parallel purpose to reflect the reality of present-day America. As noted above, this moral commitment involves centering the narrative on the specific story of ordinary people (Quintana 1997, 77), giving voice to those who are normally sidelined or silenced (in society and in mainstream cinema), and addressing the difficulties experienced in everyday living that have shaped the lives of so many defenseless anti-heroes (Quintana 1997, 100).

The fact that “the melodramatic matrix narrates *why man suffers*” (Wagstaff 2007, 64) explains why in establishing its own audience neorealism found melodrama to be a natural framework for cinematic representation. *Wendy and Lucy* follows the framework underlying

melodramatic storytelling, which is rooted in the individual's hopeless desire to reenter a paradise from which he or she has been expelled, an expulsion that has caused individualism, loneliness, insecurity, vulnerability and barrenness (Wagstaff 2007, 63). At the same time, the features and functions of melodrama enable the audience to engage with the characters at an emotional level, as the viewing experience of Reichardt's movie also attests: an understanding of Wendy's suffering prompts compassion and subverts, by contrast, any cold, impatient or annoyed response to her attenuated social situation (Nochinson 2009, 116). It is a process of knowledge and understanding of the individual which leads to a reserved and respectful sense of identification on the viewer's part that is not motivated by any sense of poignancy.

To reflect the real, lived experience of its characters, neorealist cinema set aside the traditional narrative structure based on a tight sequence of causal events, the framework of classic filmmaking, and turned to a closer analysis of the situation. Quintana (1997, 38) uses the term "constructed fictions" to denote neorealism's trust in the notion that every fiction may mask a documentary reality. To disclose the underlying truth, Zavattini argued for a primary endeavor to "reduce the story to its most elementary, simple, and, I would rather say, banal form" (Zavattini 2000, 54). *Wendy and Lucy* follows this minimalist approach to storytelling, counting on the potential for sentiment and spectacle to emerge from the many echoes and aftershocks caused by a close exploration of a situation, as Zavattini averred (Zavattini 2000, 52). This approach to cinematic understanding respects the role of the audience, the active participation of the viewer in filling in any gaps in the story. Such is clearly the case in two moments of the movie: the concealment of the reasons why Wendy has embarked on this journey, and the film's open ending which does not resolve whether Wendy and Lucy are reunited in the future.

A key feature of the neorealist "aesthetics of rejection" is structural minimalism in storytelling (Quintana 1997, 78), which roots narrative authenticity in small, basic elements, running the risk at times of presenting a *mise-en-scène* that has been described as fetishizing ugliness. The purpose, as Rossellini likewise aimed, is to establish objectivity by telling a story in the most literal terms, stripped of any extraneous detail, as plainly as possible (Noguera 2013, 28). *Wendy and Lucy* enacts this "aesthetics of poverty" in its stylized depiction of the interior life of its main character, by refusing to romanticize or falsify the spaces in which the plot unfolds, and by respecting the temporal dimension of everyday routine, which includes the drift of empty time—that is, different aspects of

an “aesthetic of contiguity” (Monterde 2003, 50) which aims to reduce the mediation of reality in so far as that is possible (Wagstaff 2007, 78).

Conclusions

In stark contrast to the epic grandiloquence of Fascist-era filmmaking, the declared purpose of neorealism was to portray the real Italy. Eschewing any and all complacency, the neorealist movement exposed the social ills afflicting the country, giving voice and dignity to individuals who boldly endeavored to escape the marginalized and disparaged lives to which they had been consigned. The brilliant films made by De Sica and Zavattini may be viewed as depicting the tragic misfortunes of ordinary people who struggle in vain to return to a social order from which they have been expelled.

Sixty years later, foreshadowing the awful social impact of the burgeoning financial crisis, *Wendy and Lucy* blazed the trail for a series of indie movies (American in both cultural and production terms) that explore the “ugly America” of the present day, the broken promises of the American Dream. Reichardt’s film reflects the legacy of its cinematic forebears in its commitment to the historical present and the structural framework of social exclusion. Then, as now, a critical analysis of the film in political or social terms rests on close observation of the difficult day-to-day existence of an individual character, the depiction of a personal drama, towards which no audience, no matter its cultural frame, may remain indifferent. Like the neorealist films of Rossellini, and De Sica and Zavattini, *Wendy and Lucy* is rooted in a moral position: a compassionate gaze at those who suffer wrongs and injustice (Noguera 2013, 25).

Thus, the main feature of *Wendy and Lucy*’s family resemblance to earlier works of neorealism resides in Kelly Reichardt’s humane concern. In conjunction with her co-screenwriter Jon Raymond, Reichardt set out to overcome stereotypes and prejudices, and foster a sense of identification between the audience and their marginalized fellow man. Like Umberto, Wendy is radically alone, a solitude that is reflected in her inability to own her own home and, in the same way, in her being stripped of her one truly affective relationship. Then as now, too, an appeal to human solidarity lies beneath the film’s surface pessimism. In short, *Wendy and Lucy* echoes the cinematic ambitions of the most renowned neorealist filmmaker: “Most of Zavattini’s work has the moral agenda of awakening people to the actualities of the world around them, to the connection of human being to

human being” (Curle and Sneyder 2000, 50). Reichardt’s film recognizes the moral value of film as a form of knowledge: people must first meet and get to know each other if they are to care for one another (Casetti 1994, 36-37).

The humanism permeating these films is in tune with the primary function that Todorov, following Richard Rorty, attributes to literature, and which is likewise applicable to cinematic narrative: to enable the reader/viewer to transcend egotism (the illusion of self-sufficiency) and learn other ways of being a person (Todorov 2007, 27); or, in Kant’s words, “to think by putting oneself in the position of any other human” (Todorov 2007, 27-28); and as the Bulgarian intellectual adds: “To think and to feel while adopting the point of view of others, real people or literary [film] characters, this unique way of tending toward universality, permits us to achieve our calling” (Todorov 2007, 28). Moreover, unlike more abstract types of knowledge, cinema (like literature) deals with human experience through unique stories that facilitate their communication over time and space (Todorov 2007, 25-26), that is, beyond the cultural framework from which they emerge. Thus, we may conclude that the particular idiosyncrasies of these narrative languages, and the encounter with otherness they enact in their best forms, are what enable transcultural permeability. Needless to say, in relation to film, such potential depends first and foremost on the screenwriting process.

As noted at the start of the chapter, neorealist cinema was soon assimilated by other national cinemas outside Italy. The recent *Wendy and Lucy*, an emblematic example of one of the current trends in American indie filmmaking, continues to demonstrate the value of neorealism’s legacy, enhanced by remarkable affinities at a number of levels: historical (post-war Italy and pre-financial crisis USA), aesthetic (the “aesthetics of rejection”), and relating to character design and development, most of whom experience common conflicts of a social (lack of solidarity, marginalization and isolation) and psychological kind (the suffering of those who have lost everything), as has been set out in this contribution. Reichardt’s film evinces the neo-neorealist continuity that ultimately proves the validity of a cinema willing to retake reality.

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