



*Treeless Mountain* (dir. So Yong Kim, US/South Korea, 2008).

Courtesy Oscilloscope

## Watching Women's Films

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Patricia White

Production, distribution, programming, preservation, advocacy, access, scholarship, criticism—the many forms of *work* around feminism and media culture are the purview of this new section of *Camera Obscura*. In the first several years of the journal, such topics were addressed in an irregular feature called “Women Working”;<sup>1</sup> thirty years on, the current editors feel the need for a similar section, one that carries forward the emphasis on practice while updating and expanding its definition beyond any identity constraints implied by the previous title. Although other contributors are encouraged to respond differently (see the call for proposals that follows), for me, the new section affords the opportunity for renewing the kind of attention to women filmmakers that cannot be provided exclusively by the traditional scholarly article—limited space, academic protocols, and lengthy turnaround time limit what the journal can say about contemporary filmmaking. Connections among women’s works (and their contexts) may be overlooked when commentary is ceded to critics and bloggers for whom feminism, media, and culture are a rare enough trio of keywords.

Film festivals circulate, and to some extent sustain, forms of women’s film production—shorts and feature-length fiction and documentary films by emerging and established directors from

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all around the world—that deserve scholarly and public attention beyond their momentary appearance in these venues. While festivals, especially the A-list competitive ones, are not always notable for gender equity in their selections (and many programmers—and women filmmakers—would strenuously object to such criteria), they show far better statistics on women directors than Hollywood.<sup>2</sup> The current festival corpus represents a transnational, multigenerational, multiformat arena of women’s filmmaking responsive to patterns of financing, distribution, and exhibition that challenge, even as they are determined by, commercial forms.

Of course theatrical release remains the goal for feature filmmakers (often even for documentarians), and for independent filmmakers it may be a receding one. In 2008, erstwhile indie Catherine Hardwicke’s *Twilight* (US) broke the box-office record for opening-weekend grosses for a film directed by a woman. Yet she was passed over for the sequel even as she promoted the hit. Earlier the same year, a studio head’s reported claim that he would no longer green-light films with female leads prompted the *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis to excoriate Hollywood sexism—the lucrative *Twilight* and *Sex and the City* may have temporarily staved off the coming “post-female” cinema she predicted, but only by entrenching their own postfeminist brands.<sup>3</sup> Dargis’s important intervention was grist for the San Diego State communications professor Martha Lauzen, who annually crunches the (generally dismal) numbers of films by women that achieve box-office success. She devised a new study for the figures of 2007, showing that, with comparable marketing budgets, films with female leads will succeed at the box office at the same rate as those headlined by men.<sup>4</sup> Even more relevant to my discussion is her demonstration that the same held true for films featuring women directors or other key creative personnel when compared to those made by men.<sup>5</sup>

In the current climate it is even more unlikely that such budgets will be forthcoming; 2008 saw a crisis in independent distribution, with the failure of THINKFilm and the dissolving of specialty arms like Paramount Vantage, and Warners’ New Line and Independent. The glut of features vying for release may mean even more

restricted access for women's work to the art-house screens that, even when not financially rewarding, at least guarantee reviews. Certainly there are many women-directed festival films that could benefit from such exploitation. In scale, scope, and commitment, such festivals as Sundance (held in January) and the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF, held in September) annually provide sound evidence of the ongoing relevance of the concept of women's cinema—characterized by women's access to the means of production, the commitment to telling women's stories, and an address to viewers' diverse gendered experience within a dynamic public sphere. Unlike women's film festivals, which have shifted in function, philosophy, and geographical location over three decades of feminist film culture, or the burgeoning circuit of audience and tourism-oriented festivals, these competitive showcases are industry players that receive intense media coverage. Thus their visible programming commitments to women filmmakers—Agnès Varda, Kathryn Bigelow, Gina Prince-Bythewood, and Samira Makhmalbaf were among the many prominent women presenting new work at TIFF 2008—are especially significant. Yet too often the most exciting films by women featured at Sundance and TIFF end up on critics' lists of “best films not in distribution” or await short-lived art-house release in the fallow postawards season.

The breakout exception at TIFF 2008 was US independent Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy*, which chronicles the journey of a young woman who, on the road with her dog, reaches the edge of destitution in the Pacific Northwest. With festival “buzz” (from Cannes and New York, as well as Toronto), *Wendy and Lucy* opened in New York in December in time to appear on more than seventy North American critics' top-ten lists. Competing against Reichardt's film at the 2009 Independent Spirit awards was Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River*, the Sundance Festival's 2008 winner, about a dollar-store cashier who tries to keep her family financially afloat by teaming up with a Mohawk woman to drive undocumented workers across the US-Canadian border. (Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* won the competition—I'm not saying it was fixed.) The two films suggest their female directors' consciousness that the eco-

conomic hard times that made news by the end of 2008 had long been defining many US lives. The economic situation also marked their own relative success with some precariousness.

Reichardt's film resonated strikingly with two other critics' favorites shown the same year at TIFF, films whose small-scale dramas and unhurried paces suggest a new form of women's observational cinema—fictional rather than documentary. *Treeless Mountain* (US/South Korea, 2008) is American independent So Yong Kim's autobiographical portrait of two very young sisters in Korea sent by their struggling single mom to live first with an aunt in a provincial town and then on their grandparents' farm. Claire Denis's *35 rhums* (*Thirty-Five Shots of Rum*, France/Germany, 2008), conceived in part as a tribute to Yasujiro Ozu's *Banshun* (*Late Spring*, Japan, 1949), is a portrait of the changing rhythms of life linking a single father and his eighteen-year-old daughter with their neighbors in a Paris apartment block, as well as with a small number of coworkers, classmates, and chance acquaintances. All three are notably modest movies with very little dialogue or narrative incident; they chronicle the quotidian existence of the socially marginal, foregrounding emotional and perceptual intimacies that extend to the view from behind the camera, and all turn on a profound sense of place. Precisely shot, balancing realism and formalism, the films' action seems more coordinated than directed, even as their palettes and sound mixes, performances and locations, narrative ellipses and shot durations exhibit, on the auteurs' side, a control that their characters themselves cannot exercise. With near unanimity, critics proclaimed or confirmed their directors' gifts, without pigeonholing their films as women's work—indeed feminist interpretations have been nearly as muted as the films' surface emotions. And this is not only because of critical indifference to such themes (Amy Taubin among other journalists consistently brings feminist issues to the fore) but also because the films (and their directors) are as wary as are their protagonists of the intentions of others. For me, even such defensive and vulnerable postures come into sharper focus through a feminist lens.

The formal and thematic connections among these three women's films may be largely accidental or consistent with more

general trends. Certainly they bear some resemblance to the Dardennes brothers' work, and Kim's film was widely (and justly) linked in the press with her husband Bradley Rust Gray's *The Exploding Girl* (US, 2009), on which she has a producer credit. A. O. Scott's *New York Times Magazine*'s essay on "Neo-neo realism" puts Reichardt and Kim in the company of a third director, Ramin Bahrani (*Goodbye Solo*, US, 2008), in diagnosing a distinctly American aesthetic response to the times.<sup>6</sup> Yet there are material connections between the two American women's works that suggest a particular affinity. Reichardt, whose critically lauded *Old Joy* (US, 2006) was released by Kino International, helped Kim's debut feature *In between Days* (US/Canada/South Korea, 2006) land distribution with the company, and *Old Joy*'s producing team joined Kim and Gray to make *Treeless Mountain*. And seeing the younger women's works alongside Denis's ninth feature reminded me of Virginia Woolf's observation about women's books that they "continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately."<sup>7</sup> Reichardt greatly admires the French director's work and particularly the autonomous conditions under which she produces her projects.<sup>8</sup> While Denis is certainly among the top echelon of international women cineastes, even her body of work, amassed over two decades, has not come easy.

Nothing, *essentially*, marks *Wendy and Lucy*, *Treeless Mountain*, and *35 rhums* as women's films, beyond their recognizability as the work of *these* (women) directors—Denis's oeuvre is extensive and consistent enough to have defined her auteur signature, and the critical buzz around the younger women directors resonates to a similar consistency in their themes and styles. Girls or young women who are in some sense barred from action, who must wait—if only to grow up—are central to all three. Yet, characteristically, Denis's film has special regard for the male figure at its center, the father, Lionel. A train conductor, played by the Denis regular Alex Descas, he sets the cues for their smoothly running daily life. His daughter Joséphine ("Jo," played by Mati Diop, in her debut) watches him—for signs of fatigue, hunger, or discontent—indeed she *attends* to him, as does their neighbor and close family friend, Gabrielle (Nicole Dogue). Leaning out of her high-rise window

smoking, after her shift as a taxi driver, Gabrielle awaits Lionel's nightly return, although—after all these years—it's never been a return to her. She is a compelling yet peripheral presence, a figure for the focused yet distanced observation of male embodiment that characterizes Denis's direction. Yet even Gabrielle's gaze does not line up exactly with the filmmaker's. Her unrequited love is as responsible for keeping things in abeyance as is the loss a long time ago of the woman who binds the father-daughter couple. In contrast, Denis steers deftly, if unhurriedly, ahead.

Denis objected to a festival audience member's misreading of *35 rhums* as a "social problem" film, like the *cinéma de banlieue* inaugurated by Mathieu Kassovitz's *La haine* (France, 1995) that sensationalized immigrant life on the outskirts of the city. Although the film is set in a housing complex among people of African descent, its characters are portrayed as ordinary working people, their household economy as balanced as her narrative one. That they are Ozu's kin is suggested by the mute eloquence of an element of *mise-en-scène*. At the beginning of the film, Jo buys a rice cooker on the way home from class but hides it when her father brings another home for her as a present. At the end of the film the two appliances, side by side, provide a condensed image of the offscreen rite of passage, Jo's marriage, that will forever change their relationship.

Both *35 rhums* and *Wendy and Lucy* open in a train yard, but in the latter film the tracks are a figure of division rather than circulation, separating its heroine from familial and social networks. *Wendy and Lucy* shares with Reichardt's even more modest, Super-16, seventy-minute film *Old Joy* a number of authorial markers: a setting near Portland, source material in a story by coscreenwriter Jon Raymond, a car, a dog (the filmmaker's hound Lucy), and an itinerant protagonist. *Old Joy* is about two male friends who have drifted apart and struggle to keep their lines of communication open on a weekend camping trip. Reichardt's point of view—constant, patient, but on some level shut out—is arguably figured by the dog's peripheral presence in the film: along for the ride, leveling an unjudging gaze on the men. In *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt directs a more likely stand-in in Lucy's costar.

Wendy (Michelle Williams, deglamorized and physically vulnerable) scrunches down in her hoodie, worn sneakers, and beat-up compact car, trying to pass through town unnoticed, adding up her expenses and counting her change and worn bills. After her car breaks down, she becomes increasingly hard pressed—her distance from basic subsistence represented by the one-block towing fee she can't afford. A very minimalist movie, *Wendy and Lucy* ends on a note of deserved *Stella Dallas*-scaled pathos—all Wendy can call her own is her point of view.

The most heartbreaking female observer of these three films is *Treeless Mountain*'s six-year-old protagonist Jin (Hee-Yeon Kim), the elder of the two sisters, the one who gets what is going on as they are shunted from place to place, equipped with a red plastic piggy bank and a promise that their mom will be back when they have filled it. Filmed almost exclusively in tight static shots of the children, nonprofessionals, the film hints at an expansive authorial vision. *Treeless Mountain* is an autobiography of childhood “back in Korea” as a process of *learning to see*—images of her sister's princess play clothes, the drunken aunt snoring, the precise gestures of her grandmother—it is as if Jin does not want to miss a single clue about what disappointments or new vistas the world might have in store for her.

Each of these women's films thus inscribes a divided authorial point of view—internal and external to the diegesis. Their economy of means is also visible on the screen. The *observer* persona at the heart of these quiet, quotidian dramas proves a fitting model for the female director's perhaps necessarily wary sensibility. Neither overtly feminist in their politics nor willing to concede any ground their heroines might claim, these films are reduced by being incorporated into the individualist models of auteurism that have largely determined their reception.

However welcome, the (obviously relative) noise around and scale of attention to Reichardt's and Kim's work is curious, not because their films do not hold up aesthetically, but because they are intensely isolated and private, their stories and heroines ones that can hardly bear scrutiny. Their themes seem to have struck a note appropriate to economic hard times and to the shaky prognos-



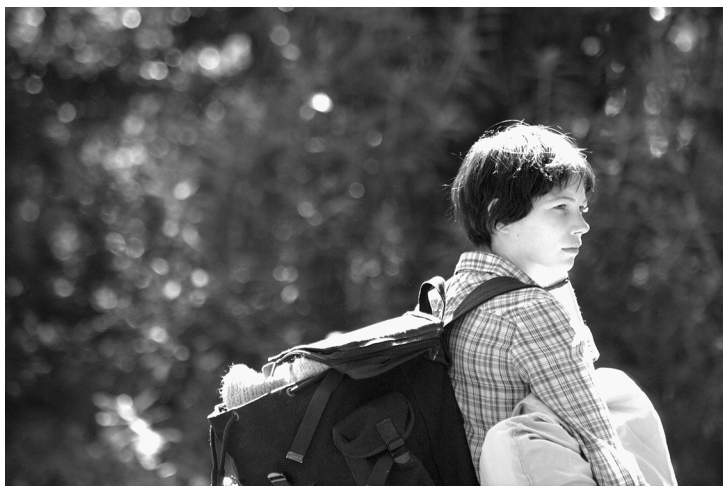
sis for independent cinema. *Wendy and Lucy* was released by Oscilloscope, a new company founded by the Beastie Boys' Adam Yauch, which later acquired *Treeless Mountain*. Fittingly, Oscilloscope's business model seems scaled to the modesty of and targeted to the specifics of its slate and its films—Jonathan Howell brings his booking expertise from New Yorker Films, tragically defunct—and the DVD release of *Wendy and Lucy* uses recycled packaging and includes bonus experimental films from Reichardt's colleagues at Bard. *Wendy and Lucy* and *Treeless Mountain* each opened on one screen, at New York City's Film Forum, a venue that, as programmed by Karen Cooper, has historically helped make classics of such women's films as Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (US/UK, 1991). (In the months between Reichardt's and Kim's premieres, Film Forum's revival screen featured the successful rerelease of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* [dir. Chantal Akerman, Belgium/France, 1975], probably the most significant historical precedent for what I am characterizing as a feminist cinema of observation, and a film with a special place in the history of this journal.) Some months later, *35 rhums* was acquired by stalwart independent distributor the Cinema Guild and also premiered at Film Forum. Such distribution and exhibition details are materially consequential at the low end of film economics—determining the financial autonomy and a “room of one's own” that Woolf saw as essential to women's creativity. Distribution on DVD will enable readers to evaluate these works in light of what I have argued is a similar authorial vision—confident yet constrained, while open to contingency and beauty.

Critical attention in a year of economic uncertainty seemed to highlight scaled-back films by female auteurs-in-the-making over the many other women's films that debuted at festivals, presenting a picture of contemporary film art and commerce where “female director” is figured sometimes as puzzle, sometimes as brand. The challenge is to carry over the public dimensions afforded by festivals and publicity into a critical framework in which women's works can be encountered in relation to each other and to their various expansive constituencies. “In Practice” aims to be one such framework.

## Notes

1. Christina Creveling's "Women Working" section in the first issue consisted of short biographies and annotated filmographies of five women directors "little known or simply not known in this country," *Camera Obscura* 1 (1976): 28–139. Subsequent issues included an account of work from the Legend of Maya Deren Project, *Camera Obscura* 2 (1977): 138–40, short dossiers on such films as *Unsichtbare Gegner* (*Invisible Adversaries*, dir. Valie Export, Austria, 1976) and *Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit—Redupers* (*The All Around Reduced Personality*, dir. Helke Sander, West Germany, 1977), *Camera Obscura* 3 (1977): 219–27, and Marc Silberman's two-part catalog of women filmmakers in West Germany, the second installment of which concluded the feature, *Camera Obscura* 6 (1980): 122–52, *Camera Obscura* 11 (1983): 133–45.
2. Thomas Elsaesser, "Film Festival Networks: New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," in *Face to Face with Hollywood: New European Cinema* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press), 82–107.
3. Manohla Dargis, "Is There a Real Woman in This Megaplex?" *New York Times*, 4 May 2008.
4. Martha M. Lauzen, "Women @ the Box Office: A Study of the Top One Hundred Box-Office Grossing Films," [womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/research.html](http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/research.html) (accessed 5 May 2009).
5. Martha M. Lauzen, "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind the Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2008," [womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/research.html](http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/research.html) (accessed 5 May 2009).
6. A. O. Scott, "Neo-Neo Realism," *New York Times Magazine*, 22 March 2009, 38–43.
7. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; New York: Harcourt, 1989), 80.
8. Kelly Reichardt, interview by the author, Toronto, 6 September 2008. For a detailed and compelling account of Denis's authorship, see Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

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*Wendy and Lucy* (dir. Kelly Reichardt, US, 2008).  
Courtesy Oscilloscope