

Anna
Backman
Rogers



Still Life
Notes on
Barbara Loden's
Wanda (1970)

STILL LIFE

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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion



HIC SVNT MONSTRA

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Wanda (1970)



*This book is dedicated in loving memory to my mum,
Eva Christina Backman Rogers... who once told me that she felt
her life had been a failure: 'the wages of dying is love.'*

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*Really hopeless people do not expect miracles,
nor do they summon up the energy to look for them.*

— Anita Brookner, *Look at Me*

Part 1

A Critical Reading of *Wanda*

I. *Wanda's* Material History: Introductory Notes

Wanda's history is a strange and convoluted one. In writing on it, I have undertaken a task that must both assume extensive knowledge of the film's production on the part of those who are fellow champions of Barbara Loden *and* her work and must account for the viewer who has only peripheral knowledge of the film's context and production based on, perhaps, a single encounter with its bruising poetics and aesthetics. This difficulty is amplified and compounded by the often abstruse and confused contemporary accounts of the film's reception, which vary from suggestions that the film was dismissed and unaccounted for in the annals of feminist filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s (which is, broadly speaking, true) and that it met with critical acclaim *and* was appreciated by film viewers (which is also, significantly, true).

Certainly, the film's path to its current status as cult classic — cemented by its re-release through Criterion in late 2018 — has been one of many digressions and averted catastrophes. Moreover, the film's circulation in the last fifty years has been erratic, which has further contributed to its semi-marginal status within cinematic history. Since the 1970s, though, the film has had important critical champions: Bérénice Reynaud played

a crucial role in re-igniting interest in *Wanda* in the 1990s. With her astute eye and fastidious attention to the film's aesthetics, Reynaud almost single-handedly brought the film back into public discourse with her paradigm-shifting essay, 'For Wanda,' first published in 2002. Her pioneering work initiated subsequent screenings in both festival and educational settings. In 2003, Isabelle Huppert took up the mantle and personally financed and oversaw the re-release of *Wanda* on DVD. This helped the film to gain significant traction once more within critical discourse and enabled further screenings — thus bringing the film to a new audience (especially within France). Later, Elena Gorfinkel, Maya Montanez Smukler, Adrian Martin, Amelie Hastie, and Sue Thornham have, between them, created a rich and complex body of scholarship on *Wanda*, which serves to deepen our understanding and appreciation of Loden's considerable achievement both as director and performer. Their work is of cardinal importance to my own writing on the film. Additionally, there have been highly personal and affective accounts of the film's poetics by Nathalie Léger and Kate Zambreno; in turn, Léger and Zambreno's work has become so braided that Zambreno has named one of her own pieces on the film, 'Plagiarism';¹ Zambreno argues, I would suggest, *not* that Léger somehow absconded with her (at-the-time-unpublished) thoughts and went on to win a literary prize of which Zambreno feels she is more deserving, but rather that *Wanda*, as an encounter between spectator and screen, engenders an affectively political cinematic community.² Indeed, for a film that has not

1 See Kate Zambreno 'Plagiarism,' in *Screen Tests* (London: Harper Perennial, 2019), 71–72.

2 As Elena Gorfinkel puts it: 'Feminist cinephiles seek the filmmaker Barbara Loden in the ephemera of her existence, in the traces of her image, charting signs of the Wanda to come in the Loden before *Wanda*, of the traces and divining predisposition toward that gesture, described by Nathalie Léger's in her *Suite for Barbara Loden* (2012), to tell the story of "a woman telling her own story through that of another woman." See Elena Gorfinkel, 'Wanda's Slowness: Enduring Insignificance,' in *On Women's Films: Across Worlds and Generations*, eds. Ivonne Marguiles and Jeremi Szaniawski (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 29.

always been readily accessible (in every sense of that word), *Wanda* has attracted film critics, scholars, writers, and viewers who feel intimately entwined with its politics and thus have felt compelled to ensure it does not fade back into obscurity. Ross Lipman has written movingly about his discovery of the film's original print and the incredible story of its recent revival (this is the near catastrophe I alluded to and on which I will elaborate further).³ Before I proceed into the body of this essay, it might be helpful — especially for the uninitiated viewer — to have a brief summation of the world explored in *Wanda* and a few basic facts about its making.

Loden's inspiration for her film came from a newspaper article about a woman, named Alma Malone, who had acted as sentinel and accomplice to a small-time bank robber. Upon being sentenced, she thanked the judge for sending her away for twenty years. The emotional complexity of a woman who would regard incarceration as a welcome reprieve from her daily life touched Loden as a working-class woman and intrigued her as an artist. The resulting film, which was in gestation for the best part of a decade, is set against a backdrop of an industrial and working-class environment that defines the people who live within its limits. In particular, the camera tracks the peripatetic and aimless movement of Wanda, an unemployed, impoverished woman who has left her husband and two children, but who lacks the perspicacity, means, and energy to alter her life. The film's ethical core, in fact, is concerned with the possibility of change and upward mobility. Eventually, Wanda stumbles into a relationship with Mr Dennis, an abusive man, whom we sense is full of self-loathing and whose criminal aspirations (which he hopelessly believes will alter his own course in life) prove to be destructive for both characters. At once both a road movie and a heist film, it is also neither of these things in any 'major' sense. Rather, Loden uses genre subversively in order to indict specific American values through a woman's perspective.

3 See Ross Lipman 'Defogging Wanda,' *The Criterion Collection*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6237-defogging-wanda>.

As a viewing experience, it is emotionally eviscerating and cannot be forgotten.

Loden started writing the script for *Wanda* in 1961, but it was not until 1966 when she met Harry Shuster (the president of a wildlife safari company, National Leisure, Inc.) whilst on holiday with her husband Elia Kazan, that the film received any form of financing. Shuster, a man with no prior knowledge of filmmaking, offered to volunteer time and money (\$115,000) to carry the project through to fruition. Later in the process, Nicholas T. Proferes came on board as both cinematographer and editor; his association with the cinema-verité-inflected Direct Cinema movement and directors such as Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, The Maysles and D.A Pennebaker lead to the film being erroneously and loosely labelled as cinema verité. Production started in 1969 on a minimal budget. Whilst Loden and Michael Higgins (who plays Norman Dennis) were both highly accomplished performers, many non-actors were also employed. *Wanda* was filmed on location in Scranton and Carbondale, Pennsylvania and Waterbury, Connecticut. It was shot on 16mm film and subsequently amplified to 35 mm for screening purposes.⁴ Loden's own wardrobe cost \$7, and she made sure that every member of the cast and crew was paid a decent living wage in line with union guidelines. These are not inconsequential details: they tell the story of a deeply ethical artist who was keen to acknowledge that the production of any film is, above all, an enterprise of collective labour.

Critically, *Wanda* was met with both praise and bewilderment on the festival circuit (as we will see in more detail further on). Shuster decided to distribute the film through his

4 For extensive discussion of both *Wanda's* print and ratio, see again Lipman's account of his work on the restoration of *Wanda*, 'Defogging *Wanda*.' Interestingly, Lipman notes that contemporary distribution prints of *Wanda* were of inferior quality and did not reflect Loden's own intentions with regard to the film's chromatic palette. His restoration of *Wanda*, facilitated by The Film Foundation in collaboration with Gucci (and screened at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010), is, in fact, truer to Loden's own vision for the film.

own company, Bardene International Films. It played at both Cinema II in New York and The Plaza in Westwood in Los Angeles for a very limited period and did not receive further international distribution. However, shored up by the critical appraisal she had received (in particular the Critic's Prize at the Venice Film Festival), Loden developed a new sense of purpose as an artist and spoke of her plans to make a further film entitled *Love Means Always Having to Say You're Sorry*. It has also been widely reported that she planned to adapt Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* for the screen. Though at a different end of the social and economic spectrum, Chopin's Edna Pontellier — a depressed woman, dispossessed of herself, who leaves her domestic role in order to pursue her own life — has much in common with the figure of Wanda. However, none of these plans came to fruition. Despite making two short educational films in 1975, *The Boy Who Liked Deer* and *The Frontier Experience*, Loden would never make another feature film. She died of breast cancer at the age of only forty-eight. In his autobiography, Elia Kazan reported that Loden died in a great deal of pain and went out of this world crying 'shit, shit, shit!'⁵ After her death, he would also overstate considerably his involvement in the making of *Wanda*;⁶ whether consciously intended or not, this certainly had the effect of undermining Loden's own authorship — despite her own gracious acknowledgment of his support and expertise in several interviews.⁷ For decades, Loden

5 I highly recommend Carina Longworth's podcast *You Must Remember This*. An episode of her 'Dead Blondes' series is devoted to Loden, in which she reiterates this story. See <http://www.youmustrememberthispodcast.com/episodes/2017/4/17/barbara-loden-dead-blondes-episode-12>

6 See 'Wanda Now: Reflections on Barbara Loden's Feminist Masterpiece,' especially Illeana Douglas's entry. Available at <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5811-wanda-now-reflections-on-barbara-loden-s-feminist-masterpiece>.

7 Loden is especially generous towards Kazan in her interview with Michel Ciment in *Positif*: 'my husband also encouraged me. He showed me that if you want to do something, you should go ahead and do it. He threw me into the water and I swam' (translation mine). However, she explicitly states that he did not have anything to do with the filming of *Wanda*: 'He

remained a secondary character within the narrative of Kazan's successful career. She is, in fact, often still written and spoken of in terms of her relationship to Kazan, a man who felt increasingly insecure in their marriage as Loden gained in confidence and autonomy with regard to her own artistry. This was something Loden already understood in relation to female subjectivity defined through exclusively (and exclusionary) phallogocentric terms: that women do not merely function as mirrors for male subjectivity and desires but also as containers for the mores and 'ills' of patriarchal societies at large, and that an inability to express one's rage — to turn it outwards towards that which holds women in harm's wake, towards that which eviscerates them of their own subjectivity — will result in self-obliteration. Wanda is, in my view, a woman who is profoundly aware that she is being used as a container — her passivity is quite possibly not only a survival mechanism, but also a cultivated act of resistance which, nonetheless, cannot lead anywhere (her bargain is always skewered). In 1975 during the height of the second wave feminist movement, in an interview with Michel Ciment for *Positif*, she said: 'women tend to define themselves in terms of men. Wanda can only survive if she is attached to a man and to his ambition. She does not think that she can live otherwise. This is actually a very widespread attitude amongst women, at least in America. I don't know what it is like elsewhere. But women's identities are defined through the men they are with.'⁸ We can only imagine the primal truths her version of *The Awakening* would have delivered. We can only imagine the feelings of blockage, inequity, and rage at not being able to leave behind a legacy such as that of her husband. Those reported (and possibly apocryphal) final

didn't help me with that. From the beginning of filming, we found we were in total disagreement. He is very attuned to solidity and strength in terms of structure and continuity. He is very methodical and prepares everything in advance. I am not the same kind of personality at all. He thinks I am a bit of a fantasist. When he says to me "what are you going to do now?" I respond "we'll see what happens" (translation mine). See Michel Ciment, 'Entretien avec Barbara Loden,' *Positif*, April 1975, 34.

8 Ibid., 36 (translation mine).

words of Loden's contain a multitude of women's stifled voices, stories, and experiences. *Wanda* stands as Loden's sole attempt to name this: to find the words and images to say it.

This volume is divided into three sections. The first part attempts to situate *Wanda* within both a historical and contemporary context through a relevant theoretical framework that serves my understanding of this extraordinary film. In short, my aim is to make *Wanda* speak to our own political and social moment through depressive affect; for my contention is that *Wanda*, though ostensibly about female and working-class experience, is a film that is finely calibrated and attuned to the affective state of depression as both a public and political source of feeling; Loden herself commented that this was at the core of her understanding and performance of Wanda as a character, telling Ciment: 'I was like the living dead...I lived like a zombie for a long time, until 30 years old...I feel very attuned to Wanda emotionally'.⁹ The second part constitutes a shot-by-shot reading of the film. This kind of 'close' reading, which was especially popular amongst film scholars for a while, has, in my view, rarely been extended towards films made by women.¹⁰ I have tried to recount my own understanding of these images over repeated viewings (this may be a fool's errand, but I am willing to run this risk because I believe that every single shot of this remarkable film is worthy of attention).¹¹ I have done this so as to build an inventory of *how* the film accrues in meaning through its highly

9 Ibid., 34, 36 (translation mine).

10 Raymond Durnat's film criticism is, perhaps, the most exemplary of this style. See Raymond Durnat, *A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho'* (2002; repr. London: BFI/Bloomsbury, 2010). I am, however, in no way comparing my efforts here with those of Durnat, but I am inspired by his approach. This is amongst my most favourite pieces of writing on film.

11 It is my long-held belief that the seemingly rather simple act of paying attention constitutes a form of feminism that can effect profound alteration in the world. I am not alone in feeling this: 'the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.' See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Quality Paper Book, 1984), 36.

particular form and subtle use of gesture. For what it is worth, I have interspersed this text with my own affective response to and reading of these scenes as set out in detail (thus as a highly subjective form of inductive reasoning). My intention here is to disavow wholly the notion that *Wanda* is any way, shape or form, a film of arbitrary happenstance (objects are profoundly meaningful in this film and tell a life-story), verité, or continual improvisation (much as Loden may have been inspired by such guerrilla tactics as an alternate film history). Finally, I conclude with an assessment of *Wanda*'s status as a specifically feminist work of art and what this might mean for a contemporary feminist politics.

II. On Filming in the Negative and Refusal Cinema

To attempt to write on *Wanda*, Loden's sole feature-length film, is a task that seems to be limned by failure from the outset. It is impossible, in fact, to produce a text on this major minor film that is not, in itself, ripe with aporia, cracks, fissures, and ambiguities (this is, in fact, the entire subject of Léger's book on Loden).¹² This film, which I first saw in Stockholm, Sweden in the Autumn of 2012 has disturbed and upset me to such an extent that I still carry *Wanda* with me; this, I believe, is a relatively common or shared feeling amongst those who are moved by Loden's vision — to the extent that the film appears to yield an arcane and highly particular sense of ownership over an implicit connection to both the director and her film.¹³ Yet, this

12 Nathalie Léger, *Suite for Barbara Loden*, trans. Cécile Menon (St. Louis: Dorothy Project, 2012).

13 It is especially intriguing from a psychoanalytic perspective that writers and scholars alike seem to confuse Loden with the character of Wanda (to the extent that it is sometimes read as purely autobiographical) and to feel that they are haunted by one another's understanding of the film. I find Zambreno's recuperation of Léger's extended essay as 'plagiarism' especially telling in this respect. In Léger's manuscript, Loden's life bleeds into Wanda's and, by extension, into that of the author (who in turn invokes her own mother's history to shore up the narrative she is writing). Loden

film affected me beyond my own grief-laden and abjectly lonely circumstances during that Autumn and the years that followed: *Wanda* entered and has remained within me as a presciently political film that speaks to our current state of crisis; *Wanda* is a film I have thought about every single day since I first saw it and it continues to teach me things. This is then, above all, an essay about discovering and living with *Wanda* in this very particular contemporary political moment. Whilst what follows is, of course, deeply personal (as I think most forms of writing necessarily must be), this is not an essay about my own subjective connection to the film (both Léger and Zambreno have acquitted themselves admirably of this task).¹⁴ Further, this is not a traditional work of archival film history that attempts to situate the film merely within its contemporary context. In short, *Wanda* is so radical in its alterity that, I believe it deserves careful and studious attention to its images without comparison or recourse to its peers in this particular case. Further, this is not a biography of Barbara Loden.¹⁵ The facts of her life, such as we know of them, are at once both nebulous and precise enough to allow any writer to adumbrate her as a mysterious, enigmatic, and perplexing figure who can fit into any narrative the writer is willing to weave (there are multiple examples of this). In my view, if we are to understand the scale of Loden's accomplishment as a filmmaker, as an artist, we should not reduce her art to the facts of her existence as a complex and contradictory person; importantly, Loden herself was adamant about this in several interviews, claiming that the material connections between

herself commented that she had discovered in psychoanalysis that she was always playing 'the victim and the orphan' so that her understanding of *Wanda* was, in effect, a necessarily personal and emotional one. Yet she was also always careful to distinguish herself from *Wanda*; that is, Loden herself always adopted the empathic rather than purely personal point of view as an artist. See Ciment, 'Entretien avec Barbara Loden,' 37 (translation mine).

14 Kate Zambreno, *Screen Tests* (London: Harper Collins, 2019), 71–72, 222–76.

15 For an excellent and comprehensive overview of Loden's background, I recommend Gorfinkel's essay '*Wanda's* Slowness,' 29–33.

her and the character of Wanda had been overstated and misconstrued: rather, she felt a deeply-held emotional allegiance to this character.¹⁶ Beyond this, though, the appeal to biographical circumstances is of limited use, I believe, in assessing any woman's work — and it is an elision we make all too often with regard to female artists. It is an appeal that has, to date, in my view, marred assessment of this remarkable film; indeed, Thornham comments that the identification of 'Loden as a director with her protagonist' is responsible for the promulgation of a dominant reading of the film 'in terms of the pathologized body of Loden herself.'¹⁷ In this, I concur with Thornham whole-heartedly. In what follows, it is *Wanda* as a visionary, unique, and, I would argue, peerless piece of filmmaking to which I will turn. In particular, it is *Wanda's* politics and aesthetics with which I am concerned.

I have already defined this extended essay by stating what I will *not* do, which is perhaps fitting for a film that in and of itself is unrelentingly and determinedly fixated on the poetics and aesthetics of failure. For *Wanda* is not only a film that centres on characters who are refused, rejected, and treated as detritus: it is a film that at its very core, as Gorfinkel, Thornham, and Zambreno have argued astutely, is formed by a politics of negativity, refusal, and rejection.¹⁸ The ethical import of *Wanda* lies in this aesthetics of denial, of the margin, its exploration of the under-

16 See both the audio recording of Loden speaking to students at the American Film Institute in 1971, and the excerpt from *The Dick Cavett Show*, both available as extra features on the Criterion release of *Wanda*. She reiterates this in Katja Raganelli's documentary *I Am Wanda* in which she speaks at length about her upbringing and background and is careful to differentiate her experience from that of Wanda (Alma Malone). This is also available on the Criterion edition of the film.

17 Sue Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 66.

18 Please see especially Gorfinkel, 'Wanda's Slowness,' as well as Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero?*, 64–67 and Zambreno, *Screen Tests*, 222–76. It is also worth noting that Kazan described Loden as 'white trash' in his own writing and spoke of the character of Wanda in metaphorical terms that likened her to society's flotsam and jetsam.

side, its use of slowness, its persistent use of counter-images and in-between-images and its invocation of crisis.¹⁹ There is a seamless continuity between form and content in *Wanda* that is so skilfully and unobtrusively deployed that its moments of disruption, void, frustration, impossibility, exhaustion, and refusal *must* seep into any attempt to write on its images. To write on *Wanda* is to allow oneself to step into that impasse: the result of which is this essay.

I am neither the first scholar, critic, or writer to broach this task, nor, I am quite sure, will I be the last. For a film that has been so neglected by a public audience, *Wanda* has amassed astonishingly voluminous amounts of column inches, book chapters, articles, and attempts to think alongside it and fathom its meaning. I contend that so much has, in fact, been written on *Wanda* despite the relative difficulty (up until 2018) of seeing it that it has passed over into the realm of myth.²⁰ That myth, which is beset not only by notions of the ‘miraculous’ and ‘sacred’ (a characterisation spun by Marguerite Duras to describe Loden’s faultless performance of Wanda) but also by apocrypha (which the men in her life, who outlived Loden, certainly played a hand in promulgating), has occluded careful and studious attendance to its distinctive formal properties and by extension, its politics of the image.²¹ There is indeed a ‘miracle’ in *Wanda*, but I contend it has nothing whatsoever to do with an imbrica-

19 Conversely, Raymond Carney, in his analysis of the film has suggested that *Wanda* is a film edited to effect ‘extreme rush and haste’: see Ray Carney, *American Dreaming: The Films of John Cassavetes and the American Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). For intricate analysis of the negative politics and slowness of *Wanda*, please see especially Gorfinkel ‘*Wanda*’s Slowness’, 27–48, and Zambreno, *Screen Tests*, 222–76.

20 See Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, ‘Wanda,’ *Film Critic: Adrian Martin*, 2019, <http://www.filmcritic.com.au/reviews/w/wanda.html> and ‘Nothing of the Sort: Barbara Loden’s *Wanda* (1970),’ *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema* 4, no. 8 (2016), <http://www.ocec.eu/cinemascomparativecinema/index.php/ca/inicio-eng/33-n-8-english/451-contents-n-8>.

21 See Marguerite Duras and Elia Kazan, ‘Conversation on Wanda by Barbara Loden’ (originally printed in *Cahiers du cinema*, 2003), *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*, n.d., <http://www.ocec.eu/cinemascomparativecinema/index.php/en/33-n-8-english/446-conversation-on-wanda-by-barbara-loden>.

tion of Loden with Wanda as a fictional character — a reading that has persistently helped to marginalise Loden's agency as a filmmaker and artist.

No. The miracle in *Wanda* is that this film has survived, despite decades of neglect (having finally been re-discovered by Ross Lipman in a film lab, the contents of which were about to be discarded), to emerge into the fuliginous light of an era that may just be ready to strain at grasping its harsh and brutal truths.²² Truths that reveal the implication of the psychic in the social and the experiential in political structures; this is a film that dares to suggest that the social and ethical functions of art should not necessarily be redemptive — that salvation is a cheap and spurious form of consolation that few can afford in this world. This film, made by a woman who knew all-too-well what it means to be defined through and by her material circumstances (and her relationships to men), that is so relentlessly ferocious in its refusal to assuage and comfort the viewer was always a film, as Gorfinkel contends, that was made for the future.²³ *Wanda* does not brook the comforts of positivity, of aspiration or even the luxury of selfhood. This film is so radical in its feminist-anti-capitalist politics of refusal that we are still struggling to keep up with it. It delineates precisely how the personal is political and why this matters now more than ever. *Wanda*, this film about a woman who refuses to be saved or to save herself, who lacks the means and energy to alter anything in her life, who lives in a permanent state of blockage, impasse, and failure is, I suggest, the film of our contemporary moment.

III. On Contemporary Criticism and Cultures of Redemption

Upon its release, *Wanda* met with a relatively ambivalent critical reception. In my view, Estelle Changa's review from 1971 is the sole example that is attuned to the film's highly particu-

²² See Lipman, 'Defogging *Wanda*.'

²³ See Gorfinkel, 'Wanda's Slowness,' 45.

lar melancholic register and resonance. Changas saw clearly that Loden's project in *Wanda* is precisely to open up a site of contestation and critique in which one is forced to reckon with the very notion of choice, of self-fashioning, as a privilege. She writes: 'Loden plays against all the optimism surrounding the odyssey myth. Her protagonist has absolutely no prospect of survival and Loden refuses to compromise her grim vision of life with any trace of sentimentality.'²⁴ That Changas does not chastise Loden for refusing to offer a solution sets her apart from other contemporary critics who merely viewed *Wanda* as a depressing, muted, and nihilistic affair (chiefly, Chuck Kleinhans and Pauline Kael).²⁵ Moreover, Changas identified the 'problem of feminism' which the film opens up and for which it was so readily criticised and dismissed: 'Wanda is so burdened with the horror of belonging to the abject, outcast race of impoverished Americans that she hasn't the luxury to lament her role as a female. Loden is concerned with a more basic, universal question than sexual politics — the stark deprivation of the abandoned poor. The film seems almost anachronistic because it evokes the Depression thirties;²⁶ the ravaged faces of its Appalachian coal field inhabitants resemble those of dust-bowl dwellers.'²⁷

24 Estelle Changas, 'Wanda,' *Film Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 50.

25 See Chuck Kleinhans, 'Wanda and Marilyn Times Five: Seeing Through Cinema Verité,' *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 1 (May–June 1974): 14–15. In her review of the film printed in March 1971, Kael writes that *Wanda* is: 'so dumb we can't tell what has made her miserable....She's an attractive girl but such a sad, ignorant slut that there's nowhere for her and the picture to go but down, and since, as writer-director, Miss Loden never departs from the misery of the two stunted characters, there are no contrasts. The movie is very touching, but its truths — Wanda's small voice, her helplessness — are too minor and muted for a full-length film.' Interestingly, Kael does acknowledge that *Wanda* is a film that is devoid of clichés and, as such, identifies something fundamental about Loden's political aesthetic. Kael's original review is available here: <https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1971-03-20/flipbook/136t>.

26 Gorfinkel also points out that the film's images resemble the Depression-era portraits of Robert Franks and the photographs of Walker Evans. See Gorfinkel, 'Wanda's Slowness,' 34.

27 *Ibid.*, 50.

Here, Changas also intimates the radical nature of Loden's images: precisely that she attends to that which is overlooked, that which is forgotten, that which is rejected, that which is *abjected* from the grand (and generic) narrative of Hollywood's vision of America. The revelation is that the film is not anachronistic in any sense. Loden's subject, as she revealed in an interview, is the ongoing toil of millions of forgotten Americans who are struggling to attain 'dignity,' but who can never escape the place and class into which they are born.²⁸ Social mobility is the cruellest lie America may have peddled to its citizens, she suggests.

Having won the International Critics' Prize for Best Film at the Venice Film Festival in 1970, *Wanda* went on to play at the London and San Francisco film festivals and then was screened at Cannes in 1971. However, the film failed to gain traction and was poorly distributed; it played only at a single film theatre in New York (Cinema II) and again only at a single cinema in Los Angeles (The Plaza at Westwood), and both of these screenings had a limited run (the spring of 1971). Thereafter, *Wanda* fell into obscurity since it received no international distribution. It was not, as we have seen, until 1995, due to the staunch effort of Bérénice Reynaud, and subsequently of Isabelle Huppert, that the film gained renewed attention and deserved appreciation. Within its contemporary context, *Wanda* was characterised as 'depressing' and 'nihilistic' and met with consternation from second wave feminists;²⁹ Kael denounced *Wanda* as being too much of an 'ignorant slut' to be worthy of the viewer's time, empathy, or interest and the film itself as so minor and muted that it is impossible to gain any purchase on the film's 'message.'³⁰ Con-

28 See Ruby Melton, 'Barbara Loden on *Wanda*: An Environment That Is Overwhelmingly Ugly and Destructive,' *The Film Journal* 1, no. 2 (Summer, 1971): 11–15.

29 Kleinhans, 'Seeing Through Cinema Verité in *Wanda* and *Marilyn Times Five*,' 15. See Maya Montanez Smukler's detailed account of the film's production and reception in *Liberating Hollywood: Women Directors & The Feminist Reform of 1970s American Cinema* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2019), especially chapters 2 and 3.

30 Quoted in Kate McCourt, 'Who Was Barbara Loden? *Wanda* and the Life of an Actual Woman,' *Propeller Magazine* (2012; repr. March 2019),

versely, Marion Meade laboured suspiciously hard to redeem Wanda as a character who has ‘the guts to hit the road with only the clothes on her back’ out of a vehement need to find a ‘life of her own,’ only then to chastise Loden for not providing any ready prophylactic to lessen the spread of the depressive condition she loosens in the film.³¹ Where does a woman go once she has rejected the roles laid out for her by society? What can she do with her life once she has turned her back on everything she has known? Meade suggests that Loden’s pill — ‘nowhere’ and ‘nothing’ — is one that is altogether too bitter to swallow. In other words, *Wanda* does not leave the viewer with any sense of comfort or relief. The film refuses to attenuate the pain of this woman’s existence. The suggestion that lives are daily lived up against the impossible, that to live inside oneself can be a most vicious form of hell was, and is, not a message that many people are willing to countenance (invested as we all are in a dominant cultural narrative of happiness).

Embedded or implied in the tenor of this critical discourse is the assumption that the role of art in society is a redemptive one. Leo Bersani has written at length about the alacrity with which writers, artists, scholars, and thinkers alike work to salvage their arguments from their most radical implications.³² ‘Radical’ because in following through on the inferences of their arguments, they arrive at propositions which are wholly counter to the way in which society functions, our place within it, and our most basic and comforting assumptions about our own psyches. He argues that this work partakes in a ‘culture of redemption,’ the cardinal conjecture of which is: ‘that a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless

<https://www.propellerbooks.com/posts/2012/12/06/who-was-barbara-loden>. See Kael’s full review at <https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1971-03-20/flipbook/136t>.

31 Marion Meade, ‘Movies,’ *The New York Times*, April 25, 1971, 11, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/25/archives/lights-camera-women.html>.

32 Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

experience.³³ Moreover, he opines that an implicit hierarchy exists therein by which it is postulated that: ‘the work of art has the authority to master the presumed raw material of experience in a manner that uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material.’³⁴ The role of art is a compensatory one, then. It appropriates the crude, visceral, and brutal stuff of life and shapes it into an experience that works to crystallise and elevate in order to deliver perspicacity, nuance, and insight. As Bersani puts it: ‘the catastrophes of history matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art.’³⁵ For Bersani, this redemptive form of aesthetics is predicated on the negation of life, which, in turn, results in the negation of art.³⁶

It is my contention, extending Bersani, that *Wanda* is a film that proffers an artform of negation, of detritus, of refusal, of rejection, and, in this sense, it has much in common with Nikolaj Lübecker’s conception of ‘feel-bad’ cinema that eschews any possibility of catharsis for its viewer.³⁷ *Wanda* dares to suggest that, for many, the life into which one is born is inherently damaged and damaging and that not all experience is equally valuable. It is a film that radically rejects the entire enterprise of liberal humanism as a positivist form of teleology. It refuses the notion that a human life adds up to something; that we are all going somewhere; that to live a life, to be a person, is to accumulate experience in the name of becoming a unified, integrated, and consistent self (the phallic self).³⁸ And in the place of that *something* and *somebody*, *Wanda* gives the viewer *nothing* and *nobody*. In place of an accumulative model, it gives us a woman who abandons the roles that might define her as *a good woman* and who then goes on to lose the few possessions she has (many of them literally ejected out of a car’s window).

33 Ibid., 1.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 2.

37 Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

38 See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985), 1–18.

In place of forward momentum, it gives us a woman who can only stare out of the rear window of a stolen car, watching her past recede whilst literally being unable to turn around to face a future that will simply be another, paler iteration of what has already come to pass (in *Wanda*, to accumulate experience is to reiterate failure, tedium, boredom, and impossibility ad infinitum). Wanda ends up precisely where she started, but her slate is never blank. There are no fresh starts in life for Wanda and there is no prospect of failing better.³⁹ Loden's film does not partake in a so-called 'pathos of failure' — that specifically priapic form of post-1960s cinema that arose around political stasis, impotence, and disillusionment expressed through a form of white masculine crisis on the cusp of erupting into violence. Her film stages a far more intricate and subtle form of crisis that is both distinctively feminine and working-class. At the centre of *Wanda* is a crisis of movement that problematises definitively who gets to take up space both bodily and geographically (Wanda is not the lone American outlaw of myth). Loden performs her feminist politics as a question of the body and its symptoms, so as to indict the always political-public through the personal-somatic. We can see this in her performance of Wanda as a woman who is continually on the threshold, unable to claim that most elusive and exclusive of feminist tenets: a space and room of one's own. Loden — as an artist — is interested neither in meretricious moral perfection, nor in providing a model of how one should live. Her sole concern is with portraying what it might be like to be alive in *this* body, in *this* life, during *this* political moment; her question is not an existential 'why?', but rather 'how?': *how* does one keep on going when there is seemingly nothing tethering us to daily existence? *How* does one exist, when basic subsistence is not met? *How* is community possible in the face of perpetual indifference to the most fractious of lives? And

39 'All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better....Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all': Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: Calder, 1983), 7, 8.

further, in place of the rather specious notion of ‘choice’ (that watchword of contemporary feminism), Loden tells us that she knows that there is simply no such thing as a clean and isolated choice or compromise, that there is no final state of epiphany or grace, but only ever a series of events bound together by the heart’s own misgivings and the sheer precarity of existence. And that *this* is what we call a human life.

IV. On Wanda, Who Is Not Barbara

Wanda’s politics lies in its eschewal of a hierarchy between the bleak matter of lives lived out on the margins and its own status as minor cinema. As I will go on to argue, this is made possible because of Barbara Loden herself. This is not to say that I agree with the conflation of Loden with the character of Wanda, but rather to suggest that the film proposes a limit case for the viewer’s empathy through its very form and content (that the film’s body works to hold us at a distance from a woman who is already disarticulated). How far are you willing to stretch your politics? asks Loden. Do you find this character rebarbative because she reveals your own hypocrisy and complicity within systems that make life so unliveable for so many people?

Loden’s *performance* of Wanda functions as a radical yet tentative answer to her own question: ‘what kind of person would welcome being sent to prison for twenty years?’⁴⁰ In taking up the hypothetical gestures, mien, and comportment of this woman, she reaches towards something far more profoundly truthful than could ever be delivered through the specious platitude of ‘a message.’ In attending to *Wanda*, we must read deeply its surfaces, its grain, its contours, its gestures, and the ways in which these accrue to create specific tones and mood. *Wanda* requires us to pay careful attention to the in-between image and its ambiguity; it requires that we tune into the inarticulate and the muted; it draws us into the minor or seemingly inconsequential

40 Melton, ‘Barbara Loden on *Wanda*,’ 11.

as a mode of political gesture. That this film dares to suggest that the role of art should not be reparative or consolatory is a fundamentally radical thesis, and it is crucial that we, by extension, do not read Barbara as the redemptive counter-image of Wanda as a character. Wanda is not Barbara Loden. Loden's genius as a performer was to extend herself into the skin of a person seamlessly, to inhabit their gestures so as to give shape to a life (anyone who has seen her performance as the 'disposable girl' in *Splendor in the Grass* [1961] cannot doubt her abilities).⁴¹ Certainly, she understood Wanda in her bones, through the sorrows and depletions of her own existence so that she could reach into that 'incommunicative hurt that can only be performed through muscle memory' as Gorfinkel puts it so beautifully.⁴² But Wanda is based on a woman named Alma Malone, a woman who very likely never knew that a film had been made about her. A woman who spent ten years of her life incarcerated (her twenty-year sentence having been commuted).⁴³ A woman who came from and went back to the working poor. Art offered no form of consolation to Alma Malone. Alma was Barbara's cautionary tale (a fact that she readily admitted).⁴⁴ Alma was Barbara's life had she

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- 41 Loden was quite insistent that nobody else could have played the role of Wanda, which suggests that she was profoundly aware of her unique abilities as an actress. Indeed, Katja Raganelli's documentary *I Am Wanda* (1980) features several scenes in which Loden's expertise as both teacher and performer is clearly evident. I would suggest, therefore, that the 'seamlessness' of her performance is the result of assiduous study and abundant talent as well as, undoubtedly, lived experience. See also Ciment, 'Entretien avec Barbara Loden,' 34.
- 42 See Elena Gorfinkel, 'Wanda, Loden, Lodestone,' *Institute of Contemporary Arts*, 2018, https://archive.ica.art/sites/default/files/downloads/ICA%20Wanda_%20Loden_%20lodestone_v2.pdf.
- 43 Alma Malone's story is detailed in Sarah Weinman, 'The True Crime Story Behind a 1970 Cult Feminist Film Classic,' *Topic* 4 (October 2017): <https://www.topic.com/the-true-crime-story-behind-a-1970-cult-feminist-film-classic>.
- 44 Loden stated in an interview with Ruby Melton: 'I used to be like Wanda in that I had no direction in my life. I felt that everything was pointless. I was anesthetized to life. I just didn't want to be part of it. I had dropped out. I had a good understanding of how a person gets to be like Wanda and how a person can go on for years behaving like her.' See Melton, 'Barbara

not been able to access her creativity. Alma was Barbara's vision of what it means to lead a life devoid of the comfort and solace of hope for something better in the future.

It is important that this be borne in mind lest we forget that to create art involves invoking separation. Loden could give shape to Alma Malone's life *because* it was not her own (or rather, at the very least, it was *no longer* her own). Loden could lay claim to a narrative in ways that would never have been possible for Alma Malone (a woman defined first by her class and then by a patriarchal judicial system). *Wanda* explores the notion, after Judith Butler, that it may be impossible to survive a radically unnarratable life.⁴⁵ Who gets to tell stories and why matters and Loden knew this deeply in the core of her being as an artist; that is why she *chose* Alma — a person to whom nobody would pay attention, a person who came into this world and departed from it unnoticed (the very essence of *Wanda's* aesthetics and Loden's inhabitation of *Wanda* as a character). By extension, *Wanda* itself is a monument to all of those stories that remain untold, to all the people who cannot make it to the surface of life. As Gorfinkel argues: 'the very singular existence of Loden's only feature film, made before her death at age 48 of breast cancer, stands as testimony to and as palimpsest of all the films by women that have remained unmade, unknown, unseen.'⁴⁶ Indeed, Montanez Smukler is rightly aghast in noting that Loden's obituary in *The Los Angeles Times* read tastelessly as: "'Dumb Blonde" made one brilliant film' (at least *Wanda's* brilliance was acknowledged).⁴⁷ *Wanda* is a film about the losers in life. It takes

Loden on *Wanda*,¹⁴ In the interview with Michel Ciment, she states: 'I came from this kind of environment, which didn't suit my nature or spirit. I thought it was me who was not normal. But when I left, I realised it was the environment that was sick and not me. *Wanda* does not have the same understanding as me. I had to be more clever than her. She used the means she had at her disposal and I used others' (translation mine). See Ciment, 'Entretien avec Barbara Loden,' 34.

45 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 32.

46 Gorfinkel, 'Wanda, Loden, Lodestone.'

47 Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*.

failure seriously. In a direct affront to America's relentless capitalist theocracy, it meets bigger, better, and faster with smaller, worse, and slower. *Wanda* is a film that is too anti-American by far for popular American counterculture, since it remains perhaps the ultimate taboo to suggest that the trajectory of a human life might end in failure.

V. On Realism and Positive Images

An ability to live without hope defines *Wanda* as a film. It is the central contention of this essay, after Gorfinkel, that *Wanda* is of such radical politics that it remains a film of/for/from the future that does not fit with the so-called 'counterculture' of its period (which I contend was, in fact, rather conservative in nature).⁴⁸ Further, I suggest that *Wanda* cannot be understood within the feminist debates and struggles of its period. Gorfinkel states that the film 'sits at an uneasy angle to the discourses of women's liberation of its time as well as to the demand for "positive" representations that would emerge in early 1970s feminist film criticism.'⁴⁹ Loden is not concerned with anything as simplistic and naïve as 'positive' representation. *Wanda* is affectively alien and cannot be read alongside superficially comparable, contemporary films (many of which were documentaries) such as *Growing Up Female* (1971), *Janie's Janie* (1971), *The Woman's Film* (1971), *Anything You Want To Be* (1971), *Three Lives* (1971), and *Joyce at 34* (1972).⁵⁰ Ivone Marguiles has noted of these kinds of film that they were: 'engendered directly by the [second wave] feminist movement' and thus 'partake of the idea of transparency that is endemic in socially corrective realist cinema: the belief in the cinematographic record as an automatic guarantee

48 Gorfinkel, 'Wanda's Slowness.'

49 Gorfinkel, 'Wanda's Slowness,' 27.

50 See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Ivone Marguiles, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

of cinema's inclusiveness.⁵¹ In making a holy alliance of anti-illusionism and identity politics, a certain core of 1970s feminist cinema posited that by adopting a cinema vérité style and by attending to the shared and common everyday, political unity might be forged. *Wanda* — despite its critical description as a slice of cinéma vérité — effects a composite transformation of reality (through the mode of fiction) in order to render the quotidian as elusive and complex; in the process, Loden suggests that reality is, in fact, always necessarily what recedes from the frame of representation and our most vehemently held ideals about its constitution;⁵² she also problematises our ability to extrapolate from reality and render it in narrative form (whether documentary or fictional). Indeed, Thornham notes that the film, especially in relation to space, has a 'doubled quality, at once observed with documentary precision and having the distanced quality of a surreal fantasy.'⁵³ This is not, in any sense, a naïve or jejune conception of realism, then. In positing a character who does not even have the luxury of knowing her own self at the heart of this story, Loden reveals, perhaps inadvertently, the fundamental flaw of any politics that is predicated on our ability to identify and organise collectively (whilst Loden supported women's liberation, she professed vehemently that this was not a subject that interested her artistically). After all, can we identify with a woman who cannot even identify herself as a person? Indeed, with a woman who goes so far as to say that she is not a person and who, as a diegetic character, appears to be inscrutable and whose motivations are never made explicit — possibly because she herself does not have the luxury of being able to examine them. This is the ethical core of *Wanda* as an experience: do we take refuge in the film's status as an ostensible fiction in order to assuage our own guilt (since we know that Loden's

51 Marguiles, *Nothing Happens*, 4.

52 In this sense, *Wanda* has far more in common with Dudley Andrew's concept of a Bazinian aesthetics and politics of the image than it does with so-called cinéma vérité. See Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

53 Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero?*, 73.

film does, in fact, speak to the realities of human suffering from which we *should* not turn away — and yet we do all the time)? Is it easier to say that the issue is not a lack of empathy, but the impossibility of being able to identify with this woman — and that this flaw lies in the film and not in us? Loden tells us, through *Wanda*, that if our politics cannot make room for someone like *this* woman our professed ethics are utterly specious; and, further, that feminism with its overt emphasis on notions of access to agency, articulation, organisation, and solidarity has always failed women like Wanda — and continues to do so.

Dirk Lauwaert notes: '*Wanda* is no official film. *Wanda* represents no collectivity... *Wanda* does not stand for mothers, or for modern women, or for victims. There is no representation. *Wanda* always comes up absent.'⁵⁴ The implication(s) of this radical gesture of absence on the part of Loden is also the (gendered) subject of this essay: because the call of feminism demands that women self-define, self-identify and self-represent whilst functioning as a collective. *Wanda* parses this issue in order to reveal to and for whom this is (im)possible. *Wanda* dares to suggest that for many women, feminism (of a specific variety) may be a luxury they cannot afford. *Wanda* is, after all, a film about a woman who gets by in life through grim and humiliating affective bargaining with cruel and dismissive men who regard her as a means to achieving their needs and desires and never as an integral end (as a person with a history — indeed, Mr Dennis discards her wallet which carries photographs of her former husband and children into the dustbin). Gorfinkel conjectures of this internal compromise that it is impossible to speak of trauma and 'to confess and carve the outlines of a legible self, when sleep, rest, food, breath are not yet guarantees.'⁵⁵ She argues further that *Wanda* delivers a harsh truth to its contemporary feminist movement, centred on consciousness-raising and giving voice to the oppressed, because it 'makes clear

54 Dirk Lauwaert, 'Wanda...', *Sabazian*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.sabzian.be/article/wanda>.

55 Gorfinkel, 'Wanda, Loden, Lodestone.'

that such self-scripting is itself a privilege.⁵⁶ *Wanda* already contends in 1970 that feminism is a politics that will only work for an infinitesimal demographic of women so long as it is tied to a burgeoning capitalist superstructure. Indeed, Reynaud has noted of the film's production that Loden was a woman working without: 'a net, without role models, without a network of female collaborators...in a void. Of her lonely fight, we know practically nothing.'⁵⁷ *Wanda* was, in fact, financed and made possible by the men in Loden's life — many of whom would later overstate their authorial input at the expense of Loden's agency who was, by this point, long deceased.

VI. On Filming the Everyday

This is Loden's reality, then. She is not interested in filming the world as we might wish to see it. She is not interested in comforting platitudes. Her concern is solely with the way the world actually is and, in particular, with the ramifications for women on the margins who are always doubly disenfranchised and condemned by the morals and mores of a capitalist and patriarchal society — who are always spoken for before they can speak of themselves. Again, as Gorfinkel argues, the film offers: 'a reckoning with all those ill-advised, risky, "unsympathetic," ambivalent tendencies that roil within any woman who confronts the cruelties of subsisting in the exhaustion of just being, in facing, time and again, the circumscribed terms of her value, a value defined by men, by capitalism, by law.'⁵⁸ Thus, to film the everyday is clearly a political gesture. Loden openly detested what she called the 'Hollywood' albatross which she likened it to a 'ship made of lead.'⁵⁹ Yet Loden's rejection of Hollywood's slick and

56 Ibid.

57 Bérénice Reynaud, 'For *Wanda*,' *Senses of Cinema* 22 (October 2002), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/feature-articles/wanda/>.

58 Gorfinkel, 'Wanda, Loden, Lodestone.'

59 McCandlish Phillips, 'Barbara Loden Speaks of the World of *Wanda*,' *The New York Times*, March 11, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/03/11/ar->

glossy veneer that renders everything like ‘Formica, including the people,’ is not a mere aesthetic or economical choice because for her, Hollywood is a sovereign part of a capitalist system that keeps people ‘stupid’ and ‘ignorant’ of their own condition and that works assiduously to turn them into good consumers in order to perpetuate that cruellest form of oblivion.⁶⁰ That they cannot afford the ‘dream’ (a mirage of the ‘good life’) towards which they are so relentlessly propelled is a central part of the mechanism that keeps the entire aspirational system operational.⁶¹ As Loden remarks: ‘they work in the factories to make all those ugly cars that don’t last so they can get paid to buy a few of those ugly cars and to buy the things that others are making in other factories — to own a color television. It’s a whole aspect of America.’⁶² Loden cannot work within a system in which she does not believe — a system which she seemingly felt was only fit for abrogation. To choose to film the everyday, then, is, for her, to render the personal as political: to examine a system that functions through cycles of consumption and disposal by attending carefully to what and who is discarded (notably, Wanda is fired from her job in a garment factory because she is too slow for its operations). Loden is only concerned with what is rejected from the production line, the casualties of capitalist society and the American dream; she has no interest in either the much feted, yet notably scarce, stories of success, or in those who uphold its philosophy of tireless productivity.

Loden is an iconoclast. Her film aims to pierce the veil that keeps us from seeing the unseen, the between-images, the interstices, because this is the complex, messy reality from which we are kept from seeing by mass-produced and mass-consumed images (that are so inherently tied to advertising) and that are

chives/barbara-loden-speaks-of-the-world-of-wanda.html.

60 Ibid.

61 See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

62 See McCandlish, ‘Barbara Loden Speaks of the World of *Wanda*.’

eviscerated of life itself.⁶³ *Wanda*, whilst being a radically negative film, is not a work that is invested in dead images or clichés. It is a film that is concerned with giving life back to its viewers: not only through what is imaged, but through its presentation of time. *Wanda* makes the viewer viscerally aware of the passing of time. If the success of a Hollywood film is predicated, in some sense, on disappearing time from the film viewer's experience (the hallmark of a supposedly entertaining movie), *Wanda* gives back that 'tiredness' and 'waiting' to its viewer which is such a fundamentally defining aspect of everyday human experience.⁶⁴ Loden is not concerned about boring her viewer, which is not to say that her film is not rigorously executed in terms of its presentation of time, but rather to suggest that boredom is an essential part of its poetics and politics. As Maurice Blanchot argues: 'the everyday is platitude (what lags and falls back, the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse); but this banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence.'⁶⁵ Blanchot counsels us to attend to the 'tedious,' 'painful,' and 'sordid,' the 'inexhaustible, irrecusable' and 'always unfinished daily' precisely because in doing so we enact a form of counter politics. He argues that: 'the everyday challenges heroic values...to experience everydayness is to be tested by the radical nihilism that is as if its essence, and by which, in the void that animates it, it does not cease to hold the principle of its own critique.'⁶⁶ Loden's complex presentation of reality serves the purpose of divesting us of some of our most

63 In her interview with Michel Ciment, Loden states that she conceived of *Wanda* as a 'critique or attack'; she states that she feels ill when she thinks of the ways in which a population (based on her own experience) can be brainwashed or manipulated by what she perceives of as 'propaganda.' She links this state of affairs inextricably to low levels of literacy and the ubiquity of television in American homes. Her comments are prescient, of course, of our own contemporary political climate. See Ciment, 'Entretien avec Barbara Loden,' 39 (translation mine).

64 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (1985; repr. London: Continuum, 2005), 182.

65 Maurice Blanchot, 'Everyday Speech,' *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 13.

66 *Ibid.*, 19.

reassuring myths about the world and our place within it. Moreover, she is profoundly aware of the fundamental inadequacy of art to address or capture that reality. As already stated, hers is not an insubstantial or superficial conception of cinema vérité: it reveals the world to us in its indifference, its ambiguity, and its brutality. As Molly Haskell has lately noted, the film is keen to impress upon us the fundamental impotence of ‘the categories by which we find meaning — and an illusion of mastery — in experience.’⁶⁷ This is, after all, a film that posits its diegetic environment not as a backdrop, but as an organism that swallows up whole the human lives that occupy its surface; in an interview, Loden said: ‘I think her case is very common...but it’s not just a question of education, but of environment. Everyone conforms to their environment so nobody can change it....there are a lot of people who do not know what to do, who live without hope.’⁶⁸ *Wanda* is a woman who is overwhelmed and absented by the world into which she is born. It is the landscape that defines her and on which she cannot gain any purchase however hard she may try (and contrary, perhaps, to critical opinion, I think she does try).

VII. On Hauntology, Happiness, and Cruel Optimism

Wanda, historically, is positioned on the cusp of an era that ushered in a post-Fordist capitalist model, and consequently neoliberalism on a global scale: a combination that has only intensified with the further advent of all-pervasive forms of technology (resulting in what some have termed late stage capitalism, or a finance-centred model of accumulation). Yet it is also a film that reveals the lie at the heart of the post-War American dream of upward mobility and prosperity as evinced through highly spe-

67 Molly Haskell, ‘*Wanda* Now: Reflections on Barbara Loden’s Feminist Masterpiece,’ *The Criterion Collection*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5811-wanda-now-reflections-on-barbara-loden-s-feminist-masterpiece>.

68 Ciment, ‘Entretien avec Barbara Loden,’ 36 (translation mine).

cific forms of consumerism. As Franco Beradi and Mark Fisher argue, this post-War ideology centred on ‘notions of ever progressing development...the bourgeois mythology of a linear development of welfare and democracy; the technocratic mythology of the all-encompassing power of scientific knowledge; and so on.’⁶⁹ Notably this is not only a cultural, but also a psychological perspective: it is hard labour to work against the grain of an ideology into which one is born and inculcated (we cannot simply shrug it off). What this so-called ‘progressive modernity’ implies for Beradi and Fisher is a form of slow death or ‘cancellation of the future’ by which forms of exhaustion, impossibility, and impasse increasingly come to define us culturally and politically. *Wanda* explores precisely this notion of a slow slide into death: it examines what it means to live within that social and cultural impasse in which nothing is possible (in which the future is cancelled). The film can be defined as a work of hauntology — that is, following Jacques Derrida, as an ontology of absence — by which the images are defined through what does not happen, what does not come to pass, the promises that cannot be fulfilled, and the frustration and impotence that results in a stillborn life.⁷⁰ It is no accident that *Wanda* speaks of herself as already being dead. She is frequently cast as a friable, white spectre on the periphery of the frame, as a ghost that tears a small hole in the fabric of the film. Thornham describes her as ‘a tiny sharp white figure in the vast grey industrial landscape.’⁷¹ *Wanda* is imaged and understood as a void.

Wanda as a character is a woman who has forsaken a specific image of ‘happiness’. Her quest (since *Wanda* is, in a minor sense, a road movie) is one defined not by a horizon of expectations (the horizon is notably absent in *Wanda*), but rather by what she does *not* want (which is not the same thing as knowing what she does want). Reynaud has noted that ‘the film is

69 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 6–7.

70 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (1993; repr. London: Routledge, 1994). See also Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*.

71 Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero?*, 70.

constructed without a vanishing point...its reverse-angle shots [do] not follow the rules of classical narrative filmmaking.⁷² If a Renaissance perspective, the representative trope of 'a window of enlightenment' onto the world, is missing in *Wanda* — if the horizon does not appear and the human form is diminished and displaced within the diegetic frame — it is because *Wanda* is not a film that partakes in the notion of progression towards a better future and the place of the sovereign individual within it. Some contemporary critics, then, were too keen to impress a radical feminist agenda upon the film by noting that it is the nuclear family model and its adumbration of a 'woman's role' therein from which *Wanda* is in flight. This is not entirely erroneous as a reading, but it is rather overdetermined. The film's politics are, in fact, far more iconoclastic than this relatively contained rejection of societal norms might suggest. Within forty minutes, the American flag features prominently in the film frame in three key scenes (the opening scene, the courtroom scene, and the motel scene in which *Wanda* begins to sense what kind of a man Mr Dennis might be), and since *Wanda* is not a film, in my view, that is determined by an arbitrary and random aesthetic selection, but rather is a film that is the result of rigorous and deliberate thought on the part of Loden, this inclusion of the American flag is of cardinal importance if we are to grasp the political meaning of the film's aesthetics. That is, the model of 'happiness' that Loden is contesting is not merely the nuclear family, but rather the aspirational model of the American 'good' life of which the nuclear family is but one imperative, operative vessel.

Failure is important here since *Wanda's* rejection and seeming inability to follow this path of happiness ('I'm just no good'), of acceding to the 'good' life (which, by extension, demands she be a 'good' woman), is vehemently political. Writing forty years after the making of *Wanda*, Sara Ahmed has argued that: 'the demand for happiness is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as if what explains the crisis of hap-

72 Reynaud, 'For *Wanda*'.

piness is not the failure of these ideals but our own failure to follow them.⁷³ The crisis Ahmed writes of is firmly rooted in the current exhaustion of late capitalism, but *Wanda* is, in some sense, a film from the future since its politics are so prescient of the endgame currently being played out politically, economically, socially (and ethically) on a global scale. That failure is personalised, so that blame lies not with the body politic and corporations, but with the individual who has proven unable to accede to and maintain the strict mores of the capitalist model (made evident as the practice of being a 'good' citizen), *is* precisely what Loden sets out to critique biopolitically in her film. Thirty-eight years after *Wanda* was made, Kelly Reichardt (Loden's cinematic inheritor and successor) made *Wendy and Lucy* (2008). Reichardt's film provides another vital future intertext for viewers of Loden's work; with devastating clarity, Reichardt reiterates Loden's critique of America through the voice of an elderly man worn down by a lifetime trying to play by the rules of a system rigged against him: 'you can't get an address without an address, you can't get a job without a job. It's all fixed.' *Wanda* and *Wendy and Lucy*, two films made nearly forty years apart from one another, both of which centre on women who fall between the cracks, tell us how very little a so-called progressive form of politics has wrought for the average, everyday citizen of America. Wendy may as well be Wanda's daughter (and perhaps we should read her as such). Both women show us that it is impossible to 'bootstrap' one's way out of economic deprivation within a system that has pulled away the safety net.⁷⁴ To suggest otherwise is not only ridiculous and cruel, but also irresponsibly dangerous. This pursuit of happiness can be thought of as a disciplinary technology that works to orient us towards a life lived within highly specific hermetic boundaries and to turn away from those who cannot be made to fit within

73 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

74 See 'The American Con of Bootstrap Optimism,' *The Austin Chronicle*, February 20, 2009, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/2009-02-20/744096/>.

that model. *Wanda* is about a woman who has no access to any space of her 'own' (that most utopian 'room of one's own' of feminist thought), who lives out her life within transitory, provisional, and liminal spaces. Wanda is a figure of the threshold and the margin. She cannot step into and thus claim a space and identity of her own. Thinking about the ways in which certain grand narratives of happiness pre-determine who can occupy space and how, Ahmed writes: 'we need to rewrite happiness by considering how it feels to be stressed by the very forms of life that enable some bodies to flow into space. Perhaps the experiences of not following, of being stressed, of not being extended by the spaces in which we reside, can teach us more about happiness.'⁷⁵ In other words, by attending to failure, to impossibility, to the impasse, we can attain a greater understanding of the ways in which happiness, as a disciplinary ideology, comes to shape our understanding of what it means to be a person in the world — that is, our sense of self and our relationships with other people. It determines who gets to occupy space and thus can be extended and interpolated into the body politic. The loser, the reject, and the outsider are important character motifs in art for this very reason: if failure is a refusal to be assimilated, the view from the margin — the canted perspective (that which is askew and awry) — may render visible that which is kept from dominant forms of narrative (this is why *Wanda* does not trade in clichéd images even though it adopts a generic framework).

Happiness as a disciplinary notion orientates people towards the promise of a future through a horizon of expectations, which is, more often than not, understood collectively as a set of traditional and clichéd images and ideas that play directly into notions of a good and happy life; indeed, Lauren Berlant has remarked of this aspirational perspective: 'fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world *add up to something*.'⁷⁶ It is this promise of the good life made manifest through generic, easily assimilated

⁷⁵ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 12.

⁷⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2 (emphasis mine).

images rooted to the American Dream — images that coalesce around certain institutions and gendered roles (the husband as breadwinner, the wife as homemaker, for example) that is radically thrown into question in *Wanda*. The very concept of the future keeps us on a path that constrains movement: to be invested in happiness is to stick to the path that promises (but never ensures) you a return on your investment. To err from or to stray off that path is to risk a landslide of sadness, depression, disillusionment, and anger. It is to ‘leave happiness for life’ and to recognise that ‘loss can mean to be willing to experience an intensification of the sadness that hopefulness postpones.’⁷⁷ *Wanda* is a woman who refuses to stay on the path set out for her and, as such, contemporary critics were right to understand that particular choice as being at the heart of Loden’s burgeoning feminist politics. But *Wanda*’s refusal goes beyond binary gender roles and their coterminous emotional and destructive burdens: it has to do with the eschewal of a whole value system that is so intrinsically tied to the notion of ‘good American’ citizenship. In this sense, the film’s feminism is wholly radical, for as Ahmed reminds us: ‘feminist genealogies can be described as genealogies of women who not only do not place their hopes for happiness in the right things but who speak out about their unhappiness with the very obligation to be made happy by such things. The history of feminism is thus a history of making trouble....refusing to follow other people’s goods, or by refusing to make others happy.’⁷⁸ This is presumably what made *Wanda* such a seemingly unsympathetic figure for contemporary critics since she not only abandons her husband and children, an act that is controversial but nothing new (Nora Helmer having already exited her domestic doll’s house in 1879), but she refuses to place value in the very *things* and ideals that define the society in which she lives.

Wanda, an evidently depressed woman, does not have it within her to effect or feign happiness in a society that remains

⁷⁷ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 75.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

defiantly unresponsive and intransigent to the needs of ordinary people (it is not a society worth participating in and lying for). Wanda does not have the luxury of being invested in the future and its promise of happiness. The idea that one must keep to a path that ushers all human experience into what Shulamith Firestone has referred to as that ‘narrow, difficult to find alleyway’ is to lead a life fundamentally outside of oneself in which one’s path is predicated on a set of pre-determined and limiting choices (indeed the very notion of having a choice within this context would be an illusion).⁷⁹ Ahmed writes: ‘to follow the paths of life...is to feel that what is before you is a kind of solemn progress, as if you are living somebody else’s life, simply going the same way others are going. It is as if you have left the point of life behind you, as if your life is going through motions that were already in motion before you even arrived.’⁸⁰ In this light, Wanda’s passivity can be seen as a radical indictment of the multitudinous and infinitesimal ways that women every day are forced to subjugate and deny their personhood — that, for many women, an existence as a sovereign individual not defined by men or patriarchal law is an impossible myth (indeed, a bogus inheritance from Enlightenment thinking). Wanda cannot survive without appeal to the callous indifference of men who treat her as an object to be discarded. Thornham notes astutely that Wanda is a character caught up in a ‘fantasy scenario’ in which men play the part of ‘writer and director but also star’ — a performance to which Wanda remains but a supporting actress and audience (a role Loden herself understood all-too-well).⁸¹ Her sense of the future, even once she has left her domestic setting and its concomitant identity and role, remains precarious and fractious because her choice, regardless of its intent, cannot change her material and social circumstances. That horizon of expectations that shores up a grand narrative of the good life

79 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), 155.

80 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 71.

81 Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero?*, 72.

betrayed her long ago, since she openly states she cannot adhere to it.

Wanda examines the attrition of this fantasy of the good life. It centres on the affective bargains a working-class woman has to make in order to survive in a world in which she has no hope of attaining the material comforts and upward mobility that American society promises to its citizens within a capitalist system that admits of no alternative. It reveals that narrative always to have been a lie and as a form of what Berlant has termed 'cruel optimism.' It examines the 'affective rhythms of survival' that erupt in the wake of abandoning the narrative that has been sold to an entire nation — a nation that has been taught to think that there is only space in life for the winners.⁸² This is precisely why meticulous attendance to every aspect of the film's aesthetics is so vital. Leaving behind that narrative is hard labour and results often in breakdown, impasse, and unbearable forms of depression in a world that seemingly offers few alternatives. As Berlant notes remaining tethered to a system of values, despite the fact that it actively harms the majority of people invested in it, is seemingly inevitable; she writes that: 'even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.'⁸³ In other words, rejection of that hopeful narrative, false and pernicious as it may be, vitiates the capacity to have faith in that highly specific image of the future, and by extension absents us of our most abiding sense of continuity — of our ability to keep on keeping on. This is precisely the affective territory and bargain *Wanda* palpates. The film, through both the figures of Wanda herself and Mr Dennis, offers a dual portrait of this 'cruel' attachment to such a promise of happiness. Wanda's melancholy and despair — as a woman who has precisely abandoned happiness for life — is politicised through Loden's performance and

82 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 11.

83 *Ibid.*, 24.

the film's aesthetics, whilst Mr Dennis offers the counterpoint of a man who refuses to abandon his 'stupid optimism' and chastises Wanda for her lack of investment in the American vision of happiness.⁸⁴ As Thornham puts it: 'the feminine dream of romance functions in relation to a far more powerful masculine fantasy of outlaw heroism' in the film;⁸⁵ yet she also remarks that the film's very form asks the viewer necessarily to attend to this narrative from a critical perspective: 'with its temporal and spatial dislocations and recurrent imagery of a tarnished American dream...that fantasy invites critical reflection.'⁸⁶

More so than Wanda, Mr Dennis provides the film's cautionary tale. As Loden herself remarked: 'in my film Mr Dennis is a pathetic figure. The only way he can fit into the world is to try to get money. He thinks that if he gets enough money he will have dignity.'⁸⁷ Mr Dennis is a man that is attached in the very core of his being to this vision of the good life and he will find any means he can to try to achieve his end (which results in his death at the hands of law enforcement). His idea of what a person is, how selfhood is defined, is dictated by the accumulation of goods and the desire to consume. He is invested entirely in the narrative of good American citizenship. His tragedy is that he believes in the lie that has been sold to him — a lie that Wanda sees through — that is dependent on what Thornham calls 'sentimentalised images of heroic martyrdom.'⁸⁸ The film renders clear that for many people, this cruel and stupid form of optimism that keeps a harmful attachment operational brings a form of death upon the subject. Stupid optimism is not merely 'disappointing,' then; the idea that 'class mobility, the romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or a better sexual identity — will secure one's happiness' is revealed in this film to be corrupting and alienating at its best and literally fatal at its worst

84 Ibid., 126.

85 Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero?*, 72.

86 Ibid., 72.

87 Melton, 'Barbara Loden on *Wanda*', 14.

88 Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero?*, 73.

(and it is important to bear in mind that Wanda broaches both the internal and actual death of the subject).⁸⁹

VIII. On Depression, Melancholia, and a Cinema of Crisis

Wanda is also a film of depression and melancholia, by which I mean that it centres on the ‘affective rhythms of survival’ of a woman in a world that remains hostile and apathetic to her plight.⁹⁰ Depression is read here, alongside the paradigm-shifting work by Ann Cvetkovich and Mark Fisher, as a social phenomenon and ‘public feeling’ that is localised within the figure of Wanda as a depressive outsider. As Fisher has remarked in his own personal reflections on depression as a socially produced phenomenon: ‘the depressive is one who is totally dislocated from the world’ and who does not labour under the damaging misapprehension that ‘there is some home within the current order that can still be preserved and defended.’⁹¹ The depressive perspective, for both Fisher and Cvetkovich, opens up possible sites of social, cultural, and political contestation within which critique can be formed; fundamentally, depression marks out an inability to assimilate into, to cohere with, existing social models and is, thus, markedly political in nature. Importantly, this is not about ‘redeeming’ depression as socially useful (that is, as part of a ‘culture of redemption’ as explored earlier); indeed, as Cvetkovich suggests: ‘moving to an even larger master narrative of depression as socially produced often provides little specific illumination and even less comfort because it’s an analysis that frequently admits of no solution.’⁹² And, as we have seen, *Wanda* was readily denounced precisely for Loden’s refusal to admit of any solution to the societal wounds she explores in the film (in-

89 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 126.

90 *Ibid.*, 11.

91 Mark Fisher, *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (London: Repeater Books, 2018), 168.

92 Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 15.

stead, in interview, she called for the dismantlement of capitalist systems).

Rather, this is about allowing depression as a specific mood and affective register to reveal the ‘invisible forces that structure comfort and privilege for some and lack of resources for others...inequities whose connections to the past frequently remain obscure.’⁹³ It is fitting then that Wanda is a character who remains notably inarticulate and mute about her condition. For Loden, Wanda’s taciturn and reticent speech patterns, marked by ‘painful hesitation’ are not indicative of stupidity (Kael’s interpretation of ‘dumb’), but of a protective process of retreat from the world.⁹⁴ Wanda is a woman who has been forced to become anaesthetised to her condition in order merely to survive. Wanda comes from the legions of people who, for Loden, do not have the luxury of ‘wittily observing the things around them. They’re not concerned about anything more than existing from day to day.’⁹⁵ Affects of the depressive register are precisely numbness and indifference as a form of defence against feeling anything at all — especially towards a situation which one has no hope of altering. Depression, according to Cvetkovich, ‘keeps people silent, weary, and too numb to really notice the sources of their unhappiness (or in a state of low-level chronic grief — or depression of another kind — if they do).’⁹⁶ In particular, the medicalisation of depression shores up the notion of depression as being an individual, purely biological phenomenon (off of which pharmaceutical corporations profit) and not as a response to social and cultural inequities perpetuated by a system constructed to ensure inequality; to be clear, my point here is that we should not read this system as in any way ‘broken’ since it is finely calibrated to reap disparity and discrimination. It works, in fact, very well.

93 Ibid., 25.

94 Thornham, *What If I Had Been the Hero?*, 73.

95 Philips, ‘Barbara Loden Speaks of the World of *Wanda*.’

96 Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 12.

Wanda takes on the forms of depression within its own cinematic body. It is a film, as we shall see in the second part of this volume, that is preoccupied with stasis, impasse, slowness, repetition, margin, and exile. Cvetkovich notes that depression as a form of impasse implies also spatial connotations of: 'being at a "dead end" or "no exit"...a state of being "stuck," of not being able to figure out what to do or why to do it...the phenomenological and sensory dimensions of depression...literally shut down or inhibit movement.'⁹⁷ Depression, so often read as a sign of failure or an inability to act or be *productive* in the world, is for Loden a serious ethical and political question, I would argue.

Julia Kristeva, in her extended study of melancholia and depression, has further commented that a marked feature of depressed persons is their inability to 'concatenate and, consequently...[to] act or speak.'⁹⁸ Co-existent with this depletion of speech is a loss of reference or connection between signifier and signified so that depressed persons seemingly 'speak of nothing, they have nothing to speak of' and lose a chronological sense of time.⁹⁹ It is worth quoting Kristeva at some length, given the remarkable resonance her words hold with regard to *Wanda*'s formal properties and Loden's own performance: 'the vanishing speech of melancholy people leads them to live within a skewed time sense. It does not pass by, the before/after notion does not rule it, does not direct it from a past towards a goal. Massive, weighty, doubtless traumatic because laden with too much sorrow...a moment blocks the horizon of depressive temporality or rather removes any horizon, any perspective....no revolution is possible, there is no future.'¹⁰⁰

When I say that *Wanda* assumes the forms and rhythms of depression and melancholia, I ally it cinematically with Deleuze's notion of the time-image and my own concept of the crisis-image as a cinema that centres tropes of depletion and exhaustion

⁹⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 34.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 60.

with American values (especially Christianity and capitalism) without ready resolution.¹⁰¹ As a film, *Wanda* is beset by Deleuzian symptoms of breakdown ('the form of the trip/ballad, the multiplication of clichés, the events that hardly concern those they happen to, in short, the slackening of the sensory-motor connections') by which time (tiredness and waiting) come to the fore.¹⁰² Actions become unchained, signifiers no longer signify, the protagonist wanders in a state of shock or numbness, unable or unsure of how to respond to the landscape that surrounds her. Action becomes dissipated, frustrated, and impossible. Here, we are confronted by images of exhaustion, breakdown, rupture, and impotence that intimate an obsolete world and redundant co-constitutive set of values. *Wanda* presents a diegetic space in which the protagonists are profoundly out of step with the environment that surrounds them to the extent that it subsumes and overwhelms them; Wanda is neither merely a 'floater' nor is she a figure who simply 'drops out' of American society. The film, in its aesthetic construction, renders clear that this is a world in which there never was any room for her in the first place. She assumes the form of ghost-flesh, a figure who lives out her life permanently in spaces that are designed specifically for the transitory, fleeting, and liminal moments of life (motels, roadside cafes, shopping malls). She is fundamentally a woman who cannot gain purchase on any space of her own: she physically subsists and stands on the threshold (of the poverty line, of rooms she cannot enter, and, notably, the film frame itself). As a woman who is incapable of occupying the centre of the image, Wanda emerges from the margins of the frame as a decentred, displaced, and nebulous adumbration of a person.

101 Anna Backman Rogers, *American Independent Cinema: Rites of Passage and The Crisis-Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

102 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 3. See also Thomas Elsaesser, 'The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero' (1975; repr. in *The Last Great American Picture Show*, 279–92), for a more broad delineation of the links between Deleuzian theory and the so-called 'golden age' of American independent cinema during the late 1960s to the mid-to-late 1970s.

Loden herself was very outspoken about the ways in which the environment and class into which one is born delimit some human lives, whilst opening up space and opportunity for others. In an interview she stated: ‘she (Wanda) was born into an environment that is so overwhelmingly ugly and destructive that she really can’t function in it. Of course, people will say “well this girl is bad or stupid.” In my opinion Wanda is right and everyone around her is wrong. She is right not to function in that way. She is right not to want to live that kind of life.’¹⁰³ Ugliness, in particular, is a cardinal property of *Wanda*. It is an intrinsic part of its politics that aims to speak truth to power through the mode of minor cinema. Loden remained intent on capturing this world as ‘an ugly sight’ that has such a deleterious effect on the ‘emotional life of the people.’¹⁰⁴ For Loden, to understand a woman like Wanda, one has to attend to the landscape into which she was born and in which she subsists from day to day. Loden was intent to contrast her film with Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) since proximity in terms of date of release and mutual subject matter invited inevitable comparison between the two by critics and viewers. For Loden, Penn’s film was a slice of mere entertainment that pertained neither to the tenets of independent filmmaking nor to the real world. She said: ‘I didn’t care for *Bonnie and Clyde* because it was unrealistic and it glamorized the characters. I don’t mean it glamorized pain or crime or anything like that. The people were too glamorous. People like that would never get into those situations or lead that kind of life — they were too beautiful....I knew I wanted to make the antithesis of a movie where everyone is beautiful and wears beautiful costumes. *Wanda* is the anti-*Bonnie and Clyde* movie.’¹⁰⁵

Shot on 16mm film, *Wanda*’s grainy and tactile texture (often a result of the increased speed of film due to lack of additional lighting) is markedly different than the coherent, glossy (and

¹⁰³ Melton, ‘Barbara Loden on *Wanda*,’ 11.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

glamorous) veneer of its contemporary ‘independent’ productions that glorified the figure of the outsider (a manoeuvre that merely served to recuperate and commodify portraits of lives lived out on the margins, and thus divested them of any critical edge). Loden’s rejection of that veneer, her refusal to redeem or rescue Wanda, and her fixation on ugliness all matter precisely because the film is vehemently political in a way that *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), to take two prominent and canonical examples, are not (at least for this writer).

IX. On the Limits of Genre

Bonnie and Clyde, *Easy Rider*, and *Wanda* partake in major American genres such as the road movie and the heist film.¹⁰⁶ They all, prominently, centre on the figure of the outsider who flouts convention and defies the law. Movement through the American landscape defines all of these films and the lives of the protagonists therein. Mobility is finally — and fatally — restricted, but in the case of both Penn’s and Hopper’s films, the main characters are redeemed as heroic outlaws, glorified and baptised in violent, fiery, and bloody death, and who, by extension, also partake in some nebulous, fictional ideal of what it means to be an American citizen (brave, but above all free). I am writing here of the recovery and reformulation of counter-narratives in order only to reaffirm American identity (we encounter this cycle again in the 1980s with regard to the Blockbuster ‘action’ film which admits of subversion only in order finally to shore up hard, white masculine identity). *Wanda*, by contrast, suffers a slow death by social attrition — left to fend in a liminal space, worse off than the position from which she started, that final static framing of her face does not confirm her identity, but

106 For an extensive reading of *Wanda* through the tropes of the road movie and films from its era that explore similar themes through genre, see Fjoralba Miraka, ‘Gender, Genre and and Class Politics in *Wanda* (1970),’ *MAI: FEMINISM AND VISUAL CULTURE* 3, 2019, <https://maifeminism.com/gender-genre-and-class-politics-in-barbara-lodens-wanda-1970/>.

eradicates it. Wanda is not annihilated by fire and bullets, but by indifference; her countenance, the very marker of her identity, fades into the obscurity of darkness in the film's final shot. Whereas, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider* concern themselves with what Neil Archer speaks of as 'the fantasy of movement,' *Wanda* centres on the reality of a woman's journey — a path that leads to no form of self-discovery, no self-knowledge, no epiphany, and no progression.¹⁰⁷ As Fjoralba Miraka insightfully puts it: 'Loden re-inscribes the female body onto the landscape, not as a glamorous transgressive figure, but as a hidden, displaced, invisible figure that is estranged because she has been confined for too long.'¹⁰⁸ The film skewers entirely the idea that freedom of movement is possible for all people as well as the coterminous concept that America is a society that facilitates social mobility. *Wanda* centres on the frustration of movement — that we can never escape the place, the class, or the skin into which we are born — and it leaves us in the impasse. That lack of resolution, of redemption, and of hope is the point of the film. For Loden, to suggest otherwise would be markedly dishonest.

That the road movie, in particular, is intrinsically tied both to American cinema or culture in the broadest sense and thus to American identity is well-established. As Archer contends: 'for many, the road movie is synonymous with American cinema. We might go even further, suggesting that the road movie is not so much a product of American culture, but to some extent defines "America" itself.'¹⁰⁹ However, the road movie is also a direct cultural product of a paradigm shift between 'the scarcity of the Depression era' and 'the plenty of post-war development' during which the car arose as a major commodity on the economic market as a result of General Motors purchasing the main operative routes and means of public transport and rendering them obsolete.¹¹⁰ There is a direct correspondence, in other words,

107 Neil Archer, *The Road Movie* (New York: Wallflower/Columbia University Press, 2016), 8.

108 Miraka, 'Gender, Genre and Class Politics in *Wanda* (1970).'

109 *Ibid.*, 11.

110 *Ibid.*, 13.

between the rise of the car as a core consumerist product and corporate America — an alliance which married ‘stylization’ and ‘accessibility’ with notions of ‘individuality’ and ‘freedom.’ Co-extensive with this is a re-emphasis on individuality over the collective and on the notion of the independent, self-serving, self-made citizen who enjoys the benefits of material comfort (outwardly made manifest in the purchasing of the right products) as a result of hard labour and enterprise. The road movie, as an American franchise, by extension, shares an equivalence with America’s re-branding of itself as a superpower during the post-War economic boom. As such, I suggest, that the car — a symbolic object which Loden commented was indicative of successful American citizenship in some sense — is employed in the film in order to raise questions precisely of mobility, autonomy, individuality, and freedom.

To whom are these concepts relevant, though? This is precisely Loden’s issue: who gets to occupy these spaces and why? To whom is space, opportunity, and possibility opened up and, conversely, to whom are these things denied? If we are to turn to the most celebrated and popular examples from cinematic counterculture, the answer would seemingly be that it is white men who are able to take to the road to explore their freedom, to forge their own identities as romanticised ‘outlaws.’ Made during the nearly direct aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement (1954–1968), the notable inception of which centred on the rights of Black Americans to occupy unsegregated space on public transportation, *Wanda* again reveals the monstrous hypocrisy of a system that would congratulate itself on progress. As if in direct response, Loden’s film speaks of and to those who cannot take up any space of their own, to whom freedom of movement and individuality (central tenets of the American constitution) are denied.

Part 2

A Formal Reading of *Wanda*

Screening Notes

(A series of black leader):

Harry Shuster presents

Wanda

A film by Barbara Loden

With Nicholas T. Proferes

Featuring Michael Higgins

And Barbara Loden

Establishing shot: the camera pans slowly and steadily to screen left revealing incrementally a barren and undifferentiated landscape of coal banks dominated by shades of brown, grey, and black. Human presence is marked only by industrial debris and the low, but persistent resonance of machinery.

Cut to a coal field in mid-shot: Two industrial vehicles in red and orange occupy the centre and right-of-centre portions of the film frame; these vehicles can be contrasted starkly, in both chromatic and physical scale, with the human bodies (two workers) and the factory building sharing the frame. The landscape is marked prominently several large craters, which are

filled with dark and dank water reflecting only the greyness of the sky above.

Cut to a further establishing shot: A mid-shot of a detached house and its veranda is re-framed by the contextualizing presence of a factory and its turrets, which are designed to release waste into the atmosphere and are in striking proximity to this house. The factory and house share the same chromatic shading of brown and off-white. There is no visual demarcation or boundary between the domestic and industrial landscapes and the soundtrack is dominated by operative machinery. A door briefly swings open and a dog walks out onto the porch.

* * *

The people who occupy this house might be defined by the environment within which they live and, presumably, work (how could they not be?) Within three shots, we grasp something of the landscape, the working community, and the lives lived out within it. Taken together, these shots intimate the imbricate nature of the private and public, and of identities indelibly marked by the specificity of an industrial space that admits of little beauty or differentiation. This landscape, like its human population, is unavoidably defined by purpose, profit, and use (mined for resources). We can also surmise that the infrastructure of the coal mining industry literally looms large over the private space and health (both physical and mental) of those who live within its direct sphere.

* * *

Cut to an interior mid-shot; we are now inside the shade of the house, but the dense sound of the industrial landscape remains markedly prominent. An elderly woman is sitting in an armchair, gently feeding the beads of a rosary through her hands. She is staring out of a window draped in white lace curtains. In the background of the frame is a dresser made of solid wood.

Upon it, we see a golden crucifix which is encircled carefully by three red candles, one of which is lit. To the left of the crucifix is a double-sided picture frame that holds an image of a young, white man in a military uniform (perhaps he is in Vietnam). Behind this lies a portrait that appears to depict Jesus. This is evidently a privately meaningful altar. This elderly woman may be in mourning or she may be using ritual to deflect harm from coming to those whom she loves. We may assume, given the setting, that she is not a woman of significant financial means and, by extension, hold in mind that it is often predominantly the families of the working poor who become fodder for wars instigated by bureaucrats and politicians: wars in which human life is converted into mere statistical ‘casualty’, and meaningless death is ‘dignified’ through patriotic and religious ideologies.

Cut to a further interior mid-shot; the elderly lady from the previous shot and a child are re-framed by the partition of a glass door. A sticker of the American flag obscures the woman’s head within the frame (so we are refused, in some sense, further identification with her beyond religion and patriotism). The lower right portion of the flag has been scratched off the glass pane, the attrition of which may suggest the fraying of certain fantasies that play into the very notion of national identity and patriotic pride. To the left-hand-side of the door, in the foremost part of the frame, a can of Budweiser beer is visible (a simple signifier of ‘American’ pleasure or a form of self-medication?) The flag and beer can are prominent within the frame due to the chromatic contrast of red with hues of white and dark brown (the abiding compositional palate). The soundtrack conveys a child crying in distress. This is not the child held within the current frame — so there is a second child in the house.

Cut to a further re-framing in mid-shot; the scene now encompasses a third plane of action. We are in a bedroom looking at the back of a woman’s head. She is dressed in a white nightgown and she appears to have just awoken from sleep (her blonde hair is in a state of disarray). She is sitting in a stooped position on

a bed; her body bears the signs of physical exhaustion (from domestic labour?) We can observe, due to a cut and the camera's tracking backwards in diegetic space, that the room the elderly lady is sitting in doubles up as a bedroom. This is, then, a family that sleeps in close proximity and confinement and, therefore, to whom little privacy is afforded.

Cut to a close-up/overhead angle; a small, crying child in soiled underclothes is trying to raise him/herself up on an unmade bed. Like the woman in the previous shot his/her face is also obscured from view (there has not yet been a single close-up shot of a human face). His/her distress is registered in short, sharp bursts. The shot holds him/her in isolation from the mother.

Cut to an interior mobile shot; we are in the dilapidated family kitchen. The woman from the previous shot is now holding the child in her arms, trying to soothe his/her distress, as she opens the refrigerator (the door of which has the word 'HOLD' scrawled across it, suggesting a possibly second-hand purchase). Both woman and child look visibly tired, their faces swollen from lack of sleep (the mother) and tears (the child). The camera tracks the woman's movement to the kitchen stove on which stands another can of Budweiser beer discarded beside the hotplate. The camera pans to the right as a man enters the kitchen, picks up his jacket and stares passively at the woman who is standing at the stove. The camera pans again to take in the woman as he moves out of the centre of the frame and exits. They never make eye contact; the camera, as such, captures and conveys the spatial, and by extension, emotional, distance between them. She suggests he might like to have some coffee. An abrupt cut reveals his antagonistic reaction as he leaves the house and slams the door. The camera now pans right and slightly downwards to focus on a third presence in the room: a seemingly inert body concealed beneath a white sheet lying prostate on a sofa. Two shots, shown in quick succession, register the woman noting her partner's sudden exit and

the bedsheet being drawn back to reveal a second woman who has just awoken and appears to be equally as exhausted. This is Wanda, played by Barbara Loden, our main protagonist. She is holding her head in her hands. Directly in front of her, arrayed on the sofa's armrest, are several hair curlers, a clear glass ash-tray, and a packet of Marlboro Red cigarettes. The viewer may contrast these items, seemingly purposefully arranged, to the homemade altar and the elderly woman in prayer. Wanda is of a different generation, and inhabits another room: each has their own way of coping. The camera cuts in to frame Wanda in close-up as she rests her head back down on the pillow. She is barely awake and her face, dependent on interpretation, can convey immense fatigue, despair, or resignation (it is, perhaps, impossible to tell at this point in the action). An exchange between the women ('come on, you'd better get up') reveals that Wanda has already discerned that she is the source of the domestic tension ('he's mad 'cos I'm here'). She then raises herself up onto her elbows and there is a cut to what may be her point of view through the kitchen window. This perspective centres on the orange and red industrial trucks from the opening establishing sequence that are manoeuvring coal around the field. We, again, understand the proximity of the domestic space to the industrial landscape since this shot is conveyed in medium close-up. The noise and fray of industrial machinery remains heightened on the soundtrack, overlaid with the infant's continued distress. As if in response, Wanda pulls herself up, despite her exhaustion, to a sitting position and covers her face with her hands. Her hair is tied into a messy top knot that partially conceals her face. Her nails are painted in a pink polish that has noticeably chipped off around the edges, suggesting at once both effortful care and neglect. There is no possibility of rest, and no possibility of peace.

* * *

Within a contained series of shots—in effect merely two scenes—we understand how space defines the relationships between these people. A family of five has taken in temporarily a

further member within an already confined space. Wanda occupies the sofa by the front door in the family's kitchen. She sleeps physically on the threshold of this domestic space and is viewed as a fleeting inconvenience. She is the last character we encounter within this scene — an introduction that serves to remind the viewer that the last person in is usually, in situations defined by limited resources, the first person to be cast out. Wanda does not need to articulate the social dynamic of this family scene for the viewer to apprehend her circumstances, but she tells the other woman (possibly her sister) that 'he's mad because I am here.' This, then, is a woman who has no space of her own and who subsists by the invitation (and thus risks the irritation and anger) of those around her. Notably, it is the emotional whims and grim moodiness of the man of this house who determines the length of time she may spend here; and further, there does not appear to be any camaraderie or affective kinship between these three women living under the same roof.

* * *

Cut to an extreme long shot; we see, at a distance, the considerable size of the factory that dominates the coal fields in which it is situated. Once again, the shot is marked by a chromatic scale ranging from grey through to dark brown and black. Notably, in the furthest plane of the image there is an expansion of green hillside. From this outlying perspective, though, the factory and coal field appear as a pit from within which an expansive viewpoint would be impossible. As such, a hierarchy of scale is operational. The camera begins to zoom in on (the shot registers affectively as mechanical) and tracks a long take of just under two minutes of a diminutive, white figure that is slightly left-of-centre in the frame. This could be anyone, but we surmise that it is Wanda. The camera holds her at an extreme distance, which prevents the viewer from gauging any potential state of emotional interiority. We simply pay witness to her lonely journey on foot out of the coal fields. As a white figure set off against a dark background, she appears to rupture the overall coherence

or fabric of the diegetic world. She registers as a hole or void in the integral body of the film's landscape.

Cut to a mobile medium shot; a car with six passengers (two of whom are children) comes into view. The camera pulls back to situate the car within the immediate vicinity of the factory in front of which the car comes to a sudden halt. We then cut into, via medium shot, an exchange between the driver of the car and his colleague, Steve, who strains to hear him above the machinery. He asks Steve to remind their boss that he has to go to court and he will return within a matter of hours.

Cut to a long shot: the white figure, whom we presume to be Wanda, is walking up the hillside of the coal field. Her progress on foot is markedly slower than the coal truck that crosses the film frame from screen left to right. A further cut to a medium shot displays prominently obsolete and discarded machinery in the foreground of the frame. In the background is a small, dark figure who appears to be picking up debris and putting it into a bucket. Human presence, once again, is diminutive within the diegetic landscape. A cut to a medium close-up reveals this figure to be an elderly man who is picking up loose pieces of coal for his own use. We hear Wanda's voice calling out to him. His name is Tony. The camera pans to the right of Tony's position on screen and re-frames Wanda who is walking up the hillside to greet him. An exchange between the two, conveyed via shot and counter-shot in close-up, establishes that Tony is a kind man from whom Wanda occasionally borrows money. He explains that he cannot give her very much and he hopes she finds someone else to help her out. We notice that Wanda has a set of rollers in her hair, over which she has tied a white scarf. As the camera focuses in on her (this is the first time we see her face fully), it becomes clear that she is not entirely listening to Tony's plans for the day (to pick some more coal and then to spend his afternoon fishing so he can 'enjoy' himself for a while). Wanda seems both dejected and distracted.

Cut to a medium long-shot; Wanda is waiting by the roadside and hails a bus that is in a state of disrepair. On the side of the bus is a soot-stained advertisement for Gilbey's Gin (marketing for alcohol as leisure/alcohol as anaesthesia or painkiller/alcohol as alternative for those who cannot afford healthcare?) There appear to be several passengers on the bus, however, once we cut to an interior long-shot, we see that Wanda is sitting entirely alone on the back seat. Again, held at a distance and in isolation, she appears as co-existent with and verging on indiscernible from the space around her (light does not serve to reveal or 'illuminate' her identity here, but rather seems to obliterate it). This is a woman who can disappear in front of our eyes.

Cut to an interior mid-shot; we are now inside a courtroom. A series of medium shots convey that the passengers of the car we saw previously outside the factory are waiting for Wanda to appear. She is late (she does not have the luxury of private transport). Her absence is noted and denounced both by the court officials and the man whom we had previously seen driving the car. We presume that this man is Wanda's former husband since he informs the judge that Wanda would most likely not even care enough to 'show up to court' since she has deserted him and their two children. He wishes to marry a young woman named Miss Godek, who is sitting behind him in the public gallery with the two children, as he feels 'the kids need a mother'. Miss Godek is a well-groomed and attractive blonde woman: a nicely scrubbed-up alternative to Wanda (women are so easily and readily replaced). Notably, this character assassination on Wanda, traded amongst men, can be understood implicitly to be about American 'family' values since the American flag and a small, framed photograph of President Richard Nixon are prominently displayed on the wall behind the judge. Within this context, a woman's worth and her (domestic) labour are intimately bound up with an ideology centred on a specific heteropatriarchal interpretation of the 'family' as nuclear.

Cut to an exterior shot; Wanda is outside in a busy area of the city. The scene appears to have been shot with a telephoto lens so that Wanda, who is dressed predominantly in shades of white and blue, is immersed in and frequently obscured by the mobile landscape around her. She seems to disappear betwixt and between the passing vehicles through which her movements are framed. The viewer has to work actively to find her in the frame. She is, in some sense, being obliterated both inside and outside of the court room, then. Finally, she is framed against some kind of grey stone monument that details a list of names. Presumably this is a war memorial or tribute to men who have given their lives for their country; the viewer may recall, from the previous scene, the elderly woman in prayer.

Cut back to an interior shot; we are inside the courtroom once again. Wanda's former husband is intent on delivering an excoriating portrait of Wanda to the judge in a stream of monologue. He says: 'she doesn't care about anything. She's a lousy wife. She's always bumming around. Always drinking. Never took care of us. Never took care of the kids. I used to get up for work and make my own breakfast. Change the kids. Come home from work and she is lying around on the couch and the kids are dirty and there are diapers on the floor. Sometimes the kids are outside running around with nobody watching them.' As his speech draws to a close, Wanda appears tentatively and quietly at the back of the court room (her arrival is barely registered by the other characters). The judge calls her — by using her full name Wanda Goronski — to the front of the court. She approaches, but is holding a cigarette in her hand and is immediately reprimanded for it by the judge. She still has the set of rollers in her hair. The camera frames the former couple in a medium-shot. Wanda, notably, does not look at her children as she passes them and issues only a momentary glance to her former husband. In response to the judge's assessment of her as a woman, she responds that she has 'nothing' to say. With no visible emotional difficulties, she grants a divorce to her husband along with full custody of their children. She meets neither the eyes of the judge

(there is, in fact, a marked refusal of counter-shot so the judge's perspective appears as a disembodied voice, an apt metaphor for patriarchal law) nor the condemning gaze of her former husband; and so she affirms that she thinks the children would be 'better off' without her presence as a mother figure. Within mere seconds, she is severed from her former life and identity.

* * *

This second stage of action further establishes Wanda's relationship to her environment and the people around her in spatial terms. Of initial importance is the way in which she is decentred and displaced by the landscape which she traverses. It dominates her frame and absorbs her into its grainy textures and muted chromatic scheme so that she appears, at strategic moments, to be on the verge of disintegration. In some sense, then, the landscape defines her. Second, we can note that Wanda does not have individual access to a car. Her late arrival at the courthouse is, in part, due to the fact that she has travelled there on foot and by public transport and has a lengthier trajectory than that of her former husband. This sets her further apart from him: he possesses both a job and a car and wishes to secure further his social status through marriage to a woman who will look after both him and his children (and he will, presumably, no longer have to make his own breakfast). The physical movements of these two characters — that is, their journeys to the courthouse and their body language within the courtroom itself — convey very different stories. He is keen to portray himself as a decent man; we are, however, kept from knowing the reality of how he may have treated Wanda during their marriage — since it is only his perspective that is impressed upon the judge — yet the tentative, quiet, and hesitant nature of her 'physicality' suggests someone who is perhaps reluctant to draw attention towards herself for fear of reprisal. Wanda is someone of extremely limited resources both financially and emotionally (she cannot afford to expend anything of herself). Within the opening ten minutes of the film, she has been forced to leave what we presume to be, in some sense, a family home because she

is considered a nuisance, she has had to ask for a meagre amount of money from a man who clearly has little to get by on himself (a potential father figure), and she has been denigrated and condemned both in a personal capacity by her former husband and in an official capacity by an anonymous agent of patriarchal law. This is a woman who has to beg favours from and suffer the limited and pious judgments of a coterie of men who are sanctioned to arbitrate upon her life. It is no wonder she thinks her children would be better off with somebody else. She does not speak her case because she knows it was written long before she arrived in this particular court of law (which is simply a manifestation of the wider constraints placed on women socially, politically, economically, and spiritually). As a woman, in the specific roles of wife and mother, she has been deemed a failure. Why should she bother to make the effort of removing her hair rollers?

* * *

Cut to a long shot in high angle; Wanda enters from screen right and walks up a dimly-lit staircase towards. The camera, through its positioning, suggests anticipation of her movement (her trajectory as predetermined). Cut to an interior mid-shot; we are inside an office with a view, seen through a glass partition, onto a corridor, on the wall of which is prominently displayed a device to clock workers in and out (time as measure of productivity). We are in some kind of garment factory as women's dresses hang on racks attached to the wall in the furthest plane of the image. The soundtrack also suggests this through the incessant clatter and whirring of machinery. Wanda enters from screen right and is framed through the glass partition which is divided by timber framing. The camera tracks her hesitant movement to screen left. She seems unwilling or unable to draw attention to herself. A cut to Wanda's point of view reveals that she is looking at a middle-aged man, seated at a desk with a cigarette in his hand. He is busy talking on the telephone and briefly turns to glance at Wanda, but quickly preoccupies himself again with the telephone conversation (we surmise he is perhaps unwilling

to engage with her). Wanda seems to be waiting for permission to talk to him. She is consecutively re-framed seven times by the glass partition, a visual device which serves to underscore themes of separation, limitation, constriction, and distance. Our viewpoint, positioned from the interior of the office, detaches us further from Wanda. Like the previous scene set in the court room, the viewer is put in the position of bearing the weight of (implicitly male) judgment upon her. How comfortable does this make us feel? A series of seven short medium shots then convey the notably female labour carried out on a daily basis in this garment factory producing identikit dresses. The shots cohere through an emphasis on speed and rhythm of movement, and the varied pitch and timbre of the machinery. That these women stand on their feet and work with their hands is evident since it is the very physicality of their labour and the toll this takes that is foregrounded in this short sequence. Notably, the women's corporeal movements are inextricably bound to the machinery that facilitates their labour (they are literally parts of an industrial complex). A cut back to Wanda shows her being introduced to the boss via another female factory worker: we ascertain, therefore, that Wanda would neither have stepped forward nor would she have been invited to do so. She remains either largely invisible to those around her or is ignored by others. Her movements are markedly slower than those of the other women at busy labour. Wanda is granted entrance, but only allows herself to occupy the threshold space between the factory floor and the office. She stands with the door partially concealing her body so that she is both at once inside and outside of the room. Through a sequence of shot and counter-shot (a refusal of shared space or community), we come to understand that Wanda worked in this factory for two days during the previous week at a rate of twelve dollars per day. Her voice, like her body language, is taciturn and dampened as she makes her enquiry. Wanda is trying to understand why her rate of pay has been reduced to nine dollars and eighty-seven cents in totality (taxation). In effect, her wages have been cut in less than half. She is refused further work because she is simply 'too slow' to keep up

with the rate of production required. Although they are recruiting more people, Wanda specifically is deemed to be unsuitable for 'sewing operations' by the boss. Her offer to learn to become faster is rejected. This is devastating news which Wanda greets with silence (once again, she has nothing to say in response to a man who has already made up his mind about her use or lack thereof). She registers little emotional response in front of this man who has already turned away from her — either through indifference or discomfort at her presence — before she has even left his office. *She thanks him.*

Cut to a medium interior shot; we are inside a bar. Wanda enters into the frame from screen right. Once again, the camera has anticipated the space into which she will move. A voice reframes this initial shot as a point of view from the barman's perspective. He calls her 'blondie' and asks if she wants something (her boss back at the garment factory also referred to her condescendingly as 'lover', and asked what he could do for her). A cut back to a long shot reframes Wanda's reaction. Our perspective is now filtered through the gaze of two men (that of a patron and that of the proprietor). Wanda's presence is pinned between their two bodies within the frame; she stands with her back to them both. She turns around to ask hesitantly for a Rolling Rock beer. We cut back to Wanda's position as she seats herself at the table by the bar's window and retrieves her purse to pay the barman who has brought over her bottle of beer. A cut to a close-up of the patron seated at the bar then re-contextualises this previous shot as his point of view. Wanda is held as an object within the sphere of a doubly-figured male gaze here. The patron already has Wanda in his field of vision and, sure enough, he says that he will 'take care' of the price of her drink: he has objectified her in every sense. Wanda briefly glances back towards him, returns her purse to her handbag, and lowers her head into her left hand. She, and we, understand precisely the bargain that has just been bartered between the patron and barman without her explicit involvement or consent. Wanda is now an object that has been traded amongst men for the price of a single bottle of

beer. She pours the beer into her glass and does not turn to meet the gaze of the man who has effectively just bought her. Within less than a minute of screen time, Wanda has been reduced to a gendered body (her physical labour in the factory having been deemed valueless).

Cut to an interior mid shot; we are inside a motel. From across the room, we see Wanda curled up into a semi-foetal position on the upper right-hand corner of a bed and wrapped only in a white bedsheet (she is adroit at fitting herself into increasingly smaller spaces). An ellipsis in time has occurred, which amplifies the transactional and cold nature of this sexual encounter (this is not a film that brooks tender 'pillow talk'). A cut to a close-up mobile shot details a door to the right of the bed opening, from behind which emerges the man from the bar. The camera tracks back to screen left and into a close-up of Wanda's face as she lies sleeping. We infer that he is trying to depart discreetly from the motel room and thus to leave Wanda to wake up on her own, thus avoiding any awkward conversation that might ensue. As he gathers up his belongings to leave, the edge of his suitcase catches on the side of the luggage rack and wakes Wanda from slumber. She asks in a desultory, sleepy voice where he is going. He does not reply; Wanda, realizing that he is about to abscond, starts to dress herself, pulling on hurriedly her black bra and knickers (in which there are noticeable holes). Her naked form is framed from behind (she is not positioned as spectacle in this sense). As she dresses, she implores him to wait 'a minute,' but he has already left the motel room. The camera holds Wanda in mid-shot as she frantically dresses herself and grabs her handbag. This is the first time we see Wanda act with any speed or sense of urgency — her means to subsistence is currently dependent on the presence of this man. A sharp cut back to the man, who is now in the motel's car park, conveys that he seems to have no intention of waiting for her since he is hurrying to get his belongings into the car and he starts the car's engine before she has arrived on the scene. Wanda runs out into the car park, but strains to open the passenger car door. She

manages to get into the car just as he drives off. This struggle to ingratiate herself within masculine space — specifically into cars driven by men that might afford her some form of ‘transportation’ out of her current situation and life — will become an abiding motif in the film.

Cut to a long shot of a roadside kiosk; the camera tracks to screen right and zooms in on the approaching car. We can see Wanda is in the passenger seat. A series of clinically efficient cuts convey Wanda’s abandonment at the side of a road. She gets out of the car, presumably to order something at the kiosk which her male ‘companion’ has requested, but as soon as she has shut the car door, he pulls off at a great speed. Wanda half-heartedly chases after the car, but a cut to her point of view shows that this is pointless given the car’s already considerable progress down the road. We are unsure of her emotional response given her lack of exclamation and the fact that her ponytail, tied tightly atop her head (which makes her look decidedly child-like), conceals much of her face from view; in fact, she is captured mostly in profile shot. As she looks from left to right and back again, we infer that she is now unsure of which direction to head in. She picks up the whipped ice cream cone, which was clearly a ruse to ensure enough time for this man to abandon her. She lowers her head to gaze at the ground, seemingly in dejection (although once again, it is difficult to fathom any emotional resonance). This abandonment may simply be the latest incident of many: and someone who is repeatedly discarded after use (and treated as a childish nuisance) cannot afford to expend emotional energy on trying to fathom the callous motivations and indifference of other human beings.

This third stage of action adds a further gendered context to Wanda’s situation. She is a woman who is not only subjected to the continual judgments of men around her, she is also viewed as a disposable, worthless object by them. She is not quick or skilled

enough to be considered beneficial to any production line; and outside of commercial enterprise, she is also deemed to be of negligible value. What is the median value of nine dollars and a bottle of beer? Men do not engage in conversation with her and Wanda, perhaps knowing the futility of such efforts, does not attempt to argue her case. Men use her body for their own sexual satisfaction, but they are content to leave her in empty motel rooms or to discard her by the side of the road to fend for herself. Their behaviour towards her is markedly callous, calculating, and cowardly. Wanda, though, having no safety net to depend on, understands that she is, in some very real sense, dependent on the casual favours of men for her subsistence. When she cradles her head in her hands in the bar, when she shields her eyes from the gaze of avaricious men, I contend that she might be making an internal bargain with herself about how many affective compromises she can make in order, potentially, to get herself out of this situation. We understand the frantic desperation of her wanting to get more out of her side of this already skewed bargain: this is evident in her determination to get into the car of a man who has effectively sexually used and discarded her simply because he can convey her a little further down the road and away from a life she seems intent on leaving behind. Tellingly, though, the spaces she finds herself abandoned in are anonymous non-places, designed specifically for encounters that are fleeting, ephemeral, and temporary. Motels and roadside kiosks: these are places for those who are in transition. Yet this state of transition, of liminality, is a permanent state of non-belonging and non-identity for a woman like Wanda, and not a passage towards transformation. Wanda is an eternal passenger in life.

Cut to an interior and layered shot (multiple planes of action); we are in a shopping mall. The camera is positioned inside a shop so that a pane of glass divides the frame into two planes of action. In the foreground of the frame is a mannequin dressed

in a floral velvet suit in deep shades of red. Wanda slowly drifts into view from screen left. She is notably smaller in stature and partially obscured by the shop mannequin since she occupies the middle plane of the image. Further, she is divided from clear view by the shop's glass-fronted vitrine, which acts as reflective partition between us and Wanda obscuring her from view through the bustle and movement of the arcade. Once again, we observe Wanda from a distance then. The camera tracks her movement from inside the shop as she moves to screen right. A cut to an exterior shot then works to position the viewer behind Wanda so that we see the window display from her approximate perspective. We then move further into Wanda's perspective through an eyeline match. These mannequins are dressed in modern feminine fashions and are made up with long eyelashes and red lipstick. A counter-shot registers Wanda's face in close-up. Her reaction is opaque, but the visual contrast between the inanimate models and Wanda helps to underscore the fact that she is a woman who lacks the means to dress and make herself up similarly, should she even wish to do so (she possesses only the clothes she is wearing and the contents of her handbag). However, the viewer might also conclude that these two images held in direct close-up allude to Wanda's own status as an anonymous, doll-like figure who is subjected to the whims and desires of men and, by extension, the labour women perform on their own bodies in order to cohere to a specific image of femininity that is almost entirely bound up with male visual pleasure (something which Barbara Loden herself understood to be inextricably bound up with labour and performance). It also underscores the fact that Wanda lacks the means to 'self-fashion' if we are to understand this, in an undoubtedly problematic sense, as a facet of female subjectivity. The camera then slowly tracks Wanda, held in profile, walking away from the shop and disappearing into the open expanse of the mall.

Cut to mid-shot; Wanda is now outside on the street in a Mexican neighbourhood. The camera frames her from the road so that a series of parked cars obscure her slow progress from

screen left to right along the pavement. She is shot in profile throughout the sequence and her presence casts a shadow onto the buildings behind her that registers as a dark form of depletion (it recedes with her movement). A cut to a long shot tracks Wanda's movement into a cinema that is advertising screenings of Vicente Escrivá's *El golfo* (1969) and Chano Urueta's *El baron del terror* (1962).

Cut to an interior static mid-shot; we are inside the spacious darkness of the cinema. We see the film screen from behind Wanda whose head and knees (resting on the seat in front of her) occupy the lower part of the image (there is, in other words, no reaction shot). The frame is dominated by a figure on the cinema screen: a man (Raphael) singing a version of Ave Maria in a rather overblown, histrionic style. His song is accompanied by an orchestra and he is framed by fire. The image is predominantly black. At times the figure on screen appears as a disembodied and luminous floating head. The red light cast out from the cinema screen coupled with an increased ASA (film speed) renders Wanda as a grainy and glowing cypher — a silhouette on the verge of disintegration (also effected through the use of 16mm film stock).¹ Another cut to a long shot serves to decentre Wanda further. We see, at an extreme distance, that she has fallen asleep in her seat. On the far left of the screen, she appears as a lone and diminutive figure — in fact, as a white apparition that partially ruptures the shadow. She is barely visible. Though she is seemingly effaced, we recognise her by her hairstyle (that singular top knot) which catches the projector's light. A cinema

1 This effect may not have been Loden's authorial intention. Please see Ross Lipman's account of restoring *Wanda*: 'Defogging Wanda,' *The Criterion Collection*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6237-defogging-wanda>. The extended reading offered here refers to the French DVD release from M6 Video. However, subsequent viewing of the film via several theatrical releases in Sweden in 2020 did not convince me that the colour gradation is vastly different in the restored cinematic print, especially with regard to this scene. I have noticed only partial differences in the Criterion release from 2018/2019.

attendant is cleaning the aisles, but Wanda slumbers on, clearly having slept through the bombastic, overblown music. She is alone, exhausted, and noticeably vulnerable. The cinema attendant moves over to Wanda in order to wake her up. A cut to a mid-shot serves to inform the viewer that her handbag and wallet have been tampered with and the little money she possessed has now been stolen. The camera tracks Wanda's slow and silent movement out of the cinema screen. The scene closes with her form merging with the darkness — once again, seemingly swallowed up by space.

* * *

Taken together, these two sequences develop our understanding of Loden's evocative and emotionally intelligent use of space. Wanda's movement from the motel and roadside kiosk merely results in further occupation of liminal space. Both the shopping mall and the cinema are significant in terms of being specifically designed for mass entertainment and conspicuous consumption. They are reflective of particular (consumerist) forms of leisure through which individuals 'pass' their time or make time disappear. Wanda, who has nothing to occupy her beyond the daily grind and toil of eking out some form of meagre subsistence, finds that she does not have the means to attain any of the goods on display in the mall: leisure is a luxury she cannot truly afford and if she attends the cinema, it is to take refuge and sleep in the peace of darkness. Notably, these are both spaces in which one cannot stay for any lengthy period of time. Both sequences place a marked emphasis on her isolation and her fundamental lack of safety (where will she go at nightfall when relatively safe spaces are closed to her and with no funds whatsoever?) In the shopping mall, she is visually overcrowded and obfuscated from view by shop mannequins, and the other female shoppers she passes in the mall pay her negligible attention. In the cinema, she is shrouded in near darkness and appears as a small body of dissolution on the very margin of the film frame (an effect frequently wrought in genre film, such as horror, to suggest vulnerability and exposure to danger). This is a

woman who is constantly on the verge of disappearance: nobody notices her, and nobody expresses concern for her. If she is noticed, it is by men who want to extract something from her for their sole benefit and gain without ever seemingly giving thought to what it might mean to take from a woman who has no resources or provisions of her own. Wanda's isolation endangers her; her existence is not only palpably lonely, it is parlous. The formal arrangement of space makes this highly evident to the viewer. We can conjecture that in rendering herself transparent by articulating or giving voice to her inner world she would, in fact, only weaken further her already limited resources (that she might articulate a vulnerability that could be used against her). It is also painfully apparent that she is not a woman to whom people listen anyway. Wanda is a woman living without the luxury of having choices.

* * *

Cut to an exterior long shot; the scene opens on an anonymous section of highway at nightfall. The pale yellow light of passing cars, billboards, and street lighting bleeds out of the darkness. There is nothing to identify this street as a specific or definitive place. The most prominent sound is that of an emergency klaxon. Cut to an interior mid shot of a seemingly unoccupied and dimly-lit bar. The door to the bar opens and Wanda walks through it; simultaneously, a grey-haired man appears from behind the bar's counter (we surmise that he has been concealing himself underneath it). He aggressively shouts at Wanda that the bar is closed (he mistakenly thought the door was locked). He moves around the bar and tries to manhandle her physically off the premises. She tells him she needs to use the toilet facilities for 'just one minute' (a phrase she used previously when imploring the man with whom she had a sexual encounter in the motel to wait for her) and manoeuvres herself out of his grip. Wanda is trying to bargain for (a minimal amount of) time. As the man hurries to the bar's front door in order to lock it, Wanda runs to the restroom. The man now approaches the centre foreground of the frame. He is middle-aged, wears tinted glasses

with heavy frames, and is dressed in an ill-fitting dark brown suit and tie. He is thoroughly unremarkable except for the fact that the tinted lenses of his glasses possibly suggest someone who prefers to be an observer rather than to be seen. He seems impatient to get Wanda out of the bar. A cut to a close-up shot moves us inside the restroom where Wanda is standing in front of a broken mirror. The camera is positioned behind her so that we see her face as a partial and fragmented reflection. Once again, she is re-framed within the film's frame, a device which serves to intensify our characterization of Wanda as a woman who is confined, trapped, and, in some sense, already fractured. This is not, in any way, an image that serves to confirm identity, but rather to rupture its coherence. Wanda lowers her face so that her eyes are obscured from view; she cannot meet her own gaze. The sequence subsequently cross cuts between the man in the bar, waiting impatiently, his face growing visibly angry and frustrated, and Wanda who is washing her hands and face over the sink in the toilet (this dynamic already sets the tone for their ensuing relationship). Wanda holds her face in her hands in a manner that recalls that similarly quiet and resigned gesture she made in the previous bar where sex with her was procured for the price of a beer and a night's rest. Wanda leaves the bathroom and the camera tracks the man's movements as he retreats back to behind the bar. As she asks him for a paper towel to dry her face, the camera crosses the axis of action. This visual discombobulation and rupture coincides with the camera panning down to a second man lying on the floor with a gag in his mouth. The situation has suddenly and drastically altered. Wanda has, in fact, walked into a hold-up. The subsequent action plays out through a series of re-framings, shots, and counter-shots. The man, whom we postulate was in the midst of trying to ransack the money from the cash register when Wanda walked into the bar, ineptly tries to meet Wanda's demands for a paper towel, a drink, and a comb. He clearly does not know his way around the bar since he notably cannot pour a full glass of beer for Wanda and is consistently irritable with her (we cannot be sure of the extent to which Wanda reads or misses the warning

signs). The camera is, for the most part, positioned behind the bar so that the viewer possesses a viewpoint onto — and knowledge of — the action that Wanda herself does not hold or possess. Wanda is content to regale this man with the depressing events of her day ('do you know what happened to me? They stole all my money,' she says). Curiously, though, her determination to inveigle various items (including a personal comb, since hers was stolen in the cinema) from this man is suggestive of her trying to ingratiate herself into his life: it is a very subtle, yet clever form of feminine manipulation (we can no longer assume that Wanda is 'dumb'). She asks him direct questions, which he has no intention of answering. She imparts private details of her day. It is nightfall and she has nowhere to go or to sleep. That drawn-out gesture back in the bathroom, which graphically matches her posture in the previous bar, may signify Wanda's calculation of having to make yet another affective bargain. This man, in this bar, on this evening, is currently her only option. And her method works. The man elects to leave with Wanda by commanding her 'let's go' [let *us* go]. Wanda, this lonely woman, perilously dependent on the dubious favours of unkind men, has become part of a unit of two. She displays, in this scene, an implicit and subtle form of (gendered) agency.

Cut to a medium long-shot; Wanda is in a diner with the man from the bar. The proprietor is cleaning the tables and preparing the diner for closing. The action cuts into a series of close-ups conveyed through shot and counter shot. Wanda is eagerly eating a bowl of spaghetti with tomato sauce (he notes that she is a sloppy eater). Her male 'companion' is sitting opposite her and smoking a cigar. Neither of them make eye contact with each other (their glances constantly evade the other's detection) whilst the editing suggests that they are two lonely people who happen to be sharing the same dining booth (they remain resolutely isolated from one another — which recalls the earlier exchange with her boss in the garment factory). A cut to a medium shot of the proprietor looking at them through the kitchen door suggests further that he is anxious for them to leave the prem-

ises (he seems harried and vexed). The conversation between Wanda and her companion is ripe with passive aggression and hostility on his part. He chastises her about her poor table manners and tells her to wipe her mouth as though she were a small child whom he is trying to discipline (he seems angered, if not appalled, by her appetite, by her seemingly unashamed orality, which briefly indicates who Wanda might *really* be under all those layers of studied self-protection). She tries once again to instigate a dialogue with him through various personal details (she asks him if he likes mopping up spaghetti sauce with scraps of bread). He does not respond to any of Wanda's attempts to converse, but rather stares at her in a markedly hostile fashion. She, however, attempts to maintain an upbeat and carefree disposition despite his lack of response (since she does not have the luxury of anger or confrontation). He takes some tablets, but does not answer Wanda's enquiry as to whether he is suffering from pain (he rejects any personal exchange of details, anything that might convey a sense of interior feeling or lived experience onto which she could attach). The scene plays out as though we are witnessing a long-term couple who no longer speak to one another (he is at once both cruelly familiar with her, yet noticeably suspicious as if he is trying to 'read' her before she can gain purchase on him). He clearly finds her presence irritating. We note that this is how every man has, thus far, treated Wanda — a woman who is, in fact, markedly adept at trying to appease and soothe the irascible and inexplicable temper tantrums of men either by directly meeting their immediate needs and demands, or by diminishing herself physically (it is not she who is the source of annoyance, it is female presence in general).

Cut to a medium close-up shot; we are once again in a hotel room. Wanda is lying on the edge of the double bed, whilst her companion occupies the centre of the mattress and lies with his back to Wanda; she is repeatedly represented as a woman who is unable to take up or is pushed out of space. The entire right portion of the bed is empty. There is, therefore, ample space for both of them to lie comfortably, but Wanda is forced to confine

herself (this use of space foretells a relationship held together by forms of punishment and control). They are lying under a white sheet, presumably having had sex (once again, the sexual act is conveyed through an ellipsis). We find out that the man Wanda has spent the evening with is called Mr Dennis. She asks him if he cares to know her name, to which he responds in the negative. He refuses to engage with her questions as to his marital status (he does not like 'nosey people') and reacts suddenly and violently to her attempts to touch him (he does not like 'friendly people'). Wanda's discrete and muted gestures suggest anxiety and discomfort. Mr Dennis pulls himself up to a sitting position in the bed and, thus, takes up even further space on the mattress. He then begins to issue a series of imperatives to her: Get up! Get dressed! Go out and get me something to eat! He gives directions to the nearest place for her to procure food (Wanda is reluctant to go out into the night on her own and tells him everything will surely be closed in the middle of the night). He hands her clothes back to her in an abrupt fashion and demands that she make it 'snappy' because he is hungry: her concerns for her safety hold no weighty significance in comparison to his needs. She may have implicated herself into his life in order to secure food and shelter for the night, but he has also ably read her as a woman who has no option but to function as his mercenary and container. If this is a perverse sort of game, she has been out-manoeuvred.

Ellipsis; Wanda is now dressed. She is searching in her handbag for her wallet, but cannot find it (a loss to which she is indifferent since there was 'nothing in it anyhow'). As the camera tracks out from close-up to mid-shot, we observe that Mr Dennis is still sitting in bed and is issuing further instructions. He demands she make sure there is no 'garbage...no onions...no butter' on his hamburger. He wants the bun 'toasted' and he also wants her to buy him a newspaper. As he reclines on the bed, he repeats the directions to her as to where she can procure these items. Wanda repeatedly seems to have trouble recalling the details (she is very possibly anxious). He slaps money into the palm of

her hand, but notably does not thank her. Interaction between them, once again, is conveyed via shot and counter shot. They rarely appear within the same frame during these interactions and if so, they do not make eye contact. Interaction between them is still strikingly impersonal. Left in the hotel room alone, Mr Dennis seems to be attentive to the slightest noise (whether it comes from the hotel corridor or from the street outside). He fetches another cigar from his jacket pocket which is resting on the dresser. Wanda's lost wallet falls off the dresser and onto the floor. Mr Dennis picks it up and looks through it whilst sitting on the bed. Through his point of view, in close-up, we see that the wallet contains old photographs of Wanda's now former husband and her two children, which in the space of days has become a lifetime ago. Alerted by a distant police car's siren, Mr Dennis moves to the window and surreptitiously looks out onto the street. Again, through his point of view (as a high angled, long-distance shot), we see Wanda standing on the pavement and talking to a man. She then walks out of sight with the man. The action cuts back to a mid-shot of Mr Dennis in the hotel room; he takes one last glance at Wanda's wallet and the photographs before discarding it into a rubbish bin. He then locks the hotel room door and turns off the light. We are immersed in darkness.

Cut to a mid-shot of Mr Dennis lying on the double bed, his arms and legs stretched out so as to take up the entirety of the mattress. We are unsure of how much time has elapsed. A knock at the hotel room door rouses him into an anxious spate of action. It is Wanda. She begins to knock persistently and noisily at the door and calls out his name. Mr Dennis, having pulled on his trousers, rushes to the door and opens it. He greets her viciously ('hey, stupid!') and pulls her into the hotel room. A cut coincides with him turning on the bedroom light and violently slapping her cheek. She draws away from him, notably shocked and confused, but we register that she already has an affective response to violence registered within her body suggesting that this is not the first time a man has unleashed his aggression on

her. He snatches the newspaper from her and demands she put the food on the table. As the camera tracks across the room to Wanda, Mr Dennis moves towards her and seemingly threatens to hit her again with the newspaper. She is trying to explain why she took longer to find the things he asked for (the shop he suggested was shut). Wanda tries to soothe her smarting face with her hand, whilst handing him back his remaining money. She tells him he has hurt her, but he barely registers the statement. He then chastises her for bringing back hamburgers that contain 'onions' and 'garbage' and demands that she remove the ingredients that she knows he does not like. The camera tracks her movement over to the rubbish bin in which she finds her wallet (he notably does not respond to her question as to why it is in there) and begins to remove the excess salad and 'garbage' from his burger bun (with which her lived history and recent past now equates). Once again, he does not thank her (this woman who continually feels she must thank men who remain unwilling to help her). The camera tracks between them as they eat this meal in the same room, yet remain completely isolated from one another emotionally. Their only contact is the physical imprint he has left on her face, the aftershock of which she attends to with the back of her own hand. This is a most brutal form of intimacy they are building. Neither is the food a source of companionship and reciprocity between them (as the simple act of eating, or rituals around food can be). He does not respond to her attempts to start a conversation. A cut to mid-shot shows Wanda eating her burger with her eyes lowered, whilst Mr Dennis intermittently looks at her as though with disgust. His gaze seems to compel her into feeling shame or fright (has she seen this look before somewhere?) He remains seated on the bed; she, however, sits on the edge of the radiator (and is manifestly pushed to the edge of the film frame). His persistent and contemptuous gaze registers increasingly as the deliberate source of her humiliation. This is, perhaps, part of his plan. Whether he does so consciously or not, in whittling down her esteem and internal resources, he renders her dependent on him (as her tormenter and bully, he also becomes the sole individual

who could alleviate her pain if she has no emotional strength of her own or alternate source of support on which she can draw). If this is so, it is painful to witness the alacrity with which he has identified and isolated Wanda's vulnerabilities and begun to use them against her.

* * *

Wanda and Mr Dennis have only just met one another, but an abusive power dynamic has already been established between them. He is not interested in her as an individual (Wanda notably is not addressed by her name, but rather carries the ignominy of men's dismissive and misogynist slang — 'blondie,' 'stupid'); he rejects entirely any attempt to know her (discarding her personal history literally into a dustbin). She is merely a means to achieving his own ends: a receptacle, an emotional container, suitable to aid fulfilment of his own crass needs and indiscriminate drives. Spatially, Wanda cannot be located (we do not know precisely where in America she currently is beyond yet another liminal space designed for mere transition); she is forced to tolerate cruel and rebarbative treatment by men in order to retain a (temporary) roof over her head and find food to eat; she is not able to gain any space of her own (she constantly occupies the margins or edge of the film frame or she is forced to make herself smaller in order to fit into an increasingly diminishing sense of personal space); she is not able to have any time to herself (her movements are dictated by the timetables of men around her, whether they happen to be an impatient manager at a diner or an irascible crook who is constantly vigilant in order to evade capture by the police). She is punished for the slightest infraction or mistake verbally and physically. She is constantly confronted with demands and injunctions. In striking her, Mr Dennis has left his mark on her, literally and psychologically. Although we surmised that abuse and assault were perhaps already embedded in her bodily register (her inability to take up space suggests so), we now have definitive proof. Her humiliation is compounded not only by his self-indulgent and vain hostility towards her, but also by the knowledge that this man

remains her only current option in order to meet the most basic of human requirements (shelter and nourishment). That she tries to soothe him, that she tries to calm him, that she tries to adopt a docile manner towards him in direct contrast to his brutality speaks to the dangerously unbalanced dynamic of their very brief relationship — from which she cannot leave since there are no feasible alternatives; one can speculate that her slowness and forgetfulness may be deliberate — her only mode of subversion and agency. Within hardly any time at all, Mr Dennis has tried to fashion Wanda into complicity and compliance by casual cruelty and wanton violence. It is telling that the sexual act between them is absented through an ellipsis. Just as with her previous assignation in the motel, this relationship is not one of mutual interest and care, but one entirely of transaction in which Wanda is an object traded amongst cowardly and vicious men. It would be erroneous to think, though, that Wanda is not aware of this. Her only private moment, back in the bar's restroom, conveys everything we need to know in that single resigned gesture: private emotion is a fading resource for Wanda. With each compromise, she loses more than she has to give. And yet, there is no alternative.

* * *

Cut to an external mid-shot; the camera pans leftwards from a stretch of highway to a church. The bells of the church are ringing and summoning parishioners to worship. We presume, therefore, that it may be Sunday; we might contrast the families filing up the steps and into the church (an increasingly redundant and otiose ritual centred on specific notions of community and family) with the unfurling narrative between Mr Dennis and Wanda (two loners with seemingly very little to tether them to either community or family). A cut to an interior mid-shot reframes this establishing shot as if it were Mr Dennis's point of view or an eyeline match (the action is, in fact, closer in proximity than it would be if shown strictly from his perspective, I think; nonetheless, it is curious that we are inside his narrative process of meaning making and not that of Wanda). The cam-

era tracks out to reveal Wanda sleeping face down on the bed underneath a white bedsheet (we might recall our introduction to her as a character — she is still on borrowed time, and at the mercy of a man who will decide if she can stay or must leave). Mr Dennis, by contrast, is fully dressed and seems anxiously alert to the bustle of the street outside. Suddenly, he strikes the table with both hands forcefully and wakes Wanda abruptly from sleep. A sharp cut into a close-up of her face suggests perhaps both shock and alarm on her part. His impatience determines her movement and mood (she is now on his timetable).

Cut to an exterior long shot; the camera, seemingly through a telephoto lens once more, traces Mr Dennis and Wanda as they walk down the street. His movements are centrally framed, whilst she remains peripheral to the action. Wanda appears as a vague adumbration that occasionally crests on the margin of the film frame (as if to confirm her lack of agency, her status as minor player in Mr Dennis's narrative). As the camera cuts in closer, we can observe that he is trying to break into a car. He was, therefore, observing the parishioners entering the church in order to wait for the optimum moment to break into one of the parked cars. The soundtrack is noticeably muted during this action, which serves to heighten the surreptitious nature of his activity. Once he finds an open car and hastily climbs into the driver's seat, Wanda asks him what he is doing, to which he demands that she get into the car quickly. She stares at him quizzically whilst he tries to jump-start the car. He reacts angrily when she passes him the car key, which she has easily found and asks 'why don't you just use these?', and he sharply tells her to make up her mind as to whether she wants to stay in the car or get out and walk (again, much as an adult might reprimand a petulant child: it seems that he is angered by her observation and, thus, the fact that she is not as conveniently 'stupid' as he had previously assumed her to be). Despite being told to 'make up her mind' by Mr Dennis, Wanda appears to be more inclined to resist passively any attempt to make such a decision, and thus becomes a passenger on a journey to an unspecified destination.

This scenario is, increasingly, not of her own making. Yet the implication that she has an easy choice to make belies the reality of her predicament: having options is a luxury when you are struggling to survive.

Cut to a close-up interior shot; we are now inside the car with Mr Dennis and Wanda. The action is organised through shot and counter shot. Wanda reads aloud from the newspaper to Mr Dennis about the robbery he committed in the bar. This may be, we contend, the first time that she understands fully the nature of the situation in which she has somewhat unwittingly gotten herself embroiled. They are not held within the film frame together (this is not a criminal partnership predicated on scheming and plotting), but rather shot separately so that Mr Dennis reacts to Wanda's slow and studied words (it is very possible that Wanda may have trouble reading). We note that he seems to be both amused and proud of the fact that his crime has caught the attention of the media (he asks her to read the story out to him twice). Wanda is, notably, facing backwards, whereas Mr Dennis, who is at the wheel of the car, is facing forwards. The scene therefore registers visually the dissonance between these two characters. Mr Dennis, buoyed up by his new-found 'celebrity', may have a plan — however clumsy and ill-conceived it appears to be — but Wanda is his passenger and is only beginning to register the full implications of her part in all of this. For Mr Dennis, this half-baked, poorly executed life of crime constitutes a directional blueprint (a future towards which he is oriented and which he believes harbours, presumably, better things) and, fittingly, his 'movement' is consistent with the passing landscape. Conversely, Wanda's 'movement' through space registers as a disruption. She is passively being drawn into a future which she has not chosen, yet faces a past that fades from view (she has severed herself from anything that would bind her to that former life). She literally cannot turn around to face the future. Spatially and temporally, these two characters are utterly disconnected. 'What are you trying to get me into?' she asks him, a question that is met only with a further injunction to exit

the car. Confronted continually with the threat of abandonment by an indifferent man (this time to a forested roadside rather than a roadside kiosk, which suggests a further stage of liminality), Wanda tells herself a knowing lie. *'I didn't do anything'*, she says. For Wanda, her passivity asserts her innocence. Through Wanda's eyes, we see the empty road recede away (signifying erasure). There is no going back. Yet there is no future (conceived of as horizon) either.

Cut to an interior mid-shot; a series of close-up shots set up this scene. In quick succession we see a bottle of whiskey, Wanda's near-catatonic facial expression, and Mr Dennis handling a gun. Wanda appears to be prostrate; her, by now, recognisable top knot is askew which lends her appearance a doll-like gait (it works as a disguise that can render her inscrutable — she can take refuge behind it — but it also seems to confirm her social position as a woman who has been worn down by manipulation and the erosion of her own will). The camera pans out to reveal a third person. An elderly looking man, behind whom is parked the stolen car. We are in a dimly-lit garage. A cut to medium long-shot situates Mr Dennis in conversation with this man. Between them, on a makeshift table, is the bottle of whiskey from which they drink. In the far plane of the image, Wanda lies, once more, in a foetus-like position on top of an upturned rectangular wooden box; she is curled tightly into herself and her body language is regressive and self-protective (we recognise this now as a pattern of behaviour that must be deeply, psychologically rooted). A cut into close-up reveals that she has shut her eyes as if to absent herself from the unfolding situation (this feels both futile and devastating to behold). Mr Dennis is seemingly trying to inveigle this man into performing some kind of heist with him. He wants the man to be the 'getaway' driver and appears to be trying to mitigate any frisson of risk (this man would only function as the driver). The man responds that there is, nonetheless, a risk involved, which he is unwilling to take since he is dying (he does not 'have long') and his son is returning home and he wants to set him up with his own finances, however mea-

gre. We note that this conversation is one of the first in the film to be conveyed through use of the medium shot that keeps both characters in frame simultaneously. Further, Mr Dennis neither reprimands nor scolds this man and does not resort to violent threats (as he does with Wanda). It is possible, of course, that he is a long-standing friend, but we cannot help but notice that this conversation between men affords a kind of decency and fundamental respect which is altogether lacking in Mr Dennis's interactions with women. The spatial set-up of the scene suggests that it is rather Wanda who will be the casualty of this situation: a woman who is physically trying to make herself smaller, unnoticeable, child-like, and mute as a plan is being hatched above her head. This woman who bears witness to this conversation passively is, by virtue of her (non) presence, now implicated in its repercussions.

Cut to an exterior mid-shot; the camera frames Wanda and Mr Dennis from outside through the car's windscreen. The framing pans between Wanda and Mr Dennis at the wheel of the car. He seems to be in some measure of physical pain. He asks her if she can drive a car, to which she responds that she guesses she can 'kind of' (since we know that she previously had no access to a car, we might conjecture that she does not have a license so cannot drive in an 'official' sense). He draws the car towards the side of the road and exits from the driver's seat. A cut to the exterior registers his movement around to the passenger side. A further cut moves us into the car's interior with Wanda now at the wheel. Once again, the camera does not frame them within the same space, but alternates between points of view. The consistent use of the close-up shot helps to convey both Wanda's concern (Mr Dennis is consuming copious amounts of painkillers) and her hesitation about the direction she should be taking. He instructs her to keep quiet and to keep driving 'straight on.' Even once she is at the wheel of the car (in some sense, therefore, in control), she is entirely dependent on the instruction of Mr Dennis. He has, in effect, neatly and quickly established that

Wanda can both drive a car and follow instructions at the same time. *She has become useful to him.*

Cut to an exterior mid-shot; Wanda is sitting at the wheel of the car and looking anxious. Mr Dennis exits from what appears to be a small convenience store carrying cans of beer and other provisions. The camera tracks his movement to the car. He instructs Wanda to pull off at some speed ('let's go...come on, let's go!') and we see, in long shot, the car progress down the road further at a considerable pace (she can certainly drive). We contend that Mr Dennis has stolen these items from the store, hence his concern that they move quickly to escape being noticed. Wanda has now transgressed (however passively) into the role of the 'getaway driver.'

Cut to an interior point of view; we are back inside the car. The scene plays out through a series of shifts in perspective. Wanda is held in profile. She seems profoundly aware that Mr Dennis is assessing her reaction. The minute movements of her jaw suggest apprehension; she seems to be trying to gauge his mood out of the corner of her eye. An eyeline match from her approximate perspective reveals that he has not only stolen items from the store, but a considerable amount of money as well which he is counting out in his hands. Neither of them exchange any words. Mr Dennis, we note, frequently gazes out of the car's rear view screen, to check that they are not being pursued.

* * *

Wanda's existence, once again, is defined in the negative: by what she cannot do, by what she has not done, by her inaction, by her passivity. Her refusal to act, in a sense, is a form of defence against what other people project upon her and demand of her (especially with regard to men). This sequence economically sets out how someone like Wanda, a woman without the luxury of choice, empowerment, and agency, might become embroiled into a life of crime simply because she has no other option. The glamor-

ous veneer of crime that Hollywood is so keen to impress upon its viewers is nowhere evident in this portrait of a slow and steady slide into criminality (when life has dealt no other hand). This is the inverse of Jean-Luc Godard's infamous statement that all one needs to make a film is a girl and a gun (Loden's response being to make an 'ugly' film of desultory, loosely enchaind, and clumsy action at the heart of which is a woman who cannot affect any change in the course or direction of the narrative since it was written long before she arrived on the scene). Wanda is not a romantic outlaw who has chosen the life she leads: she was born into it. The world around her, and the people in it, have defined her before she could gain any purchase on her environment and her place or identity within it. Her sole protection is to declare her innocence precisely through passivity. Wanda's 'dilemma' is, as I have said previously, not existential in this sense: she does not define herself through action, but rather through her inaction (her life is not the sum of considered choices and ethically pure actions). Wanda, a woman who is moved through space by men and vehicles (who is quite literally a passenger) does not have the benefit of choreographing her own life, even when she is at the wheel and in the driver's seat. She is a marionette — her appearance, in this respect, is calculated. She already knows what is expected from her; she already knows what offers her the greatest chances of survival in this world, even if it means complying with the pre-conceived and, small-minded assumptions of others (which is clearly not the same thing as collusion). She is a perfect container.

* * *

Cut to an exterior mid-shot; Wanda is sitting on top of the bonnet. Now re-framed in a long shot, we see that they have parked within a green, but markedly industrial, landscape. Two stray dogs circle Mr Dennis's feet. The camera zooms in slightly to re-frame Wanda and Mr Dennis within the same space. Mr Dennis is drunk. A cut into close-up reveals that he is drinking a bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey, which he intersperses with sips from a beer can labelled 'Real Draft' (this is clearly, then, an inten-

tional, hard drinking session the sole purpose of which is only ever to achieve the release of total inebriation). He chastises the dogs to 'go away,' but his tone is notably softer towards these animals than it has been previously towards Wanda (there *is* tenderness in him). A reverse close-up now focuses on Wanda who is also drinking beer and eating a snack, but does not seem to be as half-cut as Mr Dennis. He comes into view behind her and, remarkably, places his jacket on her shoulders — this is an astonishing gesture for which this scene is all the more pivotal. Wanda remarks that the sun is going down; the camera tightly frames her face, which is limned by the soft glow of the setting sun. She is truly beautiful in this moment. An infinitesimal and fleeting shift in mood has occurred.

A drunken, slightly playful conversation ensues about Wanda's hair, which is translated through the camera's consistent panning movement between the two. He tells her that her hair looks 'terrible' and he thinks she should 'cover it up' with a hat (his tenderness could not last). Wanda initially responds that she has lost her hair rollers (yet another item she can no longer locate). Yet the subsequent conversation reveals something profoundly personal about Wanda's view of the world. As such, she takes the opportunity to divulge her perspective to Mr Dennis, possibly *because* he is drunk and his remarks to her about her appearance are pointedly absurd (she genuinely emits a sense of security in herself which is not revealed to us up until this moment). She tells him that she has nothing 'to get a hat with' and adds further, 'I don't have anything; I never had anything; I never will have anything.' He retorts that she is 'stupid,' an assessment which she subsequently seems to reaffirm by saying 'I'm stupid.' However, her tone does not suggest demurral (Wanda is not a woman who speaks affirmatively — she is perhaps hesitant to articulate herself in a language that is constantly being used against her), but it does imply that she is questioning his inference based on what she has just said (is she 'stupid' for making a statement that is a patently clear and honest appraisal of her own existence? Or is she stupid for not sharing his values? For not wanting to make

good of this 'lack'? For recognizing that this is a fundamentally impossible task?). He seems to sense that this is, essentially, an expression of an ideological difference between them, so he develops his appraisal of her by saying, 'if you don't want anything, you won't have anything; if you don't have anything, you're nothing; you may as well be dead: *you're not even a citizen of the United States.*' Tellingly, Wanda counters, 'perhaps I'm dead, then.' The camera tracks into close-up. She seems to be smiling and shrugs off his remarks perhaps indifferently. We intuit this may be the first time Mr Dennis has really listened to Wanda's perspective and she has spoken a deeply held truth about her existence and her values here — however poorly he may have taken it. The conversation, once again, conveyed in shot and reverse shot suggests the incompatibility of their world views.

Meanwhile, a sharp and insistent noise, not unlike an electrical current, has increased in volume on the diegetic soundtrack (non-diegetic sound is, in fact, notably absent). It builds up to the point of derailing the conversation and draws Mr Dennis towards its source. A cut to the open skyline reveals that it is a toy aeroplane that is circuiting overhead. Mr Dennis chases after it demanding that it 'come back.' He issues futile and inane instructions at it, just as he has done so with the stray dogs and Wanda. He leaps up onto the car roof, still calling for the aeroplane to 'come here' and 'hang on,' as it flies ever further away from him. We are struck by this sight of a middle-aged man flailing at what he cannot grasp (shot from a low angle as if deliberately to chastise his impotent claim for control over a mechanical object); this is a man who shouts his ridiculous, quixotic mandates into an expanse of indifferent sky; this is a drunken fool who, upon realizing his words have no effect, simply returns to the one individual over whom he feels he can exercise control: Wanda — whose hair, naturally, remains an issue for him. Meanwhile, she observes the aeroplane's trajectory, a course over which she knows she has no control.

Cut to a close-up shot; Wanda is trying to wake up Mr Dennis who is asleep in a drunken stupor on the car's bonnet. She tells him that it is getting cold. The camera cuts out to a long shot of the car, Mr Dennis, Wanda, and the stray dogs — a portrait of isolated loners amongst whom there has been only the briefest of connections. The golden light of evening has dispersed into twilight. We are back within the harsher grey and blue tones of earlier moments in the film. The grain of the image, once again, becomes more prominent (due to low levels of light) and evokes disintegration. The moment has gone.

* * *

This is a pivotal scene in the film and, fittingly, it occurs at its midpoint. We can read this moment between Wanda and Mr Dennis as a caesura within which some experiential measure of Wanda's internal world emerges for us. It is crucial because it demands that we retroactively read her passivity in light of her own words here; the disarming simplicity and directness with which she offers up her experience of the world serves to offset her perspective against that of Mr Dennis. Through Wanda, Loden's own authorial voice surfaces as both empathic towards those who are worn down by the daily grind of poverty, and necessarily critical of the systemic nature of their oppression (that it is designed to keep them there). Wanda is someone who exists on the other side of hope: she does not have the luxury of believing in the clichés in which Mr Dennis is seemingly still so pointlessly invested; perhaps she is baffled by his naivety. Life has diminished any ability she may have had to believe in such comforting platitudes. She knows life does not make good on an investment predicated on pure desire (I want) because for her, and for millions like her, even mere subsistence (I need) is refused. It is neither her 'stupidity,' as Mr Dennis once again too-easily assumes, nor her lack of will that keeps her from attaining the things he is searching for so desperately, but the indifference of a political and economic system predicated on egregious capitalist theocracy. Her quiet resignation to the fact that those who are born into nothing are also those who nearly always end up with

nothing speaks of a deeply-held and hard-won form of knowledge. This is a woman who knows that it is not she who is broken, but rather the world into which she was born. A world that etiolates those that it also necessarily feeds off. To fight a system so intransigent and apathetic to the plight of those who are poorest is also, in some sense, to sacrifice oneself; but martyrdom relies on a certain luxury — that one possesses something, in the first place, that one is willing and able to sacrifice for a greater good. But what is this 'good'? Wanda is, thus, a woman who refuses to be broken by a system that will not break itself for her — and for people like her. Her passivity, her resignation, I suggest, does not stem from stupidity or a lack of lucidity: it is her mode of survival in the world; it is the only thing she has at her disposal which allows her to keep on keeping on. She already knows that Mr Dennis, a man who is driven by the desire to embody the mores and possessions of a society that does not want him and will make no place for him, will end up being destroyed by the very thing he wants so mindlessly. Is this why she can pass off his cruelty and his ill-founded aspersions on her character with ease? She already passed through and left the place from which he speaks long ago. She is on the other side of that now, watching as he flails impotently at the sky.

* * *

Cut to an establishing shot; We are in an expansive and densely packed industrial car park. A store sign — WOOLWORTHS — emblazoned prominently in red, occupies the central portion of this initial long shot. A subsequent interior mid-shot from inside a car captures Mr Dennis trawling the parked vehicles. Cut to a long shot of Wanda exiting Woolworths. Cross cut to an interior shot from inside the car that Mr Dennis is breaking into. Cut to an exterior shot that reveals he is stealing items of clothing (a pair of shoes): they have both gone shopping. The camera tracks his movement back to 'their' car. Mr Dennis places the stolen items in the car's boot. Cut to Wanda hurrying back to Mr Dennis who is standing waiting by the car. She is dressed in a pair of lemon-yellow trousers, and a floral A-line, sleeve-

less blouse with a complementary floral hairpiece (a form of hat — she did listen to him, after all). The ensemble really does suit her, but Mr Dennis berates her once again by telling her that his strict instructions were for her to purchase a dress (that most perennial signifier of femininity). She tells him she did (it is in the package wrapped in paper, which she is carrying). The outfit Wanda is wearing then is clearly one she has specifically chosen for herself (this is important given a perceptible change in her demeanour during the previous scene); she actually seems excited. Unsurprisingly though, since she has not followed his explicit demands, Mr Dennis commands her to ‘get in the back’ of the car and put on the dress (once again, that berating, belittling, bullying tone has entered into the scene).

Cut to an exterior long shot of their car on a freeway. Wanda’s yellow trousers are disposed out of the car’s window. The car moves out of the frame as the camera pulls in to focus on the discarded item of clothing left adrift on the road (there is something markedly poignant about this). Cut to a close-up of Wanda’s face. Once again, she is facing backwards and looking at the trousers. His ensuing need to upbraid her for her sartorial ‘transgression’ (‘No Slacks! When you’re with me: no slacks’) suggests that he evidently feels she has disrespected *his* authority on several levels (perhaps by trying to ‘wear the trousers’ in addition to not listening to his strict instructions); yet curiously he does not seem to have noticed that she has been wearing ‘slacks’ for the entirety of their brief ‘relationship’. Cut to a close-up of Wanda who seems possibly bewildered by his characteristic belligerence. Sharp cut to Mr Dennis throwing a set of hair curlers out of the car’s window. Cut to a travelling mid-shot of the discarded hair curlers ricocheting off the road (given the prominence of the curlers as a signifier — that a set even feature in the very first shot of Wanda, and that she even wears them into the courtroom to grant her husband a divorce — this feels like an explicit rejection of something deeply meaningful to Wanda herself). ‘No hair curlers!’ Cut to a close-up of Wanda whose face registers resignation as he informs her that hair curlers make her

'look cheap.' She does not respond to his rhetorical question: 'do you want to look cheap?' He grabs a lipstick from out of her hands and summarily disposes of it out of the window. The camera remains focused on Wanda: this is not merely about material items –although these are rare luxuries for her (however 'cheap') and his careless and indiscriminate disposal of them denotes a crushing indifference to her happiness. There is something annihilating and violent in his refusal to allow Wanda any form of self-expression or agency, however meagre it may be. A severe lack of means does not, of course, preclude a desire to possess 'nice things', and this offered her the rarest of opportunities to exercise some measure of choice in her own life. His assessment of her taste as 'cheap' is really a judgment about her 'value' as a woman to him.

Cut to a series of exterior mid-shots that progressively move into mobile close-up; Wanda is sitting in the car's passenger seat with her legs rotated outside of the car's chassis. She is painting her nails (we may recall the chipped varnish on her nails within the film's opening sequence). Mr Dennis appears to be re-packing their previous items of clothing into a bag for disposal into the 'Goodwill Industries' charity container placed to screen right (this gesture reads as a disposal of old identities, rather than as a charitable act of 'good will' towards — or expression of solidarity with — those in poverty). Wanda puts on a pair of white, high-heeled sandals that match the sleeveless, white shift dress she is wearing. She exclaims that they fit and so we infer that these shoes, too, may have been stolen. She looks, markedly, like a bride. Wanda stands in front of Mr Dennis and seemingly waits for his appraisal, which is not forthcoming. Instead, he interrogates her as to where her husband and children might be. Wanda and Mr Dennis share the same space within the mobile film frame as she explains, whilst continuing to paint her nails a shade of translucent coral pink, that she believes he has found himself 'a real good wife by now' and that her children are with him and better off for that. 'I'm just no good,' she states. Yet her apparent need to pass this comment off with a light touch of

resigned humour would suggest that this is an assessment that has been impressed upon her externally even if she has come to internalise it, and possibly even to believe it. Wanda, a woman, who defines herself in contrast to or against the kind of person who could be a 'real good wife' to somebody knows that if *this* is the measure of a woman's worth and existence, she, is, by definition, 'just no good.' Mr Dennis, whom the camera has tracked in mid-shot (thereby signalling that he has checked out of the conversation), is too occupied with discarding their belongings into the charity bin to attend to the subtlety of her intonation. He is, we know, a man who already thinks he understands everything there is to know about this woman. His questions to her, we surmise, are not genuine; this is simply another way to exercise patriarchal judgment upon her existence (her 'failure' as a wife and mother, as he sees it, seems to be imbricate with his view that she is also 'cheap'). His nonchalant disapproval is registered continually within his own body language towards her. His assessment of her character is 'moral' in the sense that this is predicated on an implicit hierarchy and scale that brooks neither context nor nuance. The scene concludes with Mr Dennis shaking his head and frowning at Wanda as he shuts her into the car. He still can only see her in the guise of a truculent and wayward child.

Cut to an interior point of view shot; we are back inside the car and travelling down the highway. We see, from Wanda's perspective, Mr Dennis in profile. 'Mr Dennis: where are we going?' she asks him. He tells her that when she is with him, she is not allowed to ask any questions. A momentary cut to his point of view reveals Wanda to be staring at him somewhat suspiciously. He asks her to draw closer to him. From her perspective, we see his hand move down her legs and rest between them. This man, with whom she is still not on first name terms, whose life and history remains opaque, regards her as a physical object to be manhandled. In my opinion, this is not a scene of quiet intimacy, but of entitled possession. He both infantilises and sexualises

her: and each of these manoeuvres is a powerful expression of ownership.

* * *

This sequence imparts several further facets of an abusive dynamic that defines the relationship between Mr Dennis and Wanda. Seemingly in response to her prior statement that she is somebody who does not want anything because she has never had anything and never will have anything, Mr Dennis, either knowingly or unconsciously, engineers a situation in which Wanda is able to exercise agency over her own appearance only in order to thwart her choices. That is, he evidently has given her part of the stolen money to choose clothes for herself. Yet he is notably displeased that she has not followed his precise instructions to dress herself in a manner that would please him. In discarding the items she has chosen for herself, he conveys explicitly his distaste not only for her style (he remarks that she looks cheap), but for the very fact of her volition. We cannot remain oblivious to the irony of his actions, however, since Wanda's choice has merely been facilitated by a form of double negation: she bought these items with money that was given to her by a man who has to steal to have any means of existence himself. Wanda's statement that she does not have anything, never did, and never will have anything speaks to the manifold ways in which she knows any agency she may be able to wield is already compromised and restricted by a patriarchal system of exchange in which women, more often than not, are objectified and traded amongst men. Mr Dennis wants her to assume the appearance of a woman who occupies a different social class because she is an object that he possesses and who, by extension, marks out his own stature. As such, he is ashamed to be seen with a woman who might cause others to infer his own economic, social, and political standing from her appearance (since it is the woman, as spectacle, who conveys this — a mere thing, an appendage, paraded around on the arms of men). By demanding that she eradicate any trace of 'cheapness' he betrays his wish to attain a certain form of rank or status that is intrinsi-

cally tied to the performance and display of wealth (since money is, in and of itself, merely a form of symbolic and thus invisible exchange). This is why the acquisition of particular goods matters to him. Wanda's perusal of Woolworths (which we do not witness, but do have the prior scene set in the mall for reference) and Mr Dennis's assiduous observation outside in the car park may both result in the same ends — the acquisition of material goods by stealth — but it is Mr Dennis who acts with calculated discernment and not Wanda. She merely purchases that which pleases her (hence her marked dejection at the disposal of these items); he, however, chooses that which he believes will mark him out as a person of specific standing to other people (despite that fact that Woolworths is not necessarily the place in which one would purchase such exorbitant items).² Wanda, a woman who remains invisible to those around her (unless they seek to take advantage of her for their own purpose) is not invested in rendering herself visible (and potentially vulnerable). We already know, from her preceding interactions with men, that Wanda understands intimately the mechanics of gendered performance and the pernicious bargains a woman with no means of her own must make to the detriment of her own safety and health in order merely to subsist. Devastatingly, one may realise that Wanda's fleeting joy at being able to possess items of her own choosing might express a deeper hope that Mr Dennis is starting to feel kindly towards her. Did Wanda allow herself momentarily to think of the money as symbolic of something other than her own exchange value? If so, her facial gestures must be read as manifestly complex: we are witnessing a woman in the process of realizing that the man on whom she is now increasingly dependent is intent on fashioning her (literally) in the image of someone whom he believes to be deserving of him and his social ambitions. She is, once again, a means to a

2 Interestingly, Loden herself expressed a preference for shopping in Woolworths. See especially Bérénice Reynaud's reflection on Loden in 'Wanda Now: Reflections on Barbara Loden's Feminist Masterpiece,' *The Criterion Collection*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5811-wanda-now-reflections-on-barbara-loden-s-feminist-masterpiece,%20but%20also%20Bérénice%20Reynaud,%202002>.

specific end which, when achieved, will determine her fate. Likely, she will be erased from the script, her performance no longer being required. An hour of screen time has elapsed and not once has Mr Dennis spoken her name.

* * *

Cut to a long high-angled shot; we are looking down on the Third National Bank which is housed in a grand, stately building in grey stone (replete with pillars, arches, and balustrades). Its classical architecture marks it out clearly as an institution of wealth and importance (and re-evokes the shots taken of Wanda outside the courthouse). Cut to a mobile mid-shot of Mr Dennis exiting their parked car and Wanda following a number of paces behind him (she is never quite 'in step' with his narrative). She looks anxious. Cut to a high angle shot taken from inside the bank designating a shift to a *mise-en-scène* of surveillance (once again eliciting the anonymous authority of the courthouse). We see customers entering and exiting the building through the solid wooden rotating door. Mr Dennis and Wanda enter the building. We cut to a mobile mid-shot that now reframes them within the bustle of the bank's transactions (we might recollect the bustle of the garment factory). Notably, they blend in seamlessly with the other customers (is Mr Dennis's plan working?) We track his movement through the bank via mobile mid-shot which serves to reveal that he appears to be nervous and hesitant. A cut to point of view moves us into his frame of reference: he is looking at one of the bank's authorities (a man in a pristine suit) who is issuing instructions to two female bank clerks. A mobile panning shot traces this man's movement to the rotating door as he ushers a customer out in a friendly manner. We ascertain, therefore, that he may well be the bank's manager (since he has clearly caught Mr Dennis's attention). A further cut to mid-shot re-situates Mr Dennis within the action. He is standing in a queue to speak to one of the bank tellers. His gaze has not left the man whom we now

assume to be the manager. We are not party to the brief conversation Mr Dennis proceeds to have with the bank teller before summarily leaving the building.

Cut to a long-distance exterior shot; Mr Dennis and Wanda are at some kind of religious monument.³ There is an elderly man seemingly at work building some form of shrine in front of a tower marked with the words 'Charity' and 'The Tower of God' (of immediate note is that this tower seems remarkably small for a monument dedicated to a supposedly omnipotent deity; the bank was a far more imposing structure, but certainly no source of charity). The soundtrack has incongruously shifted to choral music and it is unclear if this emanates from a diegetic source (we assume that it must as this would be a highly unusual and manipulative intrusion into a film that has altogether refused such tropes up until this point). Mr Dennis gestures to Wanda to stay back as he approaches the elderly man who appears to be working on the maintenance of the shrine. He calls out to him and names him as 'pop.' This is our first glimpse into Mr Dennis's personal life and background and we are now well over half-way into the film's running time (one hour and ten minutes). As such, we as viewers are prompted to question how much access to Mr Dennis's background Wanda has been afforded up until this point (she is not allowed to take part in this conversation that takes place, once again, between men). Given her strikingly white attire and the strangely religious setting, we might also wonder if this couple is about to marry one another (a jarring thought, but this seems to be a highly improbable scenario). A cut to a mid-shot shows that Wanda is still observing them from a distance. A further cut, to a reverse close-up, moves us into physical proximity with Mr Dennis who is embracing his father. He tells his father that it is good to see him

3 Sue Thornham notes that 'the scene is shot in Holy Land, USA, a 17-acre site standing above Waterbury, Connecticut...already crumbling and tawdry, in 1970 it was still the site of pilgrimage bus tours': *What If I Had Been the Hero?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 73.

after such a long time. They seem to share a genuine affection for one another and once again we feel that there is a tenderness buried within Mr Dennis which he feels he can only reveal sparingly. If Wanda's passivity is a defence mechanism, so might be his explosive anger.

Cut to an exterior mid-shot; Wanda is joining a queue of people to enter a site labelled as 'Catacombs' which stands to the left of a chapel designed for 'instruction'; we might juxtapose the inculcation of values that Mr Dennis seems to espouse (citizenship equating to the possession of the right goods) with that of religious indoctrination (the desire to possess moral goodness as a mark of one's character): the film seems to imply that there is no discernible difference between these moralities. Prominently marked out in red, the viewer may compare this sign (as a form of advertisement) with that of the WOOLWORTHS sign from a previous sequence. We determine that the intrusive choral music is, in fact, being piped out of a set of speakers and is not only warping in speed (and thus in its key), but cutting in and out of reception, which compounds the artificial 'staging' of this setting, and begets a sad and run-down atmosphere to the entire scenario. Cross cut to Mr Dennis helping his elderly father descend a series of steps down a hillside. They pass a number of shrines all of which are emblazoned in red (and rendered somewhat imprecisely) with evangelical statements and biblical references. Further up the hillside, we observe a series of buildings that seem to have been constructed deliberately for this site as their architectural scheme is entirely out of keeping with the rest of the landscape. We appear, in fact, to be in some kind of religious theme park — a queasy conglomeration of faith and commerce that seems to speak directly to the film's indictment of American Conservative values.

Cut to a dark interior point of view shot; we are now inside the catacombs. A mobile point of view reveals one of the cells in the catacombs in which a crucifixion scene is rendered via the use of plastic models and lurid fake blood; incongruously, the

scene also depicts several people being devoured by a tiger. Cut to a tracking shot through which we see Wanda descending further into the catacombs (was that previous points of view hers? Is this the first time we have occupied her space?) The guide proceeds to tell the crowd that this is a site where 'good' Christians are buried and that some of them were saints and martyrs — 'which, as we all know, is a person who was killed for his or her faith,' he states. He is careful to mark out the difference between being 'just' a 'good Christian' and being someone who is willing to sacrifice themselves for their faith. He is especially keen to impress that the patrons observe the site of St Thecla 'a disciple of St Paul,' who was a female saint renowned for her perpetual virginity (and who incurred the wrath of her fiancé and family for heeding what she felt to be her unique calling); this underscores both Wanda's inability to adhere to 'goodness' (that for time immemorial women have always been subjected to the stark polarities of patriarchal logic by which they are either virgins or whores) and the condemnation of her family and society at large for rejecting the feminine roles of wife and mother (without the luxury of a calling which she can heed). This feels both vaguely ridiculous (the bathos of the site's evident tackiness designed for tourists) and portentous (the dark shadows, the allusions to death and self-sacrifice). Mr Dennis and Wanda do not seem to have any personal investment in religion (Sunday worship provided merely a practical opportunity to steal a car) and faith seems to be a privately held occupation of an older generation (we also recollect the elderly woman seated at the window feeding the rosary through her hands, and place her alongside Mr Dennis's father who either works or volunteers at this religious site).

Cut to a static mid-shot of Mr Dennis in conversation with his father who reminds him that he has to be a 'good boy' and must find a job. He counsels him that there are a 'lot of jobs in stores.' A cut into a close-up shot of the elderly man's face and a reverse angle from over his shoulder serves to establish a dynamic by which Mr Dennis tries to assert some kind of impression over

his father (to the effect that he is succeeding in make a living for himself). Mr Dennis offers him money, which he refuses. The camera tracks in from over the old man's shoulder to Mr Dennis's face who seems to be both annoyed and dejected at his father's refusal (he has failed to impress him). His father reiterates that he has been a 'bad boy' and he does not want this money. Either Mr Dennis has been honest about his theft or, more likely, his father has encountered this situation with his son before. Mr Dennis reassures his father that he will return in a week with a good job, a statement of which the old man seems to approve, but may regard with some cynicism. Here, it is Mr Dennis who occupies the position of the reprimanded child. As someone who is evidently keen to fulfil some nebulous patriarchal ideal of masculinity (wealthy, successful, impressive, important), and given the inherent difficulty of simultaneously inhabiting the psychic positions of child and adult, it is not surprising that he seemingly projects this fraught internal ambiguity onto Wanda by bullying and infantilizing her. Perhaps he seeks domination as a mode of relief from his own mental torment.

* * *

Taken together, both of these sequences retain a sense of ambiguity and isolation within the film's overall form and are all the more important for it. The viewer's experience of the diegetic action in the bank (which seems to be a source of anxiety for both Wanda and Mr Dennis) remains opaque and therefore deflates an expectation of the ensuing course of events (we do not read for narrative information here, but rather focus on the location as a socially stratified space). Given what has proceeded, we can infer that Mr Dennis is planning to carry out some form of heist on the bank, an act for which he has evidently tried to inveigle Wanda's help after his friend refused to be the 'getaway' driver. We may also conjecture that Mr Dennis's plan is evidently going to fail since the scenario is set up in such a manner as to emphasise the weight of the institution against which he is pitting himself. As such, he has already been trapped within a mise-en-scène of surveillance upon

entering the bank's premises (he is but one tiny body amongst many within a building designed specifically to make those who enter it feel small). The sequence is not choreographed to inspire or elicit certain emotions appropriate to such a generic narrative set-up (anticipation, anxiety, excitement, fear): that is, Loden is not engaging with this scenario as cinematic entertainment. On the contrary, the banal and pedestrian manner with which the scene plays out (essentially, Mr Dennis is enacting his own version of 'staking out the crime scene' with Wanda as sentinel) serves to emphasise the unglamorous and pedestrian nature of this 'couple' and the inept naivety of their plan (Mr Dennis and Wanda are not, as we know, Bonnie and Clyde). In contradistinction to what cinematic myth may tell us, it is not the allure or fascination of being a rebel or outsider in society, it is not mere dislike of society's norms, that drives people to perform dangerous acts: it is only those desperate enough, with nowhere else to go, with no other option, who consider such a course of action in the first place. We already recognise the lengths to which Mr Dennis and Wanda have gone to acquire clothing that would not mark them out as suspicious within the bank's daily environment. They have to put on a performance in order even to be considered as the 'correct' or desirable demographic for a bank account. The very system that Mr Dennis would seek to attack (and yet clearly longs to be a part of because it represents an intrinsic form of social recognition) has already failed him. It is societal indifference and neglect that generates criminal activity. Yet Hollywood obscures this stark truth through both the glamorization and individualization of crime and acts of violence.

The second of these sequences serves to establish Mr Dennis as a character in his own right with a personal history. The context within which the action takes place is significant in terms of advancing both the film's politics and providing probable motivation for Mr Dennis's actions. It does not seem insignificant — to this viewer at the very least — that in a film so finely calibrated, we encounter a graphic match between the words WOOLWORTHS and CATACOMBS within one-tenth of the film's approximate screen

time. I contend that this is part of the film's political trajectory that works to imbricate the individual and particular with the social and structural. That is, we have come to understand that Wanda is someone who lives without expectation and hope for a different life to the one she is leading: her passivity is her sole recourse to control, in however small a measure, events that happen to her. She cannot afford the luxury of allowing herself to break down or fracture emotionally because this places her in a state of increased vulnerability as a woman. Wanda is in withdrawal from a world that has harmed her irreparably and the values (expressed through the desire and hope for better) that would keep her committed to it. By contrast, Mr Dennis is a man who is painfully tied to an indifferent world from which he seeks acceptance and recognition. His relationship with his own father is a microcosm of his psychic attachment to a specific form of American identity (a citizen who upholds the values of free enterprise and the individual pursuit of happiness). He evidently wants his father to see him as a 'good' boy (goodness being a quality or virtue with which Wanda cannot identify or ally herself precisely because of its impossible social determination). He is keen to ameliorate his father's assessment of his actions as 'bad' by trying to bribe him emotionally with (stolen) money and nebulous promises of finding employment within a week. And yet, this interaction takes place within a space that seems specifically designed to manipulate the hopes and beliefs of those seeking salvation directly through commercial exploitation. This park of 'worship' is ostentatious and tawdry — the colours too bright, the music too loud, the text too imperative (it resembles, in other words, a shopping mall). The crucifixion scene, a cardinal facet of so many places of worship, is crudely rendered and the invocation of saints and martyrs cannot help but remind the viewer of the multifarious ways in which supposed relics are commodified and commercialised for profit. Christianity and capitalism, the two touchstones of good American citizenship, are linked directly here as bankrupt ideologies that serve to sustain a system that exploits society's poorest and most vulnerable individuals (of whom Mr Dennis's father is likely one such individual). Further, it implies that both of these ideologies are moribund: in a sense,

those who are invested in these ideals are but martyrs to capitalism. Mr Dennis here takes up the role of the reprimanded child who is eager to please his father (and, by patriarchal extension, the system and country into which he was born).⁴ The externalization of his aggression (as a form of compensation) conceals his impotence (something that is, in fact, not his fault but which he will nonetheless struggle pointlessly to try to alter); it also places into devastating context his bullying behaviour towards Wanda. Wanda's externalised passivity, by contrast, seems to conceal deep reservoirs of the internal strength necessary to the daily, repeated act of continued existence.

Cut to an interior mid-shot; two elderly men are sitting watching television (we surmise from the soundtrack) in what appears to be a motel reception or bar area. Wanda, dressed in a short black skirt and a smocked gingham top, appears behind them as she ascends a staircase. Cut to a further interior shot. We are now inside yet another hotel room. Mr Dennis is sitting at a table and appears to be constructing some kind of device. There is a knock at the door. It is Wanda. He instructs her to come in stealthily. Wanda appears to be pregnant. We are unsure of the order of events (given that this is a film that deploys the mode of ellipsis to suggest both stasis and erasure). He takes a paper bag from her hand. The camera tracks his movement back towards the table on which the device is placed. Wanda proceeds

4 In her interview with Michel Ciment in *Positif* ('Entretien avec Barbara Loden,' April 1975, 37–38), Loden conjectures that Mr Dennis might be the son of an immigrant and that, more often than not, the sons and daughters of immigrant parents cannot live up to the expectations and aspirations of their elders — who have always wanted more for their children than they had. She also comments that Wanda's name is likely of Polish extraction. As such, she suggests that children may harbour, bio-politically, the cruel optimism of their parents who are often highly invested in the values of the country into which they have tried to assimilate. This seems to be an intrinsic aspect of many narratives centred on immigration and Wanda could be read as a subtle exploration of these themes.

to try to ask a question, addressing him, as always, formally. He refuses her tentative enquiry and hands her a set of written instructions ('I've noted it all down for you — Read it! Memorise it!' he says). As he states the order of intended action, we realise that this is indeed part of his planned heist (the device is, in fact, a bomb) and Wanda has a fully-scripted part to play in this scenario. Wanda, with each issued instruction, interjects that she cannot do what he asks of her. She states solemnly that she '*really*' means it (this is the first time we hear her speak definitively, expressing her absolute wish not to play the part which he has written for her). This has, we sense, nothing to do with her self-doubt for she clearly understands that he is placing her life in immediate danger to satisfy his ill-conceived plan. She pulls up her smocked top to reveal that it is a ruse: her skirt is holding a pillow in place (just as she only appeared to be a bride, she also only *appears* to be pregnant: this entire relationship is a scripted charade, a mirage, a sad film dictated by the motivations and desires of Mr Dennis whose inner world remains inaccessible to her). She pulls out the pillow from under her top and reiterates that she has been *trying* to tell him that she cannot fulfil his expectations (we know that he is incapable of really hearing — of intuiting the proper meaning from — anything she has to say). A sudden cut into close-up to Mr Dennis creates a jarring effect (the previous action having been conveyed through a fluid long take). He responds, predictably, with a sharp burst of rage and takes Wanda forcefully by the shoulders and tries to shake her into believing in what he so definitively insists: 'you can do it!' Each of his violent protestations is met by her statement to the contrary ('you can!'/ 'I can't!'). This is unfurling like an especially perverse form of a Punch and Judy show (or perhaps it merely reveals the violence of that riposte which is always played for laughs). She looks like a rag doll caught within his grasp. Yet she has made herself physically rigid (this is perhaps another way of *trying* to tell him what he refuses to hear). He presses the list of instructions down into her hand one further time. Wanda retreats into the bathroom, thus spatially separating them (yet another further indication to him of her refusal). We note that

each and every time she must make an internal bargain in order to force herself into accepting a course of action she does not wish to take, she retreats into a confined space as if to form a physical shell around herself since her own barrier has been breached. She needs to withdraw in order to fashion some kind of space for herself.

Several cuts move us in-between Mr Dennis in the bedroom and Wanda in the bathroom. This pattern recalls graphically their first encounter back in the bar (just as her entrance into this hotel room mirrors prior imprecations upon her entry into other hotel/motel rooms). Previously, it had been Wanda who required certain things of Mr Dennis in order to find food and shelter for the night; now, it is Mr Dennis who requires something of Wanda that she feels evidently unable to give. This is an unequal bargain. Her face registers the same muted pain subtly evident in previous sequences: this time, however, she is visibly distraught and tearful. Her carefully constructed psychological barrier (marked by very possibly feigned passivity and indifference) is broken. Personally, I can only read this moment as one of trauma for her (that a deeply entrenched psychic wound has resurfaced). Notably, *this* is the moment that Mr Dennis chooses to speak her name. Her negative repetition takes up the form of a rhythmic incantation ('I can't do it! I can't do it!'). He opens the door to the bathroom; and thus he encroaches into her only remaining private space, vitiating her ability to continue to refuse him.

As if anticipating this Wanda moves towards the bathroom sink as the door opens, thus making space for Mr Dennis to take up his place behind her facing towards the bathroom mirror. We are now, in some sense, in an imaginary space. The cut which moves us from a profile shot of the couple to a mid-shot positioned from within their own reflective space signifies a crucial transition from mere ideal ego (as idealised yet false representation) to the socially-imbricated space of the ego ideal (and Other). When Mr Dennis strategically repeats her name (as if mak-

ing up for all those times he refused to recognise her, to see her, to hear her) and pulls her shoulders upwards and backwards towards his own body, he is preparing her to assimilate an image of herself with which it is in *his best interests* for her to elide. He thus, makes her complicit in *his* narrative here. 'You listen to me!' he urges her. 'Wanda, maybe you *never did anything* before. Maybe you never did. But *you're going to do this*.' These words echo her own earlier quiet protestation of innocence upon finding out about the extent of Mr Dennis's criminality — '*I didn't do anything*.' He is not simply trying to recalibrate her esteem (he is not shoring or 'propping' her up — despite the fact that he seems to be pulling her upwards physically so as to force her to 'stand tall' — since her sense of self or any expression of her own agency for that matter has hitherto posed a problem for him), he is drawing her into identifying with the part he has written for her (even if they both *know* this to be a mis-identification). Wanda, unwittingly, was given this part because she was the sole actress at the audition, and Mr Dennis has spent the duration of their time together carefully moulding, grooming, and shaping her into the woman he desires her to be in this scenario. The cut to mid-shot by which we come to see them as a couple *seeing themselves together for the first time* (an uneasy and foreboding intimacy which has been refused altogether thus far in *Wanda*) denotes not only the establishment of an imaginary image with which Mr Dennis is trying to compel them both to identity, it designates the symbolic space or dimension from which this image is actually meaningful: his point of view; yet the vantage he occupies, as we know, is one inherently fashioned (and thereby compromised) through a regime of images that inform his notion of American citizenship. Given Loden's own views on *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and the industrial 'albatross' that begets and perpetuates an utterly false mediation of the realities of human life, it would not be overly presumptive or bombastic to suggest that it is also cinema itself which is being indicted here. Whilst Mr Dennis stares directly ahead at their virtual image (wanting to believe in it), Wanda slowly and painfully opens her eyes to meet her own gaze as a single tear falls down her face.

His right thumb, in the most minute and intimate of gestures yet, caresses her shoulder; his hands are still holding her upright coercing her into believing in what he sees in front of him. She is now visually and physically enclosed from all sides. The force of his affirmative words and gestures have been translated into an imaginary correlate. *This* is Mr Dennis and Wanda now conceived of as a couple for the very first time. It is he who has forced this image into existence: an image with which he will misidentify at his peril (it is surely an accident that the multiple re-framings within this shot position his body against what appears formally as the shape of a crucifix?) The image by which his very identity and purpose is pulled into existence (interpellated) portends self-annihilation. Mr Dennis is not a martyr to his values, but rather a mere foot soldier within a system that has been designed from the outset to crush him. Wanda cannot 'mirror' this moment of virtual misrecognition back to him; tellingly, she cannot meet his gaze with her own so as to affirm him, his vision and his narrative *for them*. Or is she resigning herself to the vision of a man who has inexorably and painfully become her only option for day to day subsistence?

Cut to a further interior mid-shot; an ellipsis in time has occurred. Mr Dennis is lying prostrate on the bed and smoking a cigar. Through the bathroom door frame, we see Wanda soaking herself in the bath. She is repeating the instructions he demanded she learn earlier on. She forgets elements of these instructions or seems to get them out of order much to his irritation (he states that she is too concerned with 'raising problems'). His voice is noticeably louder on the film's soundtrack than hers. A sudden and sharp cut to an overhead angle ushers in a further ellipsis. Wanda is vomiting into the toilet. She is wearing the outfit in which we saw her dressed previously (a short black skirt and smocked top), so we ascertain that a certain amount of time has elapsed within which she has, once again, been persuaded into playing the part he has set out for her. Cut to Mr Dennis impatiently pacing back and forth in the bedroom, his demeanour and tone once more hostile and demanding. He now irritably

shouts her name as if to force her out of her evident fear and anxiety (he resorts to his old tactics coupled with the newfound intimacy of her first name). The sound of her retching and vomiting continues. His frustration and irascibility spreads down into his closed fists (a portrait of him captured in the mirror of the bedroom's dresser, to which he is now oblivious — this is the 'real' virtual image). Within this same framing, the bathroom door opens and Wanda emerges. The camera tracks Mr Dennis's movement towards her where he endeavours to turn his belligerence and anger into solicitous care (or at least the appearance of it). In contrast to the slap he previously delivered, he now strokes her cheek and neck and asks if she is 'sick or something' in a presumed attempt to alleviate her nerves. Yet within moments, he assertively loads and engages the bullets of his pistol and, upon realizing that Wanda is going to be sick again, throws the pistol to the floor and impotently grabs at a pillow and tosses it back onto the bed. 'For Christ's sake! What the hell is wrong with you?' he demands as she rushes back into the bathroom to be ill into the toilet once more. He made no allowance for stage fright in his script.

* * *

The pathos of this scene rests on the viewer's ability to think counterfactually with regard to the relationship between these two characters. What if the care and attention that Mr Dennis extends towards Wanda here were real? What if his belief in her was honest and true? What if he spoke her name out of tenderness and affection only? That we know his interest in Wanda is purely mercenary makes our knowledge of this moment all the more eviscerating precisely because the film, briefly, envisions an alternate reality (not one of material, but emotional difference). That this scene plays out primarily in front of a mirror is of import to the film's psychological landscape (alternate reality as virtual image). In demanding that Wanda believe in her ability to be an effective agent in the world (to carry out this series of tasks), Mr Dennis is, in actual fact, shoring up his own need to believe in himself and

the course of action he wishes to take. The image in the bathroom mirror is of his making. He has choreographed this moment and, by extension, their forthcoming actions. Wanda, by contrast, is the pawn within Mr Dennis's personal narrative. That this is the moment he chooses to speak her name, that this is the moment he chooses to affirm her ability to act, is indicative and expressive of his ulterior motives. He knows he cannot accomplish this act without her. It is no longer in his interests to denigrate and evacuate her own sense of herself, to tell her that she is 'stupid' and 'dead.' Likewise, he cannot affirm the mirror image of himself without her (she is his prop as much as he is literally hers here). This image suggests a man capable of tenderness and belief in someone and something else beyond his own limited purview: in short, it implies a man who is capable of love as an ethical gesture. Just as he wishes for his father to see him as a 'good boy,' he relies on Wanda to recognise an image of potentiality — of the future. We realise it is Wanda who is, in fact, the necessary foundation for this horizon of expectations. Yet it is a false image (as all forms of ideal ego must be) that is based on a set of false promises. Like Wanda's pregnancy, it is a performance of the kind of person Mr Dennis wishes to be (an image in which Wanda simply cannot bring herself to believe). When she says that she 'can't do it,' she does not merely speak to the devastating rupture of a final ethical boundary, she also perhaps evinces her inability to believe in any of the values on which Mr Dennis's plan is predicated. Simply put: she cannot, once again, be the kind of person any man wishes her to be in order to fulfil his own needs and desires. That he does not or refuses to recognise this results in the loss of her composure (she moves from quiet insistence that she does not wish to be part of his plan to severe emotional and physical breakdown). Dignity, I contend in direct contrast to the film's contemporary critics, is something which probably matters profoundly to Wanda. She is someone who maintains a veil of passivity and composure precisely to hold onto a vestige of her own inner emotional world, despite the physical compromises she must make to continue existing in it. That quiet form of privacy was hers alone and it has now been taken from her.

* * *

Cut to an exterior long shot; two young girls are swimming in a lake: they playfully splash one another with water before climbing up onto a wooden jetty. Cut to an interior shot. The man from the bank (whom, earlier, we presumed to be the manager and now discover is called Mr Anderson) is welcoming Mr Dennis and Wanda into his home so that they can, apparently, make a telephone call (the pace of action has quickened). Mr Dennis immediately pulls out his pistol and tries to threaten Mr Anderson into submission who, in turn, retaliates. Cross cut to the young girls outside running up a grass verge towards (we presume) the house. Cross cut back to Mr Dennis, Mr Anderson and Wanda engaged in a physical struggle inside the house. Wanda has, remarkably, emerged as the agent in this scenario. She screams (the first time we have heard her do so in the course of the film's running time thus far) at Mr Anderson to let Mr Dennis 'loose.' She picks up the gun and holds it to Mr Anderson's lower back. Cut to Mrs. Anderson (we presume) rushing towards the hall to see what the commotion is about (does the cross-cutting indicate that the plan is working out as if to generic formulation?) Wanda, in a manner that mimics the tone of Mr Dennis, demands that she 'get over there to the couch!' — she has learned her lines well, in fact (she is a good student and her performance is convincing). Cut to a low angle shot. We see that Wanda is passing Mr Dennis his glasses with her foot, which have obviously fallen off in the struggle. This gesture (and Wanda's control of the situation) seems to return to him his sense of authority and imposition (are they becoming that infamous criminal duo of lore?) He begins to issue orders as the action cuts between Mr Dennis and Wanda and the Anderson family (the young girls having now entered the living room). Conveyed through a long fluid shot (interspersed with a series of close-ups of the Anderson family), the diegetic action moves with a sense of speed and urgency uncharacteristic of the film's previously slow pacing. Wanda proceeds to tie up Mrs Anderson and her daughters as Mr Dennis explains that he is planting a live bomb

(he is keen to draw attention towards the ‘ticking’ sound of the device) on their laps that is set to detonate in one hour and fifteen minutes (there is something vaguely funny about this cliché). If Mr Anderson cooperates, he informs them, he will be able to return home in time to defuse the bomb (generic narrative tropes of tension and suspense have now been added to this pre-fabricated scenario — did Mr Dennis learn these tricks from the television?) He then instructs Mr Anderson to take him to his place of work.

Cut to an exterior mid-shot; we are in the driveway of the Anderson family’s residence. Wanda rapidly exits from the car that Mr Dennis previously stole and runs around to the passenger side of the second stationary car. The camera cuts to an intimate exchange in close-up between Wanda and Mr Dennis (who is smoking a cigar: he seems confident of pulling off this highwire act after all). She asks him for the car keys (should we be surprised that this operation is already being bungled?) We cut to an interior shot from inside the Anderson family car that serves to frame Wanda’s face within the car’s passenger window. Mr Dennis tells her not only that she ‘did good,’ but that she is ‘*really something*.’ Wanda responds with evident pleasure at this. This is the first time he has praised her. It is her actions, in fact, that have, thus far, facilitated the heist. She runs back to the driver’s seat of their car.

Cut to a series of exterior mobile long shots; the camera pans back and forth between the two vehicles and traces their trajectory, presumably, towards the bank. This is not, as would have been rendered conventionally, done at high speed. Cut to a series of shots from the interior of the two vehicles through which we see Mr Dennis and Wanda exchange communicative glances to one another. The perspectives of both Mr Dennis and Wanda are thus doubly framed via two windscreens. They are, momentarily, brought together. In what follows, the violation of screen direction (right to left is erased by left to right), a series of movements across the frame, and the use of Wanda’s point of

view serve to emphasise the increasing difficulty she is going to have in tailing Mr Anderson's car. Sure enough, another vehicle pulls in between them. A cut to an interior shot from inside Mr Anderson's car (which we assume to be from Mr Dennis's point of view) details the further separation of Wanda's car due to copious city traffic. However, a further cut to an exterior mid-shot informs us that Mr Dennis is, in fact, calmly facing forwards, smoking his cigar and unaware of the fact that Wanda has been separated from his own trajectory (this had already been pre-figured in the previous scene in which Wanda reads to Mr Dennis from the newspaper). We now cross cut between Wanda (who has pulled up beside a vehicle she assumes to be Mr Anderson's car only to discover it has entirely different occupants) and Mr Dennis and Mr Anderson who have pulled over and are waiting for Wanda to arrive. Misrecognition has fatally scuppered their plans already and, as a result, they are now in different locations. Realizing that Wanda has evidently gotten lost and glancing impatiently at his watch, Mr Dennis instructs Mr Anderson to drive on. He plans to pull off the heist by himself, we infer. We cut to a high angle exterior shot of Wanda performing an illegal manoeuvre on a side street. A traffic policeman pulls her over. Cut to a close-up/point of view shot onto Mr Dennis's wristwatch. Cut further to an exterior shot registering Mr Dennis and Mr Anderson's arrival outside the bank. Cut to close-up. We have moved inside Mr Anderson's car. Conveyed through approximate eyeline match, we see Mr Dennis in profile. He is noticeably nervous (the vein in his neck pulsates), yet nonetheless insists they must go into the bank where he demands that Mr Anderson will follow his strict instructions. Mr Anderson's counsel that this plan is doomed to fail ('you won't get away with this!') is met with Mr Dennis's characteristic hostility and anger. He cannot deal with reality. Wanda, now his incompetent partner in crime, is nowhere to be seen.

Cut to an interior low-angle shot; we are, once again, inside the bank, but it is notably empty. A single guard approaches the front door to allow Mr Anderson to enter the building (Mr Den-

nis trails behind him). He summons his staff members, who arrive in no particular hurry, and he informs them that it ‘*appears* we have a hold-up on our hands’ (the emphasis on appearance here rather than genuine existential threat is telling).

Cross cut to an exterior mid-shot; the action has moved back to Wanda who is searching through her handbag for identification. The camera zooms in on her, through the car’s windscreen, as she informs the police officer that she cannot find any form of verification (indeed, by this point in the film, most of the contents from her bag are missing or discarded and we already suspected that she does not, in fact, possess a driving license; somehow, this seems prophetic of the attrition of her own identity by the end of the film).

Cut to a mobile close-up; we are back inside the bank. Mr Dennis is herding the bank’s employees with his gun. The guard has notably been told to remove his holster and gun and place it on the floor. There will be no bloody shoot-outs: but, then again, this action piece has already been deflated.

Cross cut to mid-shot; Wanda is sitting in the car still and appears to be biting her nails anxiously. The police officer stands behind the vehicle performing checks on the number plates (she really is in trouble). The camera zooms in onto Wanda’s face: she is, in fact, trying not to cry. The police officer (who is now physically excluded from the frame and thus assumes the voice of anonymous authority once again) informs her that she must bring in her papers and identification to a police station as soon as possible. In response, Wanda asks how she can get to the bank.

Cross cut to an overhead mid-shot; we are back inside the bank. Two men and two women are lying prostrate, face down on the floor. The camera pans up to take in Mr Anderson, flanked by Mr Dennis and a male employee, opening a large bank safe. The

framing is notably still, the soundtrack muted, and the movements of the characters sanguine and placid.

Cross cut to an external long shot; Wanda is, once again, on the road.

Cross cut to mid-shot. The door of the bank vault is slowly being prized open.

Cross cut to close-up; the vault is, unsurprisingly, linked to an alarm system. As the alarm is triggered, the camera abruptly zooms into close-up. A label on the alarm system informs us specifically that the '8.30 AM VAULT at the THIRD NATIONAL BANK' has been breached ahead of time. Further cut to close-up. An electronic clock registers another minute precisely. The time is 8.23 AM. There is a seven-minute discrepancy. This, we surmise, indicates an emergency. A security operator immediately telephones the police and reports the burglary.

Cut to a close-up shot from inside the vault; we see Mr Dennis framed through a set of security grills or bars (is this a clear foreshadowing?) His face subtly registers excitement at the (presumed) sight of the loot. Cut to a low-level mid-shot. Mr Dennis kicks a black Gladstone bag over to Mr Anderson and instructs him (as custom would dictate) to 'fill it up!' At the forefront of the frame, we see the lower portion of Mr Dennis' body (he is still brandishing his gun); in the middle plane we see the circular frame of the vault; and in the background, we see Mr Dennis and the bank official summarily putting bank notes into the designated bag. Mr Dennis, somewhat pointlessly, continues to issue instructions. Cut to close-up. Mr Dennis is visibly anxious and perspiring.

Cross cut to an exterior long shot; several police cars, with red lights flashing, pull up outside the bank. We register the speed in a low angle shot that captures the 'screech' of hand-brakes and

the speedy exit of multiple armed police officers (once again, a generic shot).

Cross cut to an interior surveillance shot; we are back inside the bank. Cut to mobile mid-shot. Mr Dennis is ushering Mr Anderson at gun point out of the bank, but his progress is immediately halted by the simultaneous appearance of police officers from both the rear and front entrances of the bank.

Cross cut to a hand-held exterior mid-shot; the camera registers tremulously the entry of several more armed police officers.

Cross cut to a close-up shot; Mr Dennis, we understand from the movement of his head, is surrounded on all sides. He is told to 'Drop it! Drop the gun.' Cut to a mobile mid-shot. We are positioned now behind the police officers who are encroaching on Mr Dennis (we see that he is, indeed, trapped).

Cross cut to an exterior mid-shot; Wanda is now running down the street towards the bank. A sound bridge informs us that, simultaneously, shots have been fired in the bank. The camera now takes on a frenetic hand-held quality.

Cut to an interior point of view; we see the grand, Regency-style ceiling of the bank, a blinding white light, and the face of a police officer on the outermost edge of the frame. The sound of a police klaxon looms insistently in the background.

Cut to an exterior mid-shot; Wanda has finally arrived at the bank, but a growing crowd has amassed on the pavement and, once again, she is partially concealed from view. She pushes her way forward only to be held back by several police officers. The camera tracks in on her face. She is visibly distraught. The klaxon increases in volume. Her face, held in persistent close-up, informs the viewer that Mr Dennis has been shot. We retrospectively read the mobile point of view shot as a dizzying slide from perception and feeling into nothingness. Everything

leading up until this moment has told us that this outcome was utterly predictable. Mr Dennis failed to account for the greater, overarching narrative within which his own efforts to control and guide the story have, inevitably, failed.

* * *

In a film that is defined by an almost lugubrious sense of pacing, these scenes, taken together, constitute its 'action' sequence. The schema of editing is, indeed, somewhat accelerated and the cinematography, in particular, serves to imbue this action with a sense of heightened urgency, confusion, and disruption. There is a central focus on time-keeping and the short passage within which certain actions must take place. And yet the diegetic action therein (namely that of the characters) is marked by slowness, error, erasure, hesitancy, and cliché. Mr Anderson is right to tell his employees that they are embroiled in the mere 'appearance' of a bank robbery that he knows will fail. Mr Dennis drops his gun and loses his glasses; Wanda misplaces the car keys; the convoy becomes separated in a mess of pedestrian and vehicular traffic; traffic jams and blockages mar our purview onto the action; screen direction is inconsistent and disordered; the journey of our main protagonist is halted and waylaid; the other protagonist has time to smoke a cigar; orders are issued as if they had been learned from a terribly-scripted television show (nobody is especially impressive); important actions are carried out at a meditative, rather than exigent pace; until the arrival of police presence on the scene, the soundtrack is notably muted and discrete in tone. We know, from the outset, that this operation will fail. It is of no surprise whatsoever that the bank's vault is linked to a sophisticated alarm system that triggers police presence on the premises. That Mr Dennis seems not to have accounted for this is not only pathetic, but somehow tragic. Individuals cannot outwit systems — the film already told us this much (his actions have already been surveilled). Despite the increased pace of cutting, time within this sequence is notably dilated. That is, the cuts actually serve to slow down the measure of action. Unlike its classical cinematic counterparts,

what the viewer is offered here is a deflation of generic 'heist' or 'crime/thriller' tropes precisely in order to foreground the impossibility of pulling off such a stunt in the first place (this film is attuned to the reality of such ridiculous stunts and not to studied glamorization). The banality of the action (that Mr Dennis communicates in risible clichés) indicates that he was never fully in control of this situation. Once again, we are reminded of the impotent rage of this man who rails at the sky. That the sound of the bullets that kill him are heard (and not seen), laid over Wanda's always-too-late arrival onto the scene, denotes not only the death of Mr Dennis, but, perhaps more significantly, the evisceration of her hope once again. This brief moment in which she was 'really something' to someone has been extinguished. Wanda's eyes, clearly redolent with despair and sorrow, are the main event here. There is no need to cut back to the literal death of a dream being played out within the walls of a bank: the drama is writ large across her face. With Mr Dennis's exit, Wanda is, once again, alone in the world. She has come full circle, back to where she started: 'I don't have anything; never had anything; never will have anything.'

* * *

Cut to an interior mid-shot; we are once again inside a bar. Cut to a close-up onto a black- and-white television screen. A man is announcing that 'Norman Dennis, the bank bandit, finally died just moments ago at State General Hospital.' The news broadcast cuts to surveillance footage from the bank heist. We see Mr Dennis lying on the floor, surrounded by police officers. The news reader tells us, 'you are seeing Dennis as he was shot down in the Third National Bank this morning by police.' Cut to close-up. Wanda has visibly (and physically) retreated into herself again: hidden behind her distinctive top knot and clutching a cigarette between her fingers, she looks just as she did back in that first bar after losing her job. A man's voice intrudes: 'you don't need to say nothing. *I'm talking and talking. And you're just sitting there.*' But has Wanda ever been invited to be part

of a genuine conversation? A reverse shot reveals she is sharing a booth with a man in military uniform. Between them, a number of beer bottles have accumulated and so we are left to wonder what form of payment will be extracted from her now. This man seems to be in jovial spirits in contrast to Wanda's near catatonic state (or is he wilfully oblivious to her misery?); he stares at Wanda and decides that they need 'two more beers.' The stakes have been raised. We hear further coverage of the death of Mr Dennis and the disastrous bank heist. Wanda (reduced once again to being a generic 'blonde woman') is being sought in connection with the ongoing investigation. We also find out, expectedly, that Mr Dennis's homemade bomb was a dummy device designed purely to scare people. Cut to a close-up shot of Wanda in a depressive stupor. She refuses eye contact with the man opposite her and remains seemingly unresponsive and immovable (her tried and tested defence mechanisms are, again, necessary). She has been drawn back into the depressingly familiar cycle of trying to find food and a bed for the night. We cut back to the news report in which Mr Dennis's inept plan to pull off the bank heist is being detailed elaborately. We cannot help but think that, given how pleased he seemed to be with his exploits being described in the newspaper, he would be delighted to have made it onto television, and in a report of such length and detail. Ironically, some aspect of his plan has actually succeeded; he has become in death what he could not be in life: somebody that others take notice of and see — Norman Dennis, Bank Bandit. Wanda, on the other hand, is back to being 'blondie.'

Cut to an exterior high angle long shot. We appear to be in an industrial mining landscape that is not dissimilar to the diegetic location of the film's opening shot. The camera tracks in slowly onto a red car entering from screen right until it occupies centre frame. The movement of the car and the camera's tracking meet so that the vehicle comes to occupy the majority of the film's frame. The car belongs to the man in military uniform. Wanda occupies the passenger seat of his car (same seat and situation/

different car and man). The car halts. We are positioned behind the vehicle from an angle of surveillance. The car's red hue is lurid against the deserted landscape. The man turns the engine over in a prototypically masculine display of force and then proceeds to move in closer towards Wanda. We note that Wanda still does not make eye contact with him (her body is turned away from him and she is, once more, seemingly intent on making herself smaller). Cut to a mid-shot. We are now within the same space as them, but we are positioned on his side of the vehicle. He proceeds to manoeuvre her body into a prostrate position on the car's seat (Wanda, this perpetual marionette of men). The camera moves in closer as he forces himself on top of her. We see Wanda shut her eyes before his body engulfs hers within the frame; she is entirely obscured from view. Yet, we hear her voice increasingly registering fright and panic: her distress ruptures into screaming. She manages to pull herself up from underneath him and to elude his grasping hands. Her face is redolent with anguish and intense alarm. She flees from the car after striking him with her empty handbag. Is this the first time she has registered rage at being used as a container for the fulfilment of male desire? Or did all those previous ellipses conceal (and silence) her anguish at being continually used like this? Do the ellipses actually signify the near-constant violation of her own consent? Has she, in fact, been screaming the whole time?

Cut to an exterior mid-shot; Wanda is running through a forested area, but her movement is marked by obscurity (blurriness), indecipherability (once more, she seems to disappear into the landscape), and inconsistent screen direction (she is terrified, confused, and has nowhere to go). Her presence is marked on the soundtrack by persistent distress and sorrow. She can no longer contain her anguish. We cut to a close-up shot as she collapses to the forest floor and sobs into its foliage. Cut to a low angle shot. Three tall trees, their leaves undulating in the breeze, fill the frame. These are the only witnesses to her despair. Her cries are finally engulfed by silence. Cut.

* * *

This is an excruciatingly difficult scene to sit through and one that only offers a small measure of catharsis to its viewer. For those of us who have become affectively attached to the figure of Wanda, this is truly an agonizing moment to behold which does not grow easier on repeated viewing; we know that this surge of agency is not a feminist awakening of any kind: if this is a victory, it is entirely pyrrhic. The vivid chromatic organization of the scene serves to distil symbolically all of Wanda's thwarted rage and grief, all of the affective bargains she has had to make to get to this point, and all of the infractions of her own space that she has endured in order to survive. In a film so marked by pale and anaemic colouring (the etiolation of life), this insurgence of red functions as a salient reminder that Wanda is not indifferent or apathetic to the world around her — her passivity, her retreat (both external and internal) is precisely a calculated strategy for survival in a world that is, and always will be, immune to her suffering. That this is a film that has deliberately absented any representation of sexual intercourse is significant by this point — we are already in the territory of objectification and violation. In confronting, finally, the obliteration of Wanda's space and consent, we call to mind all the hidden traumas she undoubtedly carries within her. This is, in fact, the essence of Loden's performance of Wanda as a woman who cannot stand up straight enough to face the world freighted as she is by exhaustion, disappointment, and sorrow. We may think of all the ways in which her bodily and spiritual autonomy has been compromised, the violations of privacy she may have endured, and the judgments and aspersions cast on her character precisely as a woman who is never going to be 'good enough.' If she suddenly finds the will to fight off this man who has manoeuvred her, doll-like, into a position of complete submission, this does not represent the dawning of any positive or empowering form of anger. We are not witnessing here, in any sense, the birth of feminist subjectivity. Rather, her survival instinct (which we know to be Wanda's strength) allows her an infinitesimal margin of time and energy (perhaps that 'minute' that she has been asking for all

along) — just enough for her to reach a place of further isolation where she can, finally, collapse under the weight of fright and grief in privacy. The camera's objective perspective onto this scene of rape (which, as it draws in, serves to seal Wanda hermetically into a space of violation) is replaced by the counter-shot of the trees. There is no intervention. There is no witness. There is no compassion. There is no reckoning aside from the one she makes internally in order to propel herself out of this situation. This is the essence of men's casual violation of women's bodies. It is, perhaps, also a distillation of cinema's most violent and irrevocable voyeurisms. It is especially poignant that she uses her empty handbag — which we can read as a personal and feminine signifier — to fight him off. Wanda, this woman who loses everything, from whom everything is taken, is emptied of herself (voided of personal content) in order to be filled with other people's projections and needs. And we too-easily forget the lengths to which people may go in order no longer to be used as a container — including (self)obliteration of the container itself.

Cut to an exterior long shot; it is nightfall (Wanda is back to her usual dilemma of finding a bed for the night). We are outside a roadside bar and motel. Wanda enters from screen left and the camera, which now has a hand-held quality to its movement, follows her. She is barely discernible amongst the shadow and is often obfuscated by darkness. We hear the distant sounds of upbeat folk music (which is incongruent with what we know she must be feeling). We cut to a mobile mid-shot. Another woman comes out of a door and greets Wanda who does not acknowledge her presence (can she trust other women to help her? Can she rely on them?) In one fluid camera movement, we track the other woman's trajectory up a staircase and out of the film's frame before panning back to Wanda who remains stationary and solitary. As the camera pans up again, we see that the other woman is now looking down on her from an upstairs window (perhaps she is concerned?) The camera then tracks

this woman's movement back down the staircase and towards Wanda. 'Are you waiting for somebody, honey?' she asks. We might contrast this woman's question to Wanda with the prior callous retorts of men: 'want something, blondie?'

Cut to an interior close-up shot; we have now moved inside the bar. Wanda is drinking a beer. The folk music has increased in volume. The camera pans around the bar table to take in a number of people, including the woman whom Wanda has just met, all of whom are drinking and smoking and appear to be in good spirits (which markedly offsets Wanda's emotional state). The camera pans back to Wanda and takes in her face in full close-up. She is visibly scarred by the violent encounter in the car. Her right cheek has several bruises and scratches on it. In her lap lies her handbag (somehow she has managed to keep hold of it despite losing all its contents). She holds another full glass of beer in her hand. A man to her right passes her a lit cigarette and places another behind her ear. Despite the movement and commotion around her, she does not engage with anyone or exchange in conversation. She is sealed off—turned in on herself. Cut to a mobile mid-shot. The patrons of the bar are clapping in time to the music and chatting amongst themselves. Their mood is starkly contrasted with Wanda's body language and muteness (held in counter shot/counter image). The camera pans around again to the musicians whose folk tune has increased in pace and volume. Cut to a mid-shot. Wanda raises a cigarette to her lips. Her eyes close. The frame freezes. She disintegrates into darkness. Fade out. End.

Black leader.

Wanda: Barbara Loden

Mr Dennis: Michael Higgins

Written and directed by Barbara Loden

Photographed and edited by Nicholas T. Proferes

Credits.

* * *

Through motifs of repetition, negation, circularity, blockage, liminality, and obscurity, the film has brought us back to its opening central crisis. Wanda's journey has reaped neither progression nor epiphany: it has simply confirmed the terms of her existence via different means and new names. That Mr Dennis's bomb was, in fact, always a dummy device is not only bathetic, but also indicative of how his entire enterprise never signified in reality. He was a deluded man who was far-too-easily able to swallow whole the clichés fed to him (we recall that he was a bad actor with a bad script leading a life cluttered by the lies and expectations proffered, in part, through popular American cultural narratives). In many ways, Mr Dennis was an even better container than Wanda. Wanda is now back in a bar; once again dependent on the dubious 'kindness of strangers.' She made her last internal bargain many bars ago. Freightened with heavy sorrow, she no longer has the energy to meet the eyes of the latest man who might desire to take something from her. As she already told us, she had nothing to give when she came into the world ('never had anything'). But she has had to get used to giving away what she does not, in fact, possess in order to survive (and every act of survival depletes her). This is a perverse form of credit: a way of borrowing from a future that will never appear and that always seems to recede with the horizon. The benchmarks are always moved and the signposts shifted about. There is no possibility of proceeding forward. Every movement simply brings her back to where she started. And once more, the cycle of mere existence demands she empty out even more of herself. She has reached the negative end of an equation that was always already stacked against her. These last moments devastate. This is not a woman who has the luxury of articulating what this world and the men in it have done to her. Words remain inadequate to the task of forming this narrative. We should not be surprised that she has seemingly fallen into silence. This is a portrait of eviscerating loneliness captured within the hectic bustle of human company (Wanda, as we know, is adept at disappearing in a crowd). And so Wanda, this woman who fades back into obscurity, whom nobody really sees, must now close her eyes.

Part 3

By Way of Conclusion: *Wanda* and Contemporary Feminism

The perennial critique levelled at narratives that centre radical denial — especially those harnessed through negative affect — is that they are, in essence, fundamentally disempowering to the reader or viewer. Art forms that bring us into confrontation with crushing and bleak realities are often disparaged on the grounds of making those on their receiving end feel impotent and, by extension, guilty. In other words, they often induce negative affect in their audience which, more often than not, results in a form of critical discourse that denounces such work as wilfully irresponsible, especially when it is conveyed through fictional mode (*Wanda*'s reception is just one case in point). As I stated earlier, drawing on the work of Cvetkovich on the making of depression and its affective survival mechanisms a form of 'grand narrative,'¹ we also refuse to assuage the discomfort the reader or viewer may feel (this is not the same thing, I countenance, as re-purposing it). The lack of resolution, the refusal of a specific notion of illumination or epiphany, is precisely the point. *Wanda* is a film which could not fit within the strictures and mores of its contemporary feminist moment. Gorfinkel notes that 'Loden

1 Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press).

avowedly avoids feminist models of representation as social or political correction.² *Wanda* proffers a counter-narrative to the very notion of artistic reproduction as a means to collective feminist organisation. It holds a disarticulated, muted, numb, and seemingly passive woman at its core and demands that the viewer reckon with the very possibility of self-definition as an inaccessible privilege. This is the feminist mantle that Loden offers us in the form of an eviscerating critique; this is, after all, a film that despite being named after its central female character offers up, with near clinical precision, how and why it is that women all-too-often function as the vessels and containers for men's narratives and desires. I can understand why some viewers persist in finding *Wanda* to be an abstruse cinematic experience; it *is* difficult to articulate why a film about a woman who remains so seemingly passive, so apparently open to the abuses of patriarchy, could convey a more vital and necessary form of feminism than our limited contemporary discourse seems to offer. Importantly though, Loden's politics cleaves neither to the 'images of women' debate of its own historical context nor to our current conversation centred on the politics of representation and diversity. This latter reiteration has much in common, in fact, with those earlier debates in terms of its seemingly relentless focus on positivity and self-empowerment (now recuperated through a neoliberal model of autonomous, self-fashioning, and individualised subjectivity). Loden, if she were alive today, would, I conjecture, have felt equally constrained and underserved by our contemporary discourse.

In the opening of this essay, I stated that *Wanda* is the film of our political moment and I am not alone in this conviction. Gorfinkel describes the film as 'an unforeseen, untimely feminist cinema' that has transcended the 'reaches of historical time' to find 'solidarity' in or with a current audience.³ Latterly, Amy

2 Elena Gorfinkel, 'Wanda's Slowness: Enduring Insignificance,' in *On Women's Films: Across Worlds and Generations*, eds. Ivonne Marguiles and Jeremi Szaniawski (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 35.

3 *Ibid.*, 45.

Taubin has also noted a shift in the film's reception and writes that: 'in recent years, reaction to the film has seldom been dismissive. Thanks to the feminist energy that has continued to evolve as it has seeped into the culture in the decades since the film's release, *Wanda* can now be appreciated as a portrait of a kind of woman who, being no man's fantasy, had almost never been seen on the screen before.'⁴ I can only concur with Gorfinkel and Taubin that *Wanda* is, indeed, a profoundly prescient and deeply feminist statement, which we would allow to fade back into obscurity at our peril. The film has so much to teach us as a form of counter-cinema (the likes of which remain all too rare).⁵ What defines Loden's counter-cinema as political gesture, though, has little to do with the dominant contemporary 'feminist' narrative. Rather, I regard the film as exemplary of Claire Johnston's definition of women's counter-cinema because of its direct confrontation with cinema as an apparatus of patriarchal, capitalist ideology.⁶

Johnston's critique of feminist recuperation of so-called cinema vérité techniques was incisive and excoriating and, in my view, it is worth quoting her under-utilised essay at length. She writes, 'clearly, if we accept that cinema involves the production of signs, the idea of non-intervention is pure mystification. The sign is *always* a product. What the camera in fact grasps is the "natural" world of the dominant ideology — *Women's cinema cannot afford such idealism*.'⁷ It is for this very reason that the classification of *Wanda* as cinéma vérité is, in my view, problematic — not merely because it seemingly undermines Loden's agency as an artist, but because this taxonomy fails to account for the precision of the film's feminist politics *at the level of the*

4 See Amy Taubin, 'Wanda: A Miracle,' *The Criterion Collection*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6251-wanda-a-miracle>.

5 I have alluded earlier on here to the cinema of Kelly Reichardt as being equally cardinal, in my view.

6 Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema,' in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (1976; repr. London: Wiley Blackwell, 2008).

7 *Ibid.*, 124 (emphasis mine).

image.⁸ *Wanda* stages, on a granular level, the slow and steady accretion of a radical feminist intervention into image-making as a commercial enterprise. It is all there for us to see, *if* we choose to look carefully: in the margin, in the use of dead time, in the ellipses, in its slowness, in its negativity and refusal, in its mundanity, in its ugliness, in its refusal to turn away or to soothe. It is there in the genius of Loden's performance of negative capability, of passivity, of hesitancy, of muteness, of numbness, of quiet subversion.⁹ It is there for us to behold in this narrative that centres on a woman diminished by the very spaces, people, and political landscape that surround her; a woman who disintegrates before our eyes; a woman to whom seemingly nobody pays loving attention. This woman, Wanda — who, as Lauwaert notes, is no positive form of role model — can tell us precisely what we are missing, and not only on our cinema screens, but in our politics. We might reject her because she makes us feel our complicity in and our indifference to social systems designed to perpetuate egregious inequities, and resulting political policies that summon slow death through daily attrition. That affliction of guilt may feel like too much of a weight to bear or body forth, but Loden's performance reminds us that this pales into insignificance in comparison to the weight that Wanda carries: a burden that is incontrovertible, unchanging, and is with her, and those like her, for all time. Readers who have gotten this far into my text may have noticed that I have slipped into writing about Wanda as if she were real. *This is because she is*: Barbara Loden made her so, not only through her preternatural skill as a performer, but also through her empathy for and curiosity about Alma Malone. This is a film that holds

8 *Wanda* may, in fact, have more in common aesthetically and politically with the work of late 1970s feminist 'no wave' filmmakers such as Vivienne Dick and Bette Gordon.

9 For an extended and careful analysis of Loden's performance, I recommend Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, 'Nothing of the Sort: Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970),' *Cinema Comparative Cinema*, n.d., <http://www.ocec.eu/cinemacomparativecinema/index.php/en/33-n-8-english/399-nothing-of-the-sort-barbara-loden-s-wanda-1970>.

within it the sadness of the world and asks us to attend to that as an ethical calling. It tells us, starkly and simply, not to turn away from suffering. *Wanda's* bleak truth *is* the point— it impresses on us a duty of care that we missed then, that we are still missing, that we have seemingly always fundamentally missed. It reminds us that wilful neglect and a refusal to see are, precisely, political acts of violence. It urges us to respond to the unendurable realities of the political and social world in which we live and to those it systematically disenfranchises, dehumanizes, obliterates, and discards.

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