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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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## New York Film Festival 2008

### Part II: Of Now, Passion, and the 'We'

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The films discussed here in Part II, each in its own way, play with the possibility that the 'I' may be a fiction, or simply a bundle of futile immediate desires that is - in basic ways that the individual tends to understand but dimly if at all - severely constrained by the continuities and systems of the 'we', of either the family, the community and society as a whole. Ironically, the more the viability of the discreet individual self is challenged by these films, the more each individual in them emerges in his or her fragile radiance and complexity.

#### *Happy-Go-Lucky*

Directed and written by Mike Leigh; edited by Jim Clark;  
cinematography by Dock Pope; produced by Simon  
Channing Williams; starring Sally Hawkins, Eddie Marsan,  
Alexis Zegerman. Color. 118 mins. UK

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*Wendy and Lucy*

Directed by Kelly Reichardt; written by Kelly Reichardt and Jon Raymond; edited by Mike Burchett and Kelly Reichardt; cinematography by Sam Levy; produced by Neil Kopp et al; starring Michelle Williams, Will Patton Jr., and Walter Dalton. Color. 80 mins. USA

*The Windmill Movie*

Directed, written, and edited by Alexander Olch; cinematography Richard P. Rogers; produced by Susan Meiselas; starring Richard P. Rogers, Wallace Shawn, Bob Balaban. Color. 82 mins. USA

*Summer Hours*

Directed and written by Olivier Assayas; edited by Luc Barnier; cinematography by Eric Gautier; produced by Claire Dornoy et. al.; starring Juliette Binoche, Charles Berling, Edith Scob, and Jeremie Renier. Color. 102 mins. France

*A Christmas Tale*

Directed by Arnaud Desplechin; written by Arnaud Desplechin and Emmanuel Bordieu; edited by Laurence Briaud; Cinematography by Eric Gautier; produced by Pascal Caucheteux. Color. 152 mins. France

Arguably, Mike Leigh's new film *Happy-go-Lucky* does not consciously assess the extent to which the individual is a function of the systems by means of which it may in fact be created. Indeed, according to the press packet, the question on which the film is predicated is a much more user friendly query: 'Just how hard is it to be happy?' Seemingly, this is a movie that pits the bubbling fountain of exuberance welling up ceaselessly within its protagonist, Poppy (Sally Hawkins),

against the various shades of misery in the London around her. Yet what interested me most about Leigh's film is that I found it less about individuals and more about the isolation that social categories and boundaries create for each of us and how little (or possibly how much) we can do about reaching across these external barriers.

Everyone in the film is largely determined by his or her circumstances. Sally distinguishes herself, not by being an exception to this rule, but by rejecting resignation in the face of inevitable external pressures. This is very much the sense of the initial montage in the film. In it we see Sally cruising blissfully around London on a bicycle, crossing among the distinctly different sections of the city, suggesting that she is either as a free soul or someone who wishes to be so. The rest of the film, suggests that she is no more free than anyone else, but that she is undaunted by signs of the intractability of human limitations. One of the major charms of the film is that although each experience with repressive confinements mandated by systems defines the shape of Poppy's limits more precisely, at the same time it leaves untouched her irrepressible joy of living and her sense of hope and possibility.

This delicious paradox is established when, at the conclusion of the opening montage Poppy and her bicycle come to a rest outside a bookshop, inside of which is a dour clerk, clearly a man whose prospects for employment are not bright and who, feeling trapped by the limitations placed on him, has stagnated body and soul. Poppy's attempts to lift his spirits as she rifles through the children's books - for what reason we have no idea at this point - are of no avail. He is both immune to her efforts and frankly annoyed by them. Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains. When Poppy exits the shop, having bought several books, her bicycle is gone. Suffering a momentary bout of anger and frustration, she almost immediately rebounds with a humorous take on the situation that releases her from any long-term malaise 'Never even had a chance to say good-bye', she quips. Woman is everywhere in chains, but... Poppy's apparent liberty has been taken away by circumstances, but then again it hasn't. The theft points to the existence of limits on her blithe journey through life, and at the same time reveals that she refuses to learn the lesson the book store clerk

has learned well about the way events impinge on us. Is she a fool or a blessed being?

During the press conference for *Happy-go-Lucky*, it became evident that some in the audience had their teeth set on edge by what they saw as Poppy's 'pollyanna-ish' ways. A friend of mine, on a separate occasion, voiced the same reservation. I believe both critics and friend misunderstood what Leigh is about in this film. Leigh, who has time and again demonstrated the power of external systems and histories over human wishes, appears in *Happy-go-Lucky* to reserve a 'Sisyphean' freedom to laugh at defeat. As Poppy encounters a driving instructor who has also been too good a student of life's disappointments and defeats, a child in the school in which she teaches who has been brutalised by his mother's boyfriend, and an almost witless homeless man, she demonstrates an openness to engage them, but a refusal to be dragged down by them. And the reward is love. Poppy is able to love not only those whom life gives her easily as friends, but also a man who appears suddenly on her horizon. Because she has not become cramped by the defeats that we are all handed every day, when her prince shows up, she is able to spontaneously respond to him. Because she will not learn despair, she is able to teach the little boy in her class to move beyond the shock of being betrayed in his home. A celebratory movie, yes, but not a cheap shot. Both Leigh and Poppy have achieved a hard-won affability about the human condition.

Although Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy* also affirms the persistence of love within socially prescribed limitations, it is quite another story. *Wendy and Lucy* is a quiet, small film, deliberately underplayed for affect, and yet, in my experience, it is among the very few American films that can validly claim a positive family resemblance to the passionate, Italian post-World War II neo-realist movement. Lucy (played by herself) is Wendy's dog. Wendy (Michelle Williams) is travelling with Lucy in a wreck of a car to try to make her way to Ketchikan Alaska, in order for Wendy to get a summer job in a fish cannery there. It's a desperate move, a long trip toward one place where she knows there are jobs. Without financial resources of any kind, Wendy needs to find a way to make a living in a depressed economy. The film, based on a short story by Jon

Raymond, leaves Wendy vulnerable to the heavy hand of circumstances as it falls most mercilessly on those most without protection and a strong, read middle class, support network. But though life hits her hard, everything that happens to Wendy is plausible, reflecting America as it really is. Hers is a lonely America seen from outside the comfortable bourgeois enclave. Out there, the fact that money defines social place is a great deal more problematic than just the struggle for status for those sheltered under the dome of privilege. Reichardt encourages those of us under that dome to take another look at our privilege and how it affects those down on their luck or those who have simply fallen through the cracks, who are viewed coldly, with suspicion, or with impatient irritation by those who are nothing more than luckier than their deprived brothers and sisters. Reichardt also makes us proud of the ruptures and fissures in this America through which human empathy spontaneously shoots out, as we see in a number of characters who extend compassion to Wendy.

Williams' Wendy copes with both aspects of the outsider experience. Because she is unsentimental about her heroine's plight, Reichardt's film avoids bathos quite handily; for the same reason, it creates an opportunity for us to delve into our most profound sense of charity; it is a pure example of what it means to understand about doing unto others as we would want them to do unto us. Williams delivers a quietly incandescent performance, creating a resilient character coping with life on the road. A good deal of the time her Wendy is trying to figure out what her position is and what her real options are. Lucy plays a key role in these meditations because she is Wendy's only source of affection. Wendy's family appears to be without a shred of generosity for her, in their concern for dealing with unspecified economic hardships that they themselves are facing. Family, as well as friendships, are conditional depending on circumstances in this film. Without feeling sorry for herself, Wendy comes to understand that this is the case. In a Hemingway-esque manner, she responds to the demands of her life that she do what her situation calls for in order to survive.

Wendy is dealt a huge blow early in the film, when she shoplifts food for Lucy in a supermarket because she can't afford the food. The clerk who catches

her is a strictly-by-the book fellow, who does not even allow her to provide for Lucy who is tied up outside the supermarket when Wendy is hauled off to jail. When Wendy is finally released, Lucy has disappeared. To add insult to injury, she finds her car has broken down. For the rest of the film, Wendy tries to survive, to fix her car, and to find Lucy. Of course, the initial shoplifting incident poses the question of the film. Can Wendy afford Lucy; that is, can she afford love, given her indigence? De Sica devotees will immediately flash on *Umberto D* (1952) which asked the same question, and clearly challenged the sentimentality of capitalism and its mass entertainment industry full of melodramas that absolutely deny that free market societies commodify human relationships. I am not so sure that Reichardt mounts the same challenge with the same intentionality. But not only is that the *de facto* question at the core of the story of Wendy's and Lucy's bond with each other and the events that entrap them in this film, but during the press conference, Reichardt said that she made the movie because, as the American financial system was going into collapse, she wanted to think about what would happen to people in the current situation without a safety net. *Wendy and Lucy* is awesome in the simplicity with which it does just that.

Although it may sound like a burn notice to describe *The Windmill Movie* as the vain attempt of a child of privilege, a filmmaker named Richard P. Rogers - not the famous pioneer of the American musical - to make a coherent, cinematic autobiography, it is not. Rather, *The Windmill Movie* is one of those rare praiseworthy though Quixotic attempts to explore how much truth the cinema can bear. Made after Rogers's death by one of his students, this film, a gathering of fragments without a hope of forming a coherent whole, speaks to us about the inevitability of failure when we seek to draw a picture of the self. Though it explains nothing, it bursts with implications that the self, resist the idea thought it may, does not exist outside of the context in which it entered the world. Rogers is contemptuous of the WASP American family of which he is indelibly a part. Part of him stands outside and watches them and their friends during their social gatherings, viewing with contempt their smugness and their exclusion of anyone not like them, and unable to understand why they should have so much

while others suffer painful privations. He outrages his mother by partnering with a Jewish woman. He trains his camera on the usual WASP suspects in the Hamptons and on his WASP self cruelly. But part of him is of this crowd and clarity eludes him. He does not know what his autobiographical film is about at any point, despite the many years he spent filming family and friends. To the audience, it would seem that he can never distinguish himself fully from them; he is always a part of who they have made him.

Not that he has created the structure within which the pieces become suggestive of his intractable connection to a heritage that troubles him profoundly. When Rogers died, he left only many cartons of disconnected pieces of film. The job of assembling the pieces fell by chance to Rogers's student, Alexander Olch, in many ways his alter ego. Also a son of privilege, Olch formed a father-son-like bond with his mentor and teacher. They met at Harvard, and among the first words Rogers said to Olch were, according to Olch, 'Let me guess, 74<sup>th</sup> Street, Collegiate [the name of a private school on New York's exclusive Upper East Side]': the recognition of a member of the tribe. Two years after Rogers' death in 2001, Olch sent a polite note to his widow, Susan Meiselas, a Magnum photographer, and the post-mortem relationship between Rogers and Olch began. Meiselas asked Olch to help her with problem she was having with Rogers old Avid, and the two were surprised to find themselves creating a shape for the hundreds of film fragments Rogers had left behind.

Like Jia Zhangke, Olch and Meiselas found that history is best transmitted through a combination of documentary and fiction. The finished *Windmill Movie* - so called because of a windmill out in the Hamptons, where Rogers was raised, dear to his much loved and much hated mother - is a combination of candid camera film taken by both Rogers and his father, and dramatisations of Rogers's life shot by Olch on location in his family home in which Wallace Shawn plays the role of his old friend Richard Rogers and Bob Balaban plays himself. *Windmill Movie* is not destined to become a runaway hit for mass audiences, but it seems to me to open another chapter in the book of the Mysterious American WASP, begun by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, contributed to by his famous interchange with Hemingway about the differences between 'the Rich' and 'us'

which ended with Papa H. saying, 'Yes, they have so much more money'; and alluded to in Richard Dyer's study of whiteness. Rogers struggled against the 'we' that enfolded him, passionately insisting in vain on a felt spontaneity that would grant him release from values and a history he could not countenance. As we confront the defiant resistance to coherence in the fragments Rogers left behind him, we experience his own confusion, doubt, and despair of knowledge. Olch's film lends a documentary credence to the legendary tales of the suffering of 'the haves'.

Finally, from France, two tales of family, the continuities blood imposes, and the constraints built of the binding ties that define the 'we' in terms of The Mother: Olivier Assayas' lyrical *Summer Hours* and Arnaud Desplechin's loopy *A Christmas Tale*. In *Summer Hours*, a mother's death triggers in each of her adult children a comic crisis of recognition about his or her relationship to the larger familial unit and to the discontinuities between the France of the past and the France of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Helene (Edith Scob) is a seventy-five year old matriarch who gathers her children Frederic (Charles Berling), Adrienne (Juliette Binoche), and Jeremie (Jeremie Renier) and their spouses and children for what she feels will be one last time (it turns out that she is right) before she dies. After her death, the subject of the film is the distribution of her possessions, including her house and the paintings of her uncle, a renowned artist. It is a familiar scenario, in many ways, that blends a range of reactions from Frederic, Adrienne, and Jeremie that we have seen before in movies about inheritance: denial, economic considerations, sadness, thoughts of tradition and legacy. However, there is a felt life deliberately realised by Assayas in his juxtaposition of Helene's possessions with nature, and in his intentionally unmelodramatic handling of the situation that contrasts strongly with other films of this genre.

The film begins evoking the ecstatic beauty of the house and its gardens as we watch children running freely around the sunlit, flower-filled grounds of Helene's beautiful, old home. Assayas immerses us first in the bliss of family that has formed the memories of Frederic, Adrienne, and Jeremie. They are who they are within a richly evoked context. The questions in the film have to do

with how they will transmit all this to the next generations, taking into consideration the forces of a new, global world that finds only Frederic still in France. Adrienne works in New York City. Jeremie and his family are on their way to China to pursue his business opportunities. The house can no longer serve to unify them, nor can it be a vital inheritance to the next generation. House and possessions, once in intimate connection to the family can now only be distant objects. What to do? Anyone who has seen ordinary 'dividing up the family loot' films will, as I did, watch the film expecting fierce infighting, betrayals, and counter betrayals because of strongly held differing feelings about whether to keep house and artworks. But though fights erupt, Assayas has dramatised the way these sudden passions dissipate among family members who are basically good people who care for each other. It is a refreshing, satisfying and deeply lifelike picture of sibling sagas of war and peace.

The film grew out of a commission from the Musee D'Orsay in Paris which wanted to connect its twentieth anniversary with some kind of cinematic project. The museum originally proposed an anthology of four short films, of which Assayas was to direct one. That four-part film fell through for what Assayas called 'technical reasons'. However, Assayas continued to discuss the project with the Musee and was inspired to create *Summer Hours* as a long form, which at its core is so involved with the way the life of objects and the life of people brush each other that it not only includes the Musee D'Orsay in a key scene, but has major implications for the nature of the museum as an institution.

Oddly, the Musee D'Orsay was well pleased with Assayas's film, even though the museum as a functioning part of culture is likened in *Summer Hours* to a graveyard for objects. Once Helene's furniture and objets are (beautifully) on display in the museum, they, out of context, are moribund and seem coldly distant from the family members who come to see them there, the focus of attention of strangers. However, Assayas is not sentimental or mawkish about the deceased things. Rather, he depicts their departure as a kind of liberation for Helene's children. *Summer Hours* is a warmly affectionate, intelligent ode to growth and change.

But if you are a connoisseur of quirky, you will prefer the story of Junon

(Catherine Deneuve) and Abel (Jean-Paul Roussillon) in Desplechin's *A Christmas Tale*, which sounds like some kind of Dickensian offshoot, but is more like a very sophisticated Looney Toons. As in Assayas' film, a seemingly generic plot concept, here the disastrous gathering of the family at Christmas, is played off-beat. The result is an immensely entertaining *tour de force* of acting and directing; whether it is more than that I am not able to determine, but I am open to the possibility that Desplechin has found a way of revealing some important home truths. However, whatever he has done, this director could not have done it without Catherine Deneuve, a celebrated beauty associated with both highly romantic and demi-pornographic fantasies, whose importance to the film as the mother at the centre of an haute bourgeois family circus cannot be underestimated. It is likely that no one else would have been able to fill her shoes in this story of Junon, a middle-aged matriarch, clearly once the last word in sexual appeal of the blonde variety, who married a rich man much older than herself and much less attractive, but whom she clearly and genuinely loves - an impossibility in an American film, and a first for Deneuve, who in her previous starring roles was paired with men who, no matter how unsuitable for her in other ways, matched her as objects of desire. Junon is also clearly not a trophy wife for Abel.

Add to this challenge to stereotypical expectations, Junon's brood of adult misfits. Daughter Elizabeth (Anne Consigny) is a self-righteous, prim, darkly pretty playwright with an inexplicable, cold hatred for her brother Henri (Mathieu Amalric), the kind of impulsive, loveable, semi-demented screw-up that is Amalric's acting specialty. There is also Ivan Melvil Poupaud, Junon's youngest child, the uxorious husband of Sylvia (Chiara Mastroianni), who never knows of the unfinished erotic business she has with his cousin, Simon (Laurent Capelluto). In the family background is Joseph, the first-born child, who, having contracted leukaemia, needed a bone marrow transplant that no one in the family could supply. Henri was conceived in the hope that he would be a suitable donor, which he was not, and Joseph died when he was seven years old. The Christmas reunion that forms the framework of the film marks the first time the entire family has been together in years because Henri has been absent

from their circle for years for reasons only Henri and Elizabeth know - and you will find out when you see the film. Familial flesh and blood are literally much on the minds of these people during this holiday season because of a sudden re-entrance of leukaemia into the family story.

Junon has been diagnosed with leukaemia and told by the doctors that chemotherapy will not work for her. Moreover, she has been told by the doctors that they are not entirely sure that her condition will worsen, and that a bone marrow transplant, the only therapy that might cure the disease (that might or might not afflict her in a serious form) is very dangerous. The most probably donor is a member of the family, but the test is painful and sometimes injurious. In effect, Junon is shadow boxing in a fog, a condition that is a metaphor for the intimacy that is family. Nevertheless, no Camille Junon. Although elegant, she appears hale and hearty, of the earth and sturdy; her strong and grounded appearance in contradiction of the disease that is reputed to be working away inside of her. Those who enjoy star studies, tracing the trajectory of star texts through a series of career avatars, will find Deneuve's Junon a provocative successor to the Deneuve of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, *Donkey Skin*, *Belle de Jour* and *The Hunger*.

The question of Junon's transplant runs straight through the film while around it swirl the murky passions of the siblings that erupt in the dark corners and on the staircases of Abel and Junon's beautiful home, and in neighbouring cafes and rain and snow slicked streets. All comes to a head in a climactic scene in the hospital between Junon and son Henri, who has proven to be the donor match for her that he was not for his doomed brother Joseph. It is a comic masterpiece, a discussion at once hilarious and profoundly moving about their mutual dislike for each other. In the aftermath of the transfusion, both naked under their hospital gowns and in great pain from the procedure, they enact a mother-son dance of estrangement around this transfer of bodily tissues between them that is intimate to the point of sublimated incest, patently bonded in all their bones and sinews, patently estranged by animosities of which neither possesses a shred of understanding. Was it necessary? Will it be of use? Surrounded by the cut and dried technology of medicine, they are the epitome

of the essential human mystery. The original Christmas tale was also a mother-son story. Make what you will of its differences from this modern version.

Courage courses through the cinematic veins of the films reviewed in Parts I and II of this report from NYFF, both individually and in the aggregate. The directors have allowed themselves no safe havens, no easy outs in confronting human vanity, depravity, mortality, absurdity, passion, charity, and fortitude. Therein, resilience, exhilaration, and grace abound.