

# WASTELAND

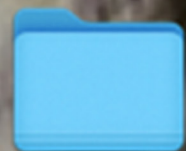




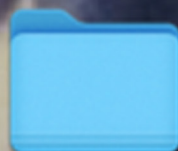
Wanda



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# ***Wanda***

Barbara Loden, 1970





Wanda's body is parcelled through the film as its own object. Its introduction is tempered with the mechanical hum of coaling machinery outside her place of stay—a friend's house, complete with the trappings of proletariat domesticity: an unsettled baby, a disinterested husband, and a faded sticker of the American flag pasted to a door-pane. Sedately peering outside to the elephantine spoil tips, the film's opening scene gestures towards Wanda's precarious lifestyle. Indeed, it is as uncertain as her subsistence. Thereafter, as if lifted from her surroundings like a paper cut out—dressed all in white, traversing the cavities of the anthracite landscape—she moves along an invisible chord; she hovers atop the miry earth.

Tinged with sensitivity, Barbara Loden's self-insertive *vérité* is a singularly feminist text. As the first film to be written, directed and starring the same woman, Loden marries the incision of directorial objectivity with the intuition of performance. Benefited by the intimacy of both positions to the source material, Loden blends the hostile, acrid backdrop of the North American rust-belt with Wanda's almost spectral femininity. Visualised through a catalogue of white clothing and youthful hairstyles, Loden's self-direction confers a sense of acuity impossible to replicate; her inhabitation of Wanda as a character is as tactful as it is self-aware.

In the presence of petty criminals, Wanda curls up to sleep on a pile of disused furniture; at the side of the road, she dabs her nails with pink lacquer; she recalls declining custody of her children; she fixates on the resounding flight of a toy plane as it encircles overhead. Each lingering shot of Wanda solitarily passing through the *mise-en-scène* yields to Loden's oneiric, instinctive performance. It is precisely Wanda's laconic dialogue, and the frequent depictions of her sleeping, that reflect the camera's own reluctance to embellish. Beaten down by abusive relationships, turning to the survivor's adage to keep moving forward, Wanda's words are used economically, her behaviour a dance between restraint and reticence.

At odds with her peripheral position to the criminal men with whom she finds herself,

Wanda is sutured to the fabric of the film through an autonomous camera, one that devotes itself to the minutiae of her behaviour, to the most fractional of expressions and gesticulations—mirroring their subtlety. Arrival at the final sequence sees its only disruption. With Wanda shouldered between boisterous men drinking and smoking, the camera's dedication is threatened, obstructed by hands exchanging cigarettes and pitchers of beer. Actuated by a freeze-frame, gleaning a moment of unimpeded clarity, Wanda's silent acculturation to this half-lit milieu of bodies in kinesis intimates the uncertainty of her direction. Where she will go after this evening is left unanswered, implied to be unanswerable. Indeed, freezing this particular moment of Wanda's estrangement, now felt too by the camera, is an act of empathy, of immortalisation.

Words by Jessica Moore

Images: *Wanda* (Bardene International Films, 1970)







# ***Stop Making Sense***

Johnathan Denne, 1984





*Hi, I've got a tape I want to play.* Panning up from his white tennis shoes, David Byrne seems more square than rockstar. Frontman of Talking Heads, Byrne waltzes onto the screen to perform a stripped-back version of 'Psycho Killer'; the bare stage and his oversized attire making the scene resemble a high school talent show, a maths teacher seizing hold of an acoustic guitar and portable tape player. With each song the stage becomes more crowded. Other musicians trickle in, stagehands set up mic stands and wheel out drum kits, until, by the fourth song on the set-list, every member of the band has convened.

As a concert film, *Stop Making Sense* boasts unparalleled originality. However, one does question what exactly the show is at times. A gig? Conceptual art performance? Off-broadway theatre production? During 'Once in a Lifetime', you could easily mistake the spectacle for some ecclesiastical convention—the audience, or rather congregation, in witness to the profferings of the Talking Heads megachurch. Yet it is precisely this inventive and diverse display that makes the film so visually and aurally arresting.

Byrne, who spends most of the show drenched with sweat, is formidable. His classically handsome and angular face contorts and shudders, his eyes wide and crazed. Flailing, quivering and gyrating to every beat, illustrating every lyric, his body—as if controlled by some extraneous force—is flung across the stage; he hobbles, careers around drum kits, and for a peculiarly tender moment in 'This Must Be the Place', partakes in a pas de deux with a floor lamp. It seems for Byrne the show is not merely a concert, but a cardio exercise program, each song assigned a routine of aerobics and sprinting. This choreography, performed by the frontman and band alike, is augmented by lighting. Flirting between colour and position, lights illuminate from every direction. This parade is announced in a flourish of blue, red and white, as shadows of the band—like those cast by a handheld light during 'Girlfriend is Better'—frisk across the back of the stage enormous and disembodied. This particular song, perhaps most famous for the debut of Byrne's big suit, is a paragon of the show's oddball exuberance. The suit itself quite literally hangs off his body, vast swathes of fabric suspended by a girdle and webbed shoulder pads.

As he moves, the suit sways with such exaggerated undulation that the result is at once cartoonish and effortlessly suave. In the song that follows this, Byrne unbuttons his jacket. Adopting the air of a commander, he slides his hands into his pockets and saunters around the stage; he is an overseer of precise and beguiling entertainment.

Launching into each song with relish, the band are acutely aware of their brilliance. Byrne struggles to suppress a perpetual smile, bassist Tina Weymouth dances with vocalists Lynn Mabry and Ednah Holt, whilst percussionist and promoter of unadulterated enthusiasm, Steve Scales, cavorts from one instrument to another. The band are not coy but never arrogant either. Indeed, what pervades the show is an innate earnestness, a genuine appreciation for the music, camaraderie and delight experienced up on stage. This joviality is infectious, and alongside the carefully considered set-list, prohibits the show from ever reaching a plateau. If Byrne's idiosyncrasies are characterised by staccato, spasmodic motion, then the film itself moves towards its crescendo with celebratory ease.

*Stop Making Sense* is a masterful demonstration of showmanship. The performances, which extend beyond the music, are so memorable and infused with such unbridled passion that the result is inimitable euphoria. Possessing a frenetic, hypnotic, and ultimately very touching purity, the film is exhilarating and never feels contrived. It is sublime. *Does anybody have any questions?*

Words by Isobel Wise

Images: *Stop Making Sense* (Cinecom Pictures and Palm Pictures, 1984)







# *close-up*

Abbas Kiarostami, 1990





*It's a strange story.* Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* centres a real-life event—of a man, Hossain Sabzian, arrested and charged with fraudulent impersonation of a well-known filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf—as the basis for his meta-cinematic blend of fiction and documentary. Indeed, Kiarostami's film destabilises all that we, as audiences, assume regarding the boundaries of performance and reality; he pushes the invisible lines, he reclassifies their borders. An awareness of the extent to which Kiarostami plays with the textuality of his film demands knowledge of its context. Most pressing of all is the casting: the real people involved in the case play themselves; they reenact a criminal trial, itself connected to performance and directorship—they become players who fret their hour upon the stage.

Performance implicates an audience and a performer, yet Kiarostami's narrative throws into question the definitions prescribed to these positions, conflating their ontology to constitute the same identities. Sabzian, an imposter—(aren't all actors?)—masquerades as Makhmalbaf to an unsuspecting family, convincing them of his identity to the extent that he promises the children parts in his upcoming feature. Though the story is mediated through the docufiction form, the incident is personally, self-consciously explored by Sabzian and the family during a court trial. Thus it seems that the passage of retrospect, as promised by a trial and its investigative spotlight, has much to do with Sabzian's duality; it illuminates a slippage between the act and the actor.

Closely aligned to the audience and prosecutors, the documentarians wish to understand the intent behind this unsustainable act of impersonation. They hope, for their documentary's sake, to procure insights from Sabzian to provide the substance for their film. 'This camera is here so you can explain things' they tell Sabzian, as if competing with the very function of the trial itself. As if Sabzian was not already under the watchful eyes of those pressing charges against him, he must reconcile performing for both a camera and a courtroom. Contextualising his act of fraud, he admits that its motivation was born out of a fervent identification with Makhmalbaf's films. 'He spoke for me,' Sabzian memorably claims. For both camera and court, his crime is eclipsed—he persuades us of his humility.

Kiarostami's direction operates within two schools of self-awareness. Firstly, everyone plays themselves and are therein afforded a chance to reenact what has already happened to them; the implications of this alone are a feast of meta-cinema. Secondly, Kiarostami upholds a camera towards the notion of filmmaking as its own agent of recreation. That is, the sensational real-life event is not impartially retold, it is focalised—reframed to convey perspective. Rather post-modernly, and as a reflection of his profession as a director, Kiarostami's sympathies and fascination are directed towards the act of imitation—towards the 'actor', Sabzian, who (fittingly) works in a print shop. Indeed, the copy confers more intrigue than the original.

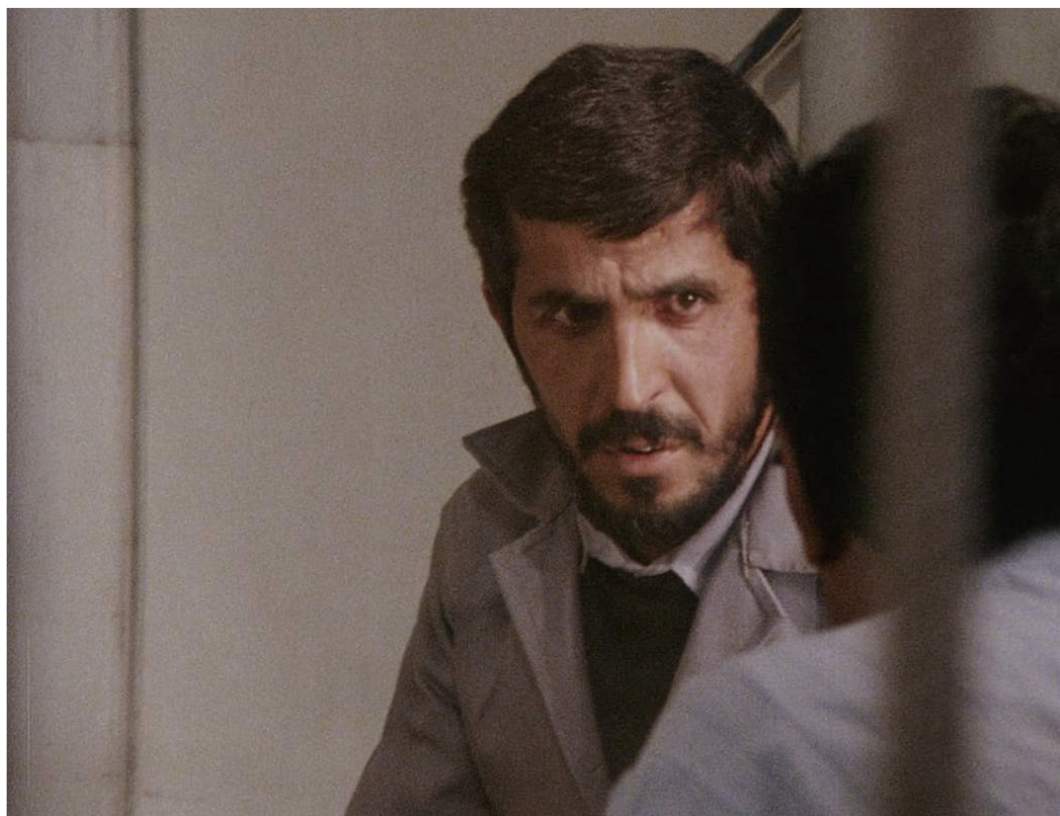
Though others have come close, perhaps there is no greater example of a filmmaker and a film that champions the art of recreation so grandly. Vacillating between the formalists and realists, Kiarostami purveys a dualism shared by Sabzian: 'I know I'm guilty in the eyes of the court, but I feel my love for the arts should be taken into account.' Posturing a love for the arts into the sterility of a courtroom is a suitable metaphor for Kiarostami's own adoption of both artistic sensibilities. In fact, Kiarostami demonstrates how one, in all its bounteous artificiality, can enhance the other—how balancing the two can enable us to get up-close (*/close-up*) to that which is expected to be impossible to capture.

Kiarostami communicates this optic through surmising a sense of harmony within the act of inhabitation, at least a cinephile's inhabitation of a director's persona. By the film's end, Sabzian and Makhmalbaf snake through the bustling streets of Tehran on a motorbike as one organism, stopping off to pick flowers at a road-side market. 'Do you prefer being...' Makhmalbaf begins to ask Sabzian though the rest is cut out; we are told by the documentarians their equipment is faulty. Between patches of disrupted sound, and in the chasm between fiction and documentary, it appears that (re)creation is always a process of identification. As audiences inclined to see ourselves in the narratives we explore, to embed our being into the fibres of cinema, creation and reception become a fluid, indivisible response to our surroundings—in *Close-Up*, this impulse is richly poetic.



Words by Jessica More

Images: *Close-Up* (Celluloid  
Picturues, 1990)







# ***Ida***

Paweł Pawlikowski, 2013



Boasting a premise that is deceptively simple, *Ida* is as much a comment upon twentieth-century Polish history as it is an intimate examination of private turmoil. Set in 1960s Poland, the film follows Anna (Agata Trzebuchowska), a young novitiate nun who has been raised in a convent since infancy. After reuniting with her only surviving relative, Anna is told of her Jewish heritage; her birth name is Ida Lebenstein and her family are victims of the former German occupation. Alongside her aunt Wanda (Agata Kulesza), Anna embarks on a pilgrimage to discover the fate of their relatives, uncovering truths that will displace notions of ancestry, purpose and grief on a personal and national scale.

What is so striking about the film is the quiet restraint of its characters. Anna—as statuesque as the figure of Christ she confides in—is devout, pious in terms of both religious reverence and individual sincerity. Clothed in her habit and knitted stockings, only her eyes are exposed; dark orbs that cast out imperturbable and ruminative observations. Introduced in scenes that feature very little peripheral commotion, it is unclear whether the acute serenity of Anna’s world—with its silent suppers and prayers—is an extension of her own placidity or rather her inspiration to adopt such affectations. Indeed, in her interactions with Wanda, there is a degree to which Anna’s stoicism is invented, as opposed to being an intrinsic quality, one that is proved to be somewhat sensitive to her aunt’s teasing and apostasy. However, regardless of the provenance of Anna’s disposition, in contrast to Wanda, it is made practically immaculate. Maintaining the severity from her time as a state prosecutor, Wanda is wounded by her past. If Anna is a novice, her aunt is worldly; her objects of devotion are far more terrestrial in the vices of cigarettes, alcohol and promiscuity. Confident in movement and commanding attention, Wanda rejects the life of ‘chastity, poverty and obedience’ that awaits Anna but shares her niece’s reticence. In truth, the film enjoys minimal dialogue. Conversations are allusive to the substantial topics of anti-Semitism, Stalinism, and atrocities of war, but remain sparse and indirect. Instead, the urgency within each exchange is electric; an invisible but ever-present current conducted through stares and pregnant silences.

As if to follow this specific delineation of emotion

preferred by the pair, the film exercises the use of solely diegetic sound. Anna’s boots gnaw at the snow underfoot; a choir of cutlery chimes in the refectory; low rumbles are pronounced by passing trams. These sounds, quotidian in nature, enhance the reserve so expertly maintained by Anna and Wanda, amplifying the immediate intimacy of their efforts to uncover the past. Refusing to bestow external expression upon a narrative characterised by such constraint, music never features as a direct score. Instead, it filters into the film as radio refrains and jazz band performances; it is ambient, sympathetic, unobtrusive.

Equally as ascetic in its aesthetics, the film’s characters move through spaces that are uncluttered and generally unpopulated. They drive along flat, barren farmlands, passing by countryside that has been liberated from war yet still suffers its lingering desolation. Such scenes recount those of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), his revisits to Holocaust sites around Poland proving that vegetation and birdsong does little to mask the cavity left behind by such history. The cinematography of *Ida* is just as austere. Shot in black and white, figures cloister in the lower regions of the screen. The weight of the heavens, or at least vaulted architecture, looms above them, as if anxieties—both individual and national—are rendered as vast and static grey skies and ceilings.

With its visuals, poignant performances and imaginative handling of its aural elements, *Ida* is a film that burns with a quiet but blistering flame.

Words by Isobel Wise

Images: *Ida* (Solopan Poland, Memento Films France, Artificial Eye UK, 2013)











*Founder and Editor*  
Jessica Moore

*Written By*  
Jessica Moore  
Isobel Wise

*Designed By*  
Charlotte Mansfield

@wastelandarts  
wastelandarts.com