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Neo-Neo Realism

By A.O. SCOTT

IT IS NOW ALMOST A YEAR SINCE “Wendy and Lucy” played in Cannes — not a watershed moment in the history of cinema, perhaps, but a quiet harbinger. Kelly Reichardt’s third feature, about the struggles of a young woman and her dog stranded in an Oregon town en route to Alaska, was certainly among the more admired films in a strong festival, where it showed out of competition. But by the time it opened in New York last December, the movie, a modest, quiet, 80-minute study in loneliness and desperation, seemed like something more — not so much a premonition of hard times ahead as a confirmation that they had arrived.

“Wendy and Lucy,” with Michelle Williams in one title role (the other belonged to Reichardt’s dog), had a successful art-house run and found its way onto many critics’ year-end best-of lists (including mine). There was some talk of an Oscar nomination for Williams, who was so believably ordinary in her look and so rigorously un-actressy in her manner that you could easily forget her celebrity. But “Wendy and Lucy,” released by Oscilloscope Laboratories, a small and ambitious new distributor started by Adam Yauch, a member of the Beastie Boys, would have looked a little awkward alongside the other Academy Award nominees. It’s true that the big winner, “Slumdog Millionaire,” concerns itself with poverty and disenfranchisement, but it also celebrates, both in its story and in its exuberant, sentimental spirit, the magical power of popular culture to conquer misery, to make dreams come true. And the major function of Oscar night is to affirm that gauzy, enchanting notion.

The world of “Wendy and Lucy” offers little in the way of enchantment but rather a different, more austere kind of beauty. And while Wendy, at the end of the film, is poignantly, even devastatingly alone, the film itself now seems to be in good company. This spring, as the blockbuster machinery shifts gears from “Watchmen” to “Wolverine,” a handful of small movies from relatively young directors are setting out to expand, modestly but with notable seriousness, the scope of American filmmaking.

“Goodbye Solo” is the third feature directed by Ramin Bahrani, a New York-based filmmaker whose previous movies, “Man Push Cart” and “Chop Shop,” explored corners of the city rarely acknowledged by Hollywood. In the weeks following its debut at the end of this month, Bahrani’s movie will be joined by — and, given the beleaguered state of distribution for noncommercial movies these days, may have to compete with — Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden’s “Sugar” and So Yong Kim’s “Treeless Mountain,” each a second feature. All of these films — like “Wendy and Lucy” and Lance Hammer’s “Ballast,” which came out last fall — were highlights of the 2008 film-festival calendar, showing up at Cannes, Sundance, Toronto and elsewhere.

The lives they illuminate, of fictional characters most often played by nonactors from similar backgrounds, are not commonly depicted on screen: the Senegalese cabdriver in Winston-Salem, N.C., whose friendship with a customer is at the center of “Goodbye Solo”; the aspiring baseball player in “Sugar” who is transplanted from the Dominican Republic to rural Iowa; the African-American shopkeeper in a sparsely populated stretch of the Mississippi Delta whose grief is the dominant mood of “Ballast”; the two very young Korean girls abandoned by their mother in an unfamiliar provincial town in “Treeless Mountain.” But these people and their situations are nonetheless recognizable, familiar on a basic human level even if their particular predicaments are not. And if the kind of movie they inhabit is not entirely new — the common ancestor that established their species identity is a well-known Italian bicycle thief — their unassuming arrival on a few screens nonetheless seems vital, urgent and timely.

WHAT KIND OF MOVIES do we need now? It's a question that seems to arise almost automatically in times of crisis. It was repeatedly posed in the swirl of post-9/11 anxiety and confusion, and the consensus answer, at least among studio executives and the entertainment journalists who transcribe their insights, was that, in the wake of such unimaginable horror, we needed fantasy, comedy, heroism. In practice, the response turned out to be a little more complicated — some angry political documentaries and earnest wartime melodramas made it into movie theaters during the Bush years, and a lot of commercial spectacles arrived somber in mood and heavy with subtext — but such exceptions did little to dent the conventional wisdom.

And as a new set of worries and fears has crystallized in recent months — lost jobs and homes, corroded values and vanished credit — the dominant cultural oracles have come to pretty much the same conclusions. Remember the '30s, when we danced through the Depression with Fred Astaire and Busby Berkeley and giggled amid the gloom with Lubitsch and the Marx Brothers? (Not many of us do, of course, which makes this kind of selective memory easier to promote.) Then as now, what we wanted most was to forget our troubles. In recession, as in war — and also, conveniently, in times of peace or prosperity — the movies we evidently need are the ones that offer us the possibility, however fanciful or temporary, of escape.

Maybe so. But what if, at least some of the time, we feel an urge to escape from escapism? For most of the past decade, magical thinking has been elevated from a diversion to an ideological principle. The benign faith that dreams will come true can be hard to distinguish from the more sinister seduction of believing in lies. To counter the tyranny of fantasy entrenched on Wall Street and in Washington as well as in Hollywood, it seems possible that engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy. Perhaps it would be worth considering that what we need from movies, in the face of a dismaying and confusing real world, is realism.

In 1940, Otis Ferguson, the plain-spoken film critic of *The New Republic*, saw unbounded democratic potential in this still-young art form's connection to the everyday. "Like the novel," he wrote, "the fiction film is wide open to anyone who can use it to advantage. Unlike the novel . . . it has taken all of actual life to be its province." By "all of actual life," Ferguson meant the ordinary modes of existence idealized in the political idioms of the time as belonging to the common man. The faithful representation of "the majority of people" was the very substance of what Ferguson grandly called "the promise of the movie in America."

But in the decades that followed, American movies had other, gaudier promises to keep. Which is not to say that realism was altogether forsaken as a practice or an ideal — it strutted its hour on the Broadway stage with Arthur Miller and Elia Kazan in the '40s and '50s, and some of its theatrical cachet migrated briefly from there to Hollywood. But more radical and innovative cinematic explorations of "actual life" occurred elsewhere, most notably in Italy, where filmmakers during and after the Second World War, driven by a mixture of necessity and inspiration, invented Neorealism.

Their methods included the casting of nonprofessional actors, often portraying characters close to their real selves; the use of unadorned, specific locations and an absorption in the ordinary details of work, school and domesticity. Some of the first Neorealist masterpieces — Roberto Rossellini's "Open City" and "Paisan," for example — were stories of war staged in the immediate aftermath of the fighting. But it was in the late '40s, a moment of economic crisis and political turmoil, that the movement achieved its characteristic form in movies like Luchino Visconti's "Terra Trema" (1948) and Vittorio De Sica's "Bicycle Thief" (1948), an international sensation at the time and still perhaps the single best known Neorealist work.

These movies, made by directors closely (if not always comfortably) aligned with the Italian Communist Party, concerned themselves with the plight of the poor, in Visconti's case a family of Sicilian fishermen, in De Sica's a Roman man fighting to keep himself, his wife and their young son from destitution. Neither "La Terra Trema" nor "The Bicycle Thief" is exactly subtle in its politics: they paint a somber picture of a society ruled by exploitation, mistrust and an imperious bureaucratic state. But if they were merely didactic — simple indictments of the system or hymns to the nobility of the proletariat — the postwar films of Visconti and De Sica would now most likely be regarded as historical curiosities rather than as artistic touchstones. Their art lies not in their messages but in their discovery of a mysterious, volatile alloy of documentary and theatrical elements. Simple, fablelike tales unfold to the beat of quotidian rhythms — the morning bustle and noontime stillness of Roman streets; the implacable movement of the tides on a primordial stretch of coastline — and the faces of characters show not only emotion but also the natural reserve of people whose dignity is at stake. The "star" of "The Bicycle Thief," a steelworker named Lamberto Maggiorani, is hesitant and inarticulate in ways that capture, with a gravity few professionals could approximate, the character's struggle to maintain some control over his circumstances.

That character, Antonio Ricci, wants to work and finds a job pasting movie posters to empty stretches of roadside wall. He gets the job because he owns a bicycle, and when it is stolen, everything else starts to unravel — Antonio's status as a father and a husband, his confidence in the efficacy of the law and the decency of other people, his ethical grounding. Antonio's dream of autonomy, humble as it may be, is cruelly untenable — a fate he shares with the fishermen of "La Terra Trema," whose attempts to own and operate their boats founder in the face of social injustice, poor planning and plain bad luck. Though these stories end in disappointment, they are somehow the opposite of depressing. Neorealism rests equally on the acknowledgment that life is hard and the recognition that life goes on, that there is something in human nature that will persist in the face of defeat.

In the '50s and after, Visconti and De Sica — and Italian cinema generally — moved on, to bigger stories and more elaborate productions. The Neorealist impulse, however, proved remarkably mobile and adaptable. It might be thought of less as a style or genre than as an ethic that finds expression in various places at critical times — touching down in Bengal in the '50s and early '60s and infusing the work of Satyajit Ray; migrating through Brazil in the '60s, Senegal in the '70s and '80s and Iran in the '90s; surfacing in the recent waves of post-Soviet cinema from Romania to Kazakhstan. But in the United States, Neorealism has sent up only fragile shoots, popping up at the edges even of what is habitually and somewhat misleadingly known as independent film. Historians will point to outliers like "The Exiles," Kent

MacKenzie's 1961 drama about Native Americans living in the Bunker Hill section of Los Angeles, or Charles Burnett's "Killer of Sheep" (1977), a small masterpiece steeped in the details of black working-class life in Watts. These films, and a handful of others like them — David Gordon Green's "George Washington" (2000) and Jim McKay's "Our Song" (2001) serve as more recent examples — offer not only bracing, poetic views of real life but also tantalizing glimpses of a cinematic tradition that might have been. Their local, intimate narratives remind you that, in spite of the abundance of American movies, there is an awful lot of American life that remains off screen.

"The Exiles" and "Killer of Sheep," long known more by reputation than firsthand, were recently revived in theaters. Burnett's film is finally on DVD, and MacKenzie's will be later this year. The timing of their availability — and the appreciative attention they received from critics and cinephiles — hardly seems coincidental. American film is having its Neorealist moment, and not a moment too soon.

"WHY SHOOT THIS WAY?" That was the question Ramin Bahrani, the 34-year-old director of "Man Push Cart," "Chop Shop" and "Goodbye Solo," asked when I sat down with him in the back corner of a West Village cafe on a frigid afternoon not long ago. It was our third meeting. Two weeks earlier, we ate lunch together at a noisy Dominican restaurant in a workaday, relatively unhipsterized corner of Williamsburg not far from his apartment, and more recently I spent most of a day following Bahrani from a classroom at Columbia University, where he was teaching a graduate course on directing, to a downtown screening room, where he was checking the color on new prints of "Goodbye Solo." On those occasions, our conversations had ranged far and wide. We had discussed Dostoyevsky and Persian poetry, the logistics of location shooting and the mysteries of effective casting, the shortcomings of "Slumdog Millionaire" and the virtues of "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance."

But it seems we had not quite gotten to the heart of the matter, and Bahrani, politely reversing the usual protocols of journalist-subject relations, e-mailed me to request a further interview. Tall, thin and stoop-shouldered, with a calm voice and gracious demeanor that only partly disguise an almost-feverish intellectual intensity, Bahrani greeted me with the question I had been asking myself somewhat obsessively over the past few years, inspired by the appearance of movies like "Chop Shop" and "Man Push Cart" at festivals and on art-house screens. "Why realism?"

When "Man Push Cart" surfaced in 2006, those who saw it had the experience of discovering something that they couldn't quite believe hadn't been done before. The film follows a Pakistani immigrant named Ahmad — played by Ahmad Razvi, whom Bahrani discovered in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, home to many South Asian cabdrivers and pushcart vendors — through the dramas and routines that define his working life. Ahmad, who operates a coffee cart, is hardly an unusual figure on the streets of New York but rather the kind of guy nearly everyone who works in a Midtown office building has encountered many times. He is also a dreamer, a lover, a hustler, a former pop singer and, not incidentally, a Muslim man making his way through a city still gripped by post-9/11 anxiety.

But if "Man Push Cart" can fairly be described as an immigrant's story, a home-front tale from the War on Terror, it is none of these things in the usual way. It is not, in other words, a parable of the melting pot or a lesson in tolerance. And even though Bahrani's subsequent films are also about immigrants working their way toward some version of the American dream — a Dominican doing odd jobs amid the low-rent mechanics and auto-body repair technicians of Willets Point, Queens, in "Chop Shop"; an African man ferrying passengers through the North Carolina night in "Goodbye Solo" — their multiculturalism is not a theme but a fact.

Bahrani describes these characters as outsiders, but in a sense that designation is as much existential — the image conjured by the title "Man Push Cart" was inspired by Albert Camus's "Myth of Sisyphus" — as sociological. Bahrani, whose parents emigrated from Iran before he was born, grew up in Winston-Salem, with only a few other Persian families in the area. In 1998, Bahrani went to Tehran, planning a six-week stay in his parents' homeland, which he had never visited, and ended up living there for almost three years. He was, he says now, amazed by the complexity and energy of the city, the way it scrambled all different types of people together and forced them to deal with one another. "This is the part of New York that reminds me of Tehran," he said to me one windy afternoon as we walked east under the train tracks in Williamsburg. He did not mean the demographic particulars — a smattering of arty establishments among the bodegas, chop shops and dollar discount stores, with blue-collar Latino blocks flanking one side of the avenue and Hasidic enclaves on the other — so much as the hectic, patchwork ambience of work and idleness, affluence and hardship.

In Tehran — whose metropolitan area has almost double the population of New York — this atmosphere was overwhelming, he said, and he tried to make his first feature there. It was going to be an urban romance, "something like what Wong Kar-wai did in 'Fallen Angels.' Not like an Iranian movie at all." After Sept. 11, it proved impossible to secure financing for such a movie. Bahrani came back to America and, as he put it, instead of making "a Taiwanese-style movie in Tehran," set about shooting "an Iranian-style movie here in New York."

"Man Push Cart" is just that, which is to say that it shows the influence of Iranian filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami and Amir Naderi, who refined the old Neorealist spirit through the 1990s and into the next decade. Most of the scenes in the film take place outdoors, and while there is a clear, poignant story, it takes shape not through expository dialogue but through gestures, actions and details that the camera absorbs in long, patient shots.

"Chop Shop," released last winter, is, if anything, even more deeply Iranian in mood and method, in part because its protagonist is a child — something of a hallmark of Kiarostami's mid-'90s work in particular — and also because it seems at once utterly naturalistic and meticulously composed. The main characters are Ale (short for Alejandro), an energetic 12-year-old, and his older sister, Izzy (short for Isamar), who comes to stay with him in his makeshift quarters above the car-repair shop where he does odd jobs. There is no back story — no flashbacks or conversations about how they arrived at this state of virtual orphanhood in the shadow of Shea Stadium — and, at first, only the whisper of a plot.

A conventional way to explain what this movie feels like is to say that it's like a documentary, but this is misleading. To some degree, the sense of uninflected realism comes from the authenticity of the setting. Bahrani and his cast and crew spent months in the area of Willets Point, known as the Iron Triangle, and some of the workers and business owners in the neighborhood appear in the film. But Bahrani also spent a long time rehearsing with Alejandro Polanco and Isamar Gonzales, the amateur actors who play Ale and Izzy, and when it came time to shoot, he pushed them through 20 or 30 takes of each scene. Every camera movement, nearly every bit of incidental business — a plastic bag blowing along a dark, empty street like a tumbleweed; a pigeon fluttering into the frame — was blocked out, controlled, adjusted, repeated.

All of this, he explained, was in the interest of clarity — the necessity of communicating, at any given point in the story, what the characters are doing and why. It was a notion Bahrani impressed rigorously, perhaps even ruthlessly, on his students at Columbia, whose three- or four-minute scenes (drawn from longer scripts they had written) he took apart shot by shot, word by word. His insistence on the tiniest details of camera movement, expression and composition was a reminder to them — and also to me — that transparency, immediacy and a sense of immersion in life are not the automatic results of turning on a camera but rather effects achieved through the painstaking application of craft.

And movies, even as they take their audiences on virtual journeys into hidden pockets or unexplored reaches of experience, are also frequently responses to other movies. “Goodbye Solo,” for instance, is in part an answer to, or a variation on, some of the themes and problems suggested by Kiarostami’s “Taste of Cherry.” That film, which shared the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 1997, explores the uneasy bond between a driver and passenger, one of whom turns out to want the other’s help in committing suicide.

A similar relationship is at the center of “Goodbye Solo,” in which Solo begins to suspect that a regular customer, a crusty old Southerner named William, is preparing for his own death. But the link between “Solo” and its precursor is not one of quotation or allusion — the viewer who has not seen Kiarostami’s movie does not miss anything essential in Bahrani’s; nor is the moviegoer who spots the connection rewarded with the self-admiring frisson that comes, say, when you decode a King Hu or Godard reference embedded in a Quentin Tarantino film.

“In Persian culture there’s something called tazmin,” Bahrani told me, “which is a longstanding tradition of poets taking one line or one beat or one idea from an earlier poem, picking it up and putting it in their own poem and going on from there.” His own borrowings are not acts of imitation or homage but rather attempts to absorb and extend what other filmmakers have done. And you can see a similar process of appropriation and modification going on in “Wendy and Lucy,” for instance, which seems to pick up an idea from De Sica’s “Umberto D” — a lost dog as symbol and symptom of an increasingly heartless society — and follow it from the bustle of Rome into the silence of the Pacific Northwest. And Reichardt’s film, based on a story by her frequent collaborator Jonathan Raymond, also shows some affinities with “Rosetta,” Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’s groundbreaking and relentless 1999 film about a young working-class Belgian in a state of stubborn, futile revolt against her circumstances.

“Rosetta,” whose heroine is unforgettably vivid and not entirely sympathetic, was the movie that inspired “In Between Days.” So Yong Kim’s debut feature, an almost painfully intimate immersion in the life of a Korean girl drifting through adolescence in a wintry North American city. Kim, who started out as an experimental filmmaker, was drawn into narrative filmmaking partly through the example of her husband, Bradley Rust Gray, also a director. To make her second film, “Treeless Mountain,” Kim, who came to the United States when she was 12, returned to her family’s hometown in Korea. The story — two sisters must learn to cope with life as unwelcome wards of their moody, alcoholic aunt — had been on her mind for some time, but it was “Nobody Knows,” a 2004 film by the Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda, that persuaded her to try to bring the story to the screen. “Nobody Knows” is also about abandoned children — four kids left by their mother to fend for themselves in a small Tokyo apartment — but the inspiration Kim drew from it was as much practical as thematic. That Kore-eda managed to draw such delicate, authentic performances from very young children encouraged Kim to try something similar.

“I was in Toronto, with ‘In Between Days,’ ” Kim said in an interview, “and I saw Kore-eda, and I went up to him and asked him: ‘How did you do it? How did you work with those kids?’ ” The language barrier prevented her from getting the answer she wanted — “he was giving all these long answers, and the translator turned around and said, ‘Kore-eda san says, ‘Everything is good with Super 16,’ ’ and that was it!” — but further research helped her figure out what to do once she found the right children. The girls who play the sisters, 5 and 7 when shooting started, did not know anything about the story they were enacting. “We set up rules, like a game or something,” Kim explained. “There were four or five rules: You can’t look at me, you can’t look at the camera, you can’t leave the set until I say ‘cut’ and you have to repeat whatever I say, with all the other rules still applying.”

From this simple, mechanical process, a luminous, poignant story takes shape. And the accessibility of the story, the vividness of the emotions within it, is an important feature of the kind of realism that Kim and her peers practice. “Treeless Mountain” is not a difficult or an obscure movie. Nor, for all its lyricism, is “Ballast,” in which Lance Hammer uses the reticence of his actors and the strangeness of the Delta landscape to lay bare complex, primal feelings of loss, loyalty and fear. And “Sugar,” Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden’s new movie, is in some respects a classic sports picture, its narrative engine the familiar, quintessentially American drive to make it in the big leagues. You will recognize a lot of what you see, if you take the time to look.

AN INTEREST IN MOVIES from other countries is too often, even among people who should know better, taken as a sign of snobbery, an overrefined devotion to the esoteric and the difficult. There may be some commercial benefit as well as creative satisfaction in aspiring to be the next Tarantino or Scorsese — or even the next Spike Lee, Kevin Smith or Wes Anderson. But to set out to be the next Dardenne

Brothers, the next Kore-eda or the next Kiarostami is to court stares of incomprehension from your peers and polite demurrals from financial backers. American filmmakers who decline to follow the standard career path, in which a low-budget, independent debut leads to festival exposure and, eventually, work for hire in Hollywood, are themselves outsiders of a kind, subsisting on the edges of the entertainment marketplace. This marginality is a challenge for filmmakers — some of them, like poets and novelists, support themselves between projects by teaching, as Bahrani and Reichardt do. But it is also, more important, a loss for the moviegoing public, which finds itself at once glutted with choices and starved for meaning. There are so many movies. How do we know which ones matter?

Nearly every movie, good or bad, commercial or independent, asks a version of that question: What matters? It's a big question sometimes most effectively addressed on a small scale. "Goodbye Solo" is a film that, in its final moments, contemplates death, nature and the fragility of human identity in an indifferent universe. But it is also the story of a man striving to improve his lot, to move up, quite literally, from taxi-driving to a career as a flight attendant. This ambition is not just a matter of better working conditions or more money; work is never only about those things. Solo's upward striving is an expression of his optimism, which in turn is crucial to his sense of himself as a man, a husband and stepfather, a friend and, though he would never put it so bluntly, an American.

Similarly, the main narrative of Lance Hammer's "Ballast," like that of "Goodbye Solo," is not directly concerned with money or work. It dwells on the stricken reaction of Lawrence, a stolid bear of a man (played with heartbreaking stoicism by Micheal J. Smith, another remarkable nonprofessional) to the suicide of his twin brother and his subsequent rapprochement with the brother's son and former wife. But at the center of this family drama is the store Lawrence and his brother owned, a small commercial enterprise whose continued existence becomes a tangible metaphor for enigmatic, ungraspable questions of life and death.

Money is never just money; a job is always more than a job. In "Chop Shop," young Ale is saving to buy an old van that he plans to convert into a food-vending truck, in effect an expanded version of Ahmad's coffee cart in "Man Push Cart." Once this happens, everything will fall into place; Ale and his sister will have the comfort and security that is so evidently lacking in their lives. Wendy in "Wendy and Lucy" is, like Ale, almost entirely preoccupied with money. The notebooks where you might expect to find a young woman's spiritual reflections or earnest love poems are instead filled with numbers. Wendy is budgeting her supply of cash, calculating how much will go for food and gas. Once she reaches Alaska, Wendy hopes to find work in a fish-canning factory. After that, everything will be fine.

The young Dominican pitcher in "Sugar" may seem, at first, to harbor a loftier, more glittery dream — he is working for a shot at the major leagues — but it is based in some pretty earthbound desires. He wants to help his mother finish a small addition to her low-ceilinged, cinder-block house, and to give her a new table. He might also want fame, glory, money and women — he is 19, after all — but these are expressions of that basic impulse to get ahead.

I don't want to spoil any plots, but if you have read this far, it will hardly surprise you to learn that, in these movies, dreams generally do not come true. Antonio Ricci never did recover his bicycle.

"They all of them, in a way, can be connected to the myth of Sisyphus," Ramin Bahrani said to me, as our conversation ranged from his own films to those of his peers and precursors. "Because it's like, that's it: you will push the stone up to the top, and it will come back down again." In contrast, Bahrani said, Hollywood wish-fulfillment tales — or the faux-independent dramas of adversity followed by third-act redemption — did not strike him as hopeful at all. "They just don't make any sense," he said. "They create massive confusion." To which his own films (and films like "Ballast," "Wendy and Lucy," "Sugar" and "Treeless Mountain") might serve, in their very different ways, as an antidote. Not because they offer grim counsels of despair or paint lurid tableaux of desperation but rather because they take what has always seemed seductively easy about moviemaking — the camera can show us the world — and make it look hard. Their characters undergo a painful process of disillusionment, and then keep going. The disappointment they encounter — the grit with which they face it, the grace with which it is conveyed — becomes, for the audience, a kind of exhilaration. What happens at the end of a dream? You wake up.

A.O. Scott, a chief film critic at The Times, last wrote for the magazine about the impact of the small screen on the movies.