

# Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* and Todd Haynes' *Wonderstruck*: "Small" films at a time of big crisis

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*Lady Bird*, written and directed by Greta Gerwig; *Wonderstruck*, directed by Todd Haynes, written by Brian Selznick

*Lady Bird*, directed by Greta Gerwig, concerns itself with a young woman coming of age during her senior year of high school. *Wonderstruck*, directed by Todd Haynes, follows two deaf children in search of family connections.

Both films are occasionally amusing. They are generally well-acted. They are mostly free from the sort of bombast and cruelty that dominates much of popular cinema today.

But the "smallness" of the films (and of the filmmakers' concerns) hinders their ability to make much of an impression. Both films begin to fade from one's memory nearly as soon as one has left the theater.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) this, both films have garnered considerable critical praise.

*Lady Bird* follows Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson (Saoirse Ronan), a senior at a Catholic high school in Sacramento, California (where Gerwig also grew up). The film, which takes place during the fall of 2002 and the spring of 2003, consists of a series of brief episodes in which Lady Bird navigates the choppy waters of high school friendships, dating, and a volatile relationship with her mother.

Lady Bird's father Larry (Tracy Letts) has recently been laid off from his job, and her mother Marion (Laurie Metcalf), a nurse, works extra shifts at a hospital to make ends meet. The family's money troubles place a strain on their relationships. Marion is especially sensitive about appearing "poor" in front of the city's wealthier residents, including some of Lady Bird's friends. At one point Marion chastises her daughter for not putting her clothes away properly, observing that, "some of your friends' fathers could employ your father, and they won't

do that if it looks like his family is trash."

Meanwhile, *Lady Bird* dreams of leaving Sacramento behind and attending college on the East Coast. She professes a desire to move somewhere "cultured" like New York, "or at least Connecticut or New Hampshire where writers live in the woods." With the help of her father, she secretly applies to New York schools, knowing her mother will be hurt if she attends college out of state.

She enters into relationships with two boys, one a polite, buttoned-down type who endears himself to her family, the other a self-involved musician seen constantly reading Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. Neither relationship is very fulfilling. She distances herself from her best friend to spend time with a wealthy, popular girl, lying about her family's modest living conditions in the process.

In the end, the various conflicts are neatly resolved. It seems that *Lady Bird* has "grown up," or at least begun to.

There are some charms here. Ronan does well in the lead role, delivering her sometimes-clumsy dialogue with deft comedic timing. There are occasionally pointed moments, such as when Lady Bird, forced to sit through an anti-abortion presentation, tells the presenter that, "If your mother had had an abortion, we wouldn't have to sit through this stupid assembly."

Metcalf is the highlight of *Lady Bird*. She portrays Marion with a mix of passive aggression, combativeness and occasional tenderness that seems true to life. The scenes between her and Lady Bird are the film's strongest, and the brief glimpses into her professional life (she is seen counseling a priest and a teacher at Lady Bird's school who suffers from depression) are intriguing. One wishes the film had focused on her character instead.

In fact, one often gets the sense there is a far more interesting film occurring outside the frame of Gerwig's camera. It appears in flashes: the family's economic troubles (and the toll it takes on their relationships), the tensions created by wealth disparity, the widespread social and psychological problems produced by such conditions.

A comment needs to be made on *Lady Bird's* timeframe. The fall 2002/spring 2003 school year was presumably chosen because it was on or about Gerwig's own senior year of high school (she was born in 1983). But that eight-month period was also a time of explosive social tensions, with the George W. Bush administration launching a war based on lies and the eruption of the largest protests in world history. Such events were a topic of intense discussion and debate in homes and classrooms across the country. Yet here the war is only glimpsed briefly on televisions in the background. When one character attempts to mention the widespread civilian casualties in Iraq in order to gain the upper hand in an argument, Lady Bird shuts him down by saying, "Different things can be sad. It's not all war."

Gerwig, who has acted in numerous films, including Noah Baumbach's *Greenberg* and *Frances Ha*, Todd Solondz's *Wiener-Dog* and Barry Levinson's *The Humbling*, has crafted some interesting performances. Yet the bulk of her films (and this is not solely her fault) have been fairly narrow, self-involved works.

In a recent interview Gerwig perhaps reveals the relatively low bar she set for herself: "I just don't feel like I've seen very many movies about 17-year-old girls where the question is not, 'Will she find the right guy' or 'Will he find her?' The question should be: 'Is she going to occupy her personhood?'" Truth be told, there are far more critical questions Gerwig and her characters might be asking themselves right now.

Regardless, the praise critics have heaped upon the film is out of proportion to its modest charms. In addition to the identity politics crowd rushing to prematurely proclaim the "genius" of a female director, one senses almost a desperation, perhaps a desire to retreat into the "small" world of this film, in the face of overwhelming events.

Gerwig has stated that for her next film she wants "to make something that's more silent, literally fewer words." If she follows this impulse, she might end up with something like Todd Haynes' latest film, *Wonderstruck*.

The film, based on a 2011 novel by Brian Selznick, tells two parallel stories set fifty years apart. In 1927, Rose (Millicent Simmonds), a young deaf girl, runs away from her domineering father to seek out her mother Lillian (Julianne Moore), a famous actress living in New York City. In 1977, Ben (Oakes Fegley), a boy who has been recently rendered deaf by a freak accident, sets out to discover the identity of his father, also in New York.

The two children navigate their respective New Yorks, and their journeys take them both into the famed American Museum of Natural History. As the stories progress, we learn the two children are connected in a more profound way as well.

The film seems largely a cinematographic/stylistic exercise. The 1927 scenes, shot in black and white and done entirely without dialogue, borrow some of the visual and performative language of the silent films of that era. The 1977 scenes, which also have long stretches without dialogue, appear to visually imitate the work of William Friedkin and others from that time.

There's a richness here for the eyes. Great care has obviously gone into recreating the visual landscapes of the respective time periods. Certain shots or moments evoke the texture of the two time periods, or at least as they were represented in film.

But the rather trite narrative fails to evoke an important feeling for either epoch. Haynes has suggested that *Wonderstruck* was his attempt at making a "children's movie." There's nothing wrong with that, but children too need work that is more challenging and intriguing. Haynes (*Safe*, *Velvet Goldmine*, *Mildred Pierce*) is a genuine talent who seems somewhat at sea at present.



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***Wonderstruck***