

WANDA

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Wanda calls into question the substance of identity through a woman who seems to lack her own. She stumbles around with no apparent purpose, finding herself complicit in the lives of sleazy men and petty crime. *Wanda* challenges traditional notions of character development, and dramatizes a bleak actuality.

Wanda doesn't know who she is, and neither does the film or the camera. A slow panning shot of coal slag heaps begins the film. Given this considerable focus on the mines, maybe our main character has a close relationship with them. Following the mines is a shot of a house - maybe our main character lives here. Then, an old lady and a child - maybe these are related to our main character. Then, the back of a young woman - maybe this is our main character, maybe this is Wanda. Maybe Wanda is a parent of two who works next to a coal mine and takes care of her mother. Instead, everything we have seen up to this point is related to Wanda's sister. This is Wanda's sister's house. These are her sister's children, her sister's husband, and their couch that Wanda is sleeping on.

This opening establishes the central question of the film: who is Wanda? At its start, the film has trouble figuring out where its title character even is, cycling through tangential relations to her life before finally finding her waking up on her sister's couch. Wanda's character is not established at the beginning; instead, the film begins by shredding Wanda's existing identity. She easily gives up her family in divorce court and is let go from her job at the sewing factory. She's freed from whatever tethers bound her to her current life and from the traditional roles expected of women. And yet, with her theoretical newfound freedom, she's lost and finds herself dependent upon strangers. She wanders throughout the town with her journey punctuated by the three men she encounters.

Although the film centers on a singular character, that singular character does not change or grow, an unusual and poignant feature. In many films, it feels there is too much emphasis on the progression of character - that a character needs to display some type of growth in order for them to be compelling. Especially if the character is the protagonist, there is an expectation she will learn and grow into (often) a 'better' or more 'complete' person.

Wanda exhibits an opposite, embracing a realism rarely depicted in film. *Wanda* is a reminder of the difficulty of change. Wanda encounters countless hardships yet doesn't seem to learn. It's unclear whether she truly recognizes what's happening to and around her. There is no magical moment of clarity where she makes a resolution to turn her life around. She wakes up out of place and unsure of her surroundings at the start of the film, and she ends the same. *Wanda* isn't a coming of age story where a woman rediscovers herself with a newfound sense of belonging. It's a melancholic reminder of the common static nature and quiet resignation in many lives - a story that normally doesn't make its way to the big screen because it doesn't seem captivating enough.

Wanda's passivity might be a point of frustration for many viewers. Things seem to just happen to her, and she goes along with them regardless of whether or not they're in her favor. She clings to each man she meets until they drop her or drop dead - the one exception being the last man she meets who sexually assaults her. Here, she temporarily breaks out of her passiveness to fight him off and escape, a direct contrast to her experience with the first man she sleeps with and tries to stay with. She quickly reverts to her passive self though as the film ends in a scene in a bar with strangers crowding her, supplying her with food and cigarettes. Nothing implies any form of hopeful turnaround for her, nor does Wanda herself seem to desire this. The film ends in a freeze frame of Wanda looking down, holding a cigarette. She is frozen in time with the implication that perhaps, this is all she will ever be. There is no life altering future ahead of her; the rest of her life will more or less be the same.

The grainy footage lends a unique rawness to the film. The beginning is immediately reminiscent of home videos especially and brings the audience closer into the story, creating an intimacy between the subject and the spectator. This intimacy carries over to the rest of the film as we follow Wanda throughout her various escapades.

If you go into *Wanda* expecting a traditional film where the protagonist develops from point A to point B, you'll likely be disappointed. At the end of the film, Wanda likely knows as much about herself as the audience does.