

Wendy and Lucy: A picture of American life

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Kelly Reichardt; screenplay by Reichardt and Jonathan Raymond

Wendy and Lucy by Kelly Reichardt (*Old Joy*, 2006) is an honest picture of American life—in other words, a very rare occurrence in contemporary cinema.

Set in a rundown, former industrial town in Oregon, the movie points to a condition in which millions of people hang on by their fingernails. The film's drama unfolds in a locale where unemployment or under-employment is common, and those fortunate enough to have a job (or jobs) work long hours for relatively little pay. While this particular community is in the Pacific Northwest, the truth of its social coloration goes well beyond that.

Wendy (Michelle Williams) arrives in town in a 1988 Honda on its last legs. The car has served as transportation and shelter for the young woman and her dog, Lucy, since she started her journey in Indiana. She has traveled several thousand miles and is still a long way from Ketchikan, Alaska, where she hopes to make money working at a fish cannery ("I hear they need people up there.").

Director Reichardt takes a fairly careful look at life in a place with little to offer its population, much less itinerant youth like Wendy. But it's also a place where sympathy and generosity can be found.

The storyline is simple enough. While sleeping in her car, Wendy is woken up by a Walgreens security guard (Wally Dalton) rapping on her window. When the car won't start, she and the guard push it off the pharmacy's private lot onto the street. While waiting for the local mechanic (Will Patton) to open for business, Wendy is caught shoplifting dog food and ends up in a jail-cell. Hours later, she returns to the supermarket where she left

Lucy tied up and discovers the dog is gone.

On foot and by bus, Wendy searches for Lucy. In small ways everyone helps: the security guard lends her his cell-phone and insists that she accept a small amount of cash (offered behind the back of his hard-pressed family); an employee at the dog pound goes above and beyond to locate the animal; and an older man cares for Lucy in Wendy's absence. Then there are those unable to lend a hand—a group of young vagrants (modern-day hobos) and the town's indigent and disabled. This also applies to Wendy's sister back in Indiana who is financially "strapped."

With the car gone, Wendy sleeps in the park. She is accosted by a menacing stranger (Larry Fessenden), tellingly more interested in her meager possessions than her body. He rambles on about "just trying to be a good boy. They won't let me, they treat me like trash, like I ain't got no rights. They can smell weakness on you."

In one moving scene, the security guard talks about his low-paying, 12-hour-a-day job. He comments on the impact of the town's mill closing down: "I don't know what people do all day." But the tale is really told in the look of the place—the shabby, paint-peeling houses, the ramshackle small businesses, the line-up at the can redemption center and the empty streets. Wendy, who is essentially homeless and performs her morning ablutions in the dismal gas station bathroom, fits right in. Like her, everyone counts his or her pennies and barely stays afloat.

Only the Walgreens and the police station don't look worse for wear.

The film accentuates the town's dreariness by its exclusive use of available light and a minimalist soundtrack consisting of train noises and Wendy's stress-relieving humming.

Wendy and Lucy enjoys several emotionally strong, understated performances (in this regard, Will Patton seems out of place, but it's interesting he signed on to such a low-budget project). The most affecting comes from Williams, who dominates every scene, and seems to personify, in her considerable fragility and considerable determination, a widespread social reality: a young person left to her own devices, in a society that has no room or need for her, a society that thereby condemns itself.

For someone in Wendy's state, one significant set-back can prove catastrophic. The film shows young people who have been cast adrift, creating sub-social, nomadic groupings. And, of course, *Wendy and Lucy* was filmed and edited before the great crash of 2008.

In an interview with the *Phoenix*, Reichardt said that "Actually, when we were making *Wendy and Lucy* [for \$300,000], the economy of how we were making the film was very much in line with how she [Wendy] was living—one slip-up and the whole production would fold."

The director went on to state that "We began writing the script after [Hurricane] Katrina, when the contempt [for those less fortunate] was in the air." She explains that the filmmakers' starting-point was the conception, popular in the media and official political circles, that "if you're poor in America, it's because you're lazy. As the gap [between rich and poor] has grown over eight years, so has the feeling that it's okay."

Reichardt notes that the film was intended to test out the notion that all one needs to succeed in America is "gumption." She continues, "Is that all you need, if you don't have the benefit of an education or a social net or a financial net or health insurance or anything? I think that that's implied all the time, and I think that's a farce."

Elsewhere, in answer to a question as to whether she viewed *Wendy and Lucy* as a "road trip" movie, Reichardt responded: "I guess I more think of the economy, and the politics of now in the divide between the upper class and the lower class, and how vast that is. It all seemed reminiscent of Depression times in America."

Indeed, Wendy's situation speaks to a wide and widening social condition. Vast numbers of people in America face this kind of economic desperation. Yet how many films address this circumstance? One has to say,

and it's to the movie industry's shame, that while broad layers of the population are suffering, a film like *Wendy and Lucy* is an oddity, almost an aberration (one thinks as well of *Frozen River*). The vast majority of Hollywood's characters at present are people without money problems or pressures.

Reichardt's film confirms the elementary truth that real, engaging drama exists in life, not in the pointless activities of fantasized super-heroes of various shades and stripes.

The director, refreshingly, also bucks the prevailing trend in her attitude toward the police. She says, "I think a huge part of the population does not anticipate help from the authorities, and feels that cops will really just make their lives worse.... I just didn't think that someone in Wendy's situation would be looking for any kind of bureaucracy or police to be able to solve any problems for her."

One can raise criticisms. Perhaps the film takes a somewhat easier (and more minimal) path by substituting a heart-warming canine for a more complicated human companion. But it might also be argued that Lucy the dog highlights Wendy's isolation. The latter is clearly traumatized and, although articulate, finds it difficult to relate to people. So, despite the dangers, Wendy does not join forces with other young people in her predicament, preferring to make her way alone.

Although not flawless, *Wendy and Lucy* is a conscientious and credible effort.



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