

# Land



*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

## Land

Directed by Robin Wright  
Produced by Allyn Stewart, Lora Kennedy, Peter Saraf and Leah Holzer.  
Screenplay by Jesse Chatham and Erin Dignam.  
Cinematography by Bobby Bukowski.  
Editing by Anne McCabe and Mikkel E.G. Nielson  
Music by Ben Sallee and Time For Three  
Costumes by Kemal Harris  
Production Design by Trevor Smith.  
Executive Producer: Robin Wright  
Production Companies: Cinetic Media, Nomadic Pictures, and Big Beach Films.  
Distributed by Focus Pictures.  
Original Release in the USA at Sundance 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021. No rating.  
Length: 89 minutes.

### Cast

Edee: Robin Wright  
Miguel: Demian Bichir  
Alawa: Sarah Dawn Pledge  
Colt: Brad Leland  
Emma: Kim Dickens (in Eddee's flashbacks)  
Adam: Warren Christie (in Eddee's flashbacks)

### Review

The film begins with a close up of sands running out in an hour glass, while the central character, Eddee appears in the background This is the first ambiguous use of imagery in this memorable and vey different film. Symbols are usually fixed in their meanings, but not here. Such commonly used symbols work more in this film ambivalently, being more imagery than a known symbol. Is time, life, hope or all three running out for Eddee? In the next shot the hour glass appears as a timer in a therapy session. The therapist of some kind has no facial expression and her stiff body language reveals nothing but formality, while an

emotional Eddee proclaims her desire to cut herself off from contact, not only with this woman, but with her previous life: she intends to restart her life elsewhere. This also sounds open to differing interpretations. Has she suffered some traumatic defeat, something so extreme that she has to flee to anywhere, away from some locale or anyone who reminds her of it? Or has she the necessary courage, resilience and optimism to remake her life after some devastating blow? Are these alternatives mutually exclusive? As the film unfolds they entwine: one being motivation, the other a hope.

*Land* is not a film where everything is neatly explained in ways that allow for one explanation which comes with the denouement. In terms of cause, no revealing denouement unfolds and we only have indications of what caused her craving to escape people and society. In her flashbacks we see her husband Adam and their child and they look idyllically happy. We are not told exactly what happened to them. Such scenes may have been filmed and then edited out. The IMDb cast list refers to actors named for characters at a party and in a shoe store, yet nothing like these listed people in their scenes appear in the released film. Whatever happened to Eddee and her family works as only a trigger; it is not what the film is about. In one flashback Eddee tries to commit suicide, but in a tussle her sister Emma prevents that and gets her to promise never to kill herself. But when Eddee goes to live totally alone in the remote and sometimes dangerous Wyoming wilderness, with at best inadequate preparation, is this a sublimated, subconscious suicide attempt?

The film's main setting is that magnificently beautiful Wyoming wilderness, with a postcard pretty timber cabin on the steep, green, forested slopes above a sky blue river, which goes down a ravine between majestic snowy mountains. Ambivalence also exists here, starting with the cabin, so pretty in the distance, inside it is dingy, dusty, bare and nearly dilapidated,

When Eddee arrives in summer the first days have happy moments as she sees a boy and his father fishing nearby and playfully races them through the forest.

Yet the warnings of Colt, the real estate agent, that she should not be without a vehicle in the wilderness and his question (which is really a warning) about has she lived in a land like this before, hang over the unfolding narrative in these summer days. Despite the idyllic summer weather, we soon see good reasons for his fears. Eddee has inadequate

food supplies to get through the summer, let alone the harsh winter, when roads will be snowed over and her only transport to the nearest town for essential supplies must be her feet. Even the food she does have is tinned. For how long can someone survive in good health on tinned food? She does start a vegetable garden, but does not have that expertise, so what does not wilt birds take. When she cleans the cabin of dust she does not start with the interior roof or walls, but the obvious pile of dust on the floor. Instead of installing rainwater tanks she hauls river water up a steep hill to the cottage by carrying it in plastic containers. These containers would be throw always or recyclables after use in the city, but in her environment they are vital and when one falls into the fast flowing river full of detritus, she has no choice but to jump in after it. This puts her in deep trouble literally up to her neck as the river flows fast over jagged rocks. Once again ambiguity emerges. Is this necessary desperation, recklessness or sublimated suicidal desperation?

When she cuts timber it is not with a steel block axe which most timber cutters now use, but with the old fashioned, brittle iron, narrow headed style of axe. Their wooden handles sometimes splinter themselves instead of splintering timber. She makes the usual beginners' mistakes of trying to cut thin branches with such an axe, Therefore with misaimed axe blows and without a solid base for the reverberations that work to split with proper blows, she does not split the wood. Her sawing appears equally inept.

If all this is not enough, the ferocious grizzly bear arrives and the only reason she is not killed and eaten is because she was in the toilet and the grizzly cannot smash it. Instead it devastates the cabin's interior, reducing what little food she has.

Then grey, desolate winter hits and the dreariness only gains contrasts by happy memories, as she starves and freezes. Unable to shoot a deer for food, she ends up with the barrel under her chin. Remembering her promise to Emma deters her. At the worst time, as she lies starved, nearly frozen and delirious, she sees almost hulking figure approaching her. Once again an ambiguity emerges: threat or succor?

He is Miguel, a hunter from the nearby Shoshone reservation. He seems a helper as does Alywa, a nurse at the town hospital. After they treat her he tells her that only people who have never known hunger decide to starve themselves to death. With this warning she seems to realize that this is what she has been doing and does a turn around, deciding to make a success of her choice to live in the wilderness. When he asked her does

she ever get lonely Eddee responds with she felt more lonely in the city and here she can appreciate life more. He is empathetic agreeing that there are no mobiles, no traffic and also no celebrations, the latter contains a warning. On his frequent visits he teaches her hunting and then we see her fixing the roof and using a back to nature manual to successfully protect her crop, which also feeds her. Other improvements are not so obvious, perhaps because of cinematic editing down. In the poster note we see the hatchet for kindling lodged in the timber base. Similarly a large neat woodpile and a water tank appear in the background in some shots. This film is not didactic and does not go according to conventions and expectations. Mercifully Miguel is not presented as the all wise Indian teaching the foolish white. Miguel and Eddee have both been through traumatic loses that preclude them from going into a romance. After creating an image of stability and confidence the filmmakers eventually reveal that his problems are bigger than hers and only one of them will be healed.

While ultimately optimistic, the film makers do not manipulate the plot to be uplifting in a contrived way. Not only past tragedies, but self-destructive behaviour and more mundane errors and disappointments frequently occur: It all very believable.

Liking the idea of this cinematic story, Robin Wright as executive producer got the screenplay team Jesse Chatham and Erin Dignam to work and initially intended this to be her debut as a cinematic director and only that. However with a 29 day shoot rapidly approaching and no star in sight for the lead, she did what others in the film suggested, and took the lead herself. This created the very difficult task of a lead directing and financing herself on a short timeline and in an area notorious for sudden weather changes which could delay or end filming. Even so, like her heroine, she achieved much.

\*



*Robin Weight*

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