



# Wanda

## Isabelle Huppert on 'Wanda'

I first saw Barbara Loden's film many years ago, though it was long after its original release; despite support from Marguerite Duras, it had become more or less invisible, and was almost completely forgotten. But when I saw it, I was so full of admiration for it that we ended up restoring the film and releasing it first theatrically and eventually on DVD; indeed, we've just released it again, since the negative has now been restored by Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation.

It is such an extraordinary movie. Loden, who wrote, directed and took the lead role in it, was an actress, and the wife of Elia Kazan. The film – which is quite unusual in various ways and which centres on a woman who has left her husband and ends up going around with a guy who's basically a crook – was based on a true story Loden had read about, and she developed a whole fiction around that.

What's so interesting is that this very realistic, very simple story is told in such a way that you can also read it as something more metaphorical – to do, perhaps, with Loden's own relationship both to the cinema and to a man, Kazan, whom she may have felt was stealing from her. And because it can be read in that way, the film becomes more conceptual and more universal in its relevance.

It's important if you make a film which is metaphorical or conceptual that it should also be credible as a story. Ordinarily it takes a lot of experience to be able to carry that off properly; what's amazing about *Wanda* is that Loden managed to do it in her very first film.

Sadly, because she died so young a few years later, she never got to make another film. (She was meant to appear in Kazan's 1969 film *The Arrangement*, but the studio didn't want her and she was replaced by Faye Dunaway.) And that's one reason why the film is so moving: it reflects Loden's own very sad destiny. It feels like a scream of someone just about surviving...

Of course, *Wanda* was made at a time when certain people were fighting against the constraints and contrivances of the old studio system; they were looking for new ways of filming, and *Wanda* shows a kind of freedom in the way it was made. The very opening scene where you see Wanda with curlers in her hair – I can't think of another American film that starts that way. It's weird, almost as if she was naked, but it's also funny, and faintly disturbing at the same time. Or there are those shots of huge black mountains of coal, which are also part of the film's aesthetic; they say so much about industry and poverty and work. Things like that set the tone for the whole film.

And of course Wanda is not some romanticised positive role model, but a real person. As a character I find her very moving. I feel as if I identify with Wanda, in that she's both fragile and strong at the same time; she may be alone, but deep down there is a real resistance in her. I find that very touching. I can't imagine such a film ever having been made by a man. But Loden did make it, and she did everything.

**Interview by Geoff Andrew, *Sight and Sound*, October 2015**

## A contemporary review

First reviews of *Wanda* seemed anxious to point out how bad the film might have been, both as a 'semi-underground blow-up from 16 mm' and because Barbara Loden, the director, is also Mrs Elia Kazan. In the first case, *Wanda's* vaunted non-professionalism – improvised dialogue, grainy photography, long static takes – only roughens the surface of an otherwise carefully composed film whose dramatic symmetry is a far cry from the 'random' technique of Warhol (whose films Loden cites as her immediate inspiration here); while the second prejudice – that a wife's work will inevitably be derivative of her husband's – is doubly confounded, since *Wanda* is remarkably free of the moral dogmatism that has characterised Kazan's recent work.

Yet this second prejudice does, ironically, throw some light on the subject of Loden's film: her principal character is the feminine *reductio ad absurdum* of a man's world, tossed from bed to bed, will-less, aimless, identity-less, and with a name chosen to suggest lost bewilderment (wan, wander, wonder). But her spiritual progress is charted logically, from the alienation of a failed marriage ('He's mad 'cos I'm here,' she mutters vindictively as the baby screams in an early scene), through one stray lover to her criminal liaison with Mr Dennis, then back through another casual pick-up to the isolation of the beer hall scene, in which the camera-panning across a row of laughing faces catches and freezes on her own in a look of somnolent despair.

While the film begins and ends at lowest ebb, Wanda's spiritual highpoint is exactly midway through the film: a casual little scene in which she and Mr Dennis, picnicking by the car, swap homespun philosophies as a plane circles enigmatically overhead. Established with a minimum of dialogue (and most of that abusive), their relationship suddenly takes on a quality of childish compatibility that recalls Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* – another pastoral-criminal liaison between two small town misfits. But explicit echoes of Penn's film are sounded only to be debunked. When Wanda reads out the latest press reports of their exploits, it is in the halting monotone of a semi-illiterate, and their descriptions are pathetically unglamorous (Mr Dennis scowls to hear himself described as 'the sort of man you wouldn't notice'). As a counterpart to Bonnie's sandhill reunion with her mother, vaseline-lensed and idyllic in Penn's film, Mr Dennis' visit to his father's showcase chapel and fake catacombs is an exercise in non-communication. For all this, Wanda and Mr Dennis are never merely Bonnie and Clyde burlesques (or 'seen for real') but credible outcasts from a society whose demands for Instant Integration they cannot meet.

Their relationship is strengthened by an element of sado-masochism (Michael Higgins' Dennis has the nervy irritability of a pathological introvert; Wanda remains innocently passive); but this is never spelled out in a film whose non-committal style is established early on by a succession of long shots: a 60-second pan follows Wanda as she crosses the slaghills of her home landscape, a tiny figure in white; entering the courtroom noiselessly, she overhears her husband, near camera, enumerating her vices to the divorce judge. Wanda becomes the film's still centre, but as the victim rather than the observer of her surroundings.

Barbara Loden says she saw the character as having 'no redeeming qualities'. And whatever sympathy she gains in the course of the film is indeed the product of the audience's magnanimity rather than of any 'sentimental waif' invitations to pity in either Barbara Loden's script or her performance.

**Nigel Andrews, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1971**

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## WANDA

*Director:* Barbara Loden  
*Production Company:* Foundation for Filmmakers  
*Producer:* Harry Shuster  
*[Production] Assistant:* Christopher Cronyn  
*Screenplay:* Barbara Loden  
*Director of Photography:* Nicholas T. Proferes  
*Lighting:* Lars Hedman  
*Editor:* Nicholas T. Proferes  
*Sound:* Lars Hedman  
*Sound Mixer:* Dick Vorisek  
*Sound Editor:* Harvey Greenstein

## Cast

Barbara Loden (*Wanda*)  
Michael Higgins (*Mr Dennis*)  
Dorothy Shupenes (*Wanda's sister*)  
Peter Shupenes (*Wanda's brother-in-law*)  
Jerome Thier (*Wanda's husband*)  
Marian Thier (*Miss Godek*)  
Anthony Rotell (*Tony*)  
M.L. Kennedy (*judge*)  
Gerald Grippo (*court clerk*)  
Milton Gittleman (*factory owner*)  
Lila Gittleman (*factory owner's wife*)  
Arnold Kanig (*travelling salesman*)  
Joe Dennis (*Joe*)  
Charles Dosinan (*father*)  
Jack Ford (*Mr Anderson*)  
Rozamond Peck (*Mrs Anderson*)  
Susan Clark, Linda Clark (*daughter of Mr and Mrs Andersons*)  
Bill Longworth (*newscaster*)  
Frank Jourdano (*soldier*)  
Valerie Mamchez (*girl in roadhouse*)  
Pete Richman, Ed Somavitch (*musicians*)

USA 1970  
103 mins

The screening on Thu 9 Feb will be introduced by Jason Wood,  
BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences

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**Sans Soleil** Wed 1 Feb 20:40; Fri 17 Feb 18:00

### M (Mörder unter uns)

Thu 2 Feb 14:30; Thu 16 Feb 20:40; Wed 22 Feb 18:00

**Moonlight** Thu 2 Feb 20:45; Tue 14 Feb 20:30

### Blade Runner: The Final Cut

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### Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Sat 4 Feb 12:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:30

**La dolce vita** Sat 4 Feb 14:15; Sat 25 Feb 19:30

**Sherlock Jr.** Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

**City Lights** Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

**Goodfellas** Sat 4 Feb 20:10; Wed 15 Feb 20:10

**North by Northwest** Sat 4 Feb 20:20; Thu 9 Feb 18:00

**L'Atalante** Sun 5 Feb 12:15; Tue 14 Feb 18:30; Wed 22 Feb 14:30

**Rear Window** Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

**Stalker** Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

**Casablanca** Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

**Psycho** Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

### 8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

### The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Tue 7 Feb 18:10; Sat 25 Feb 11:50

**News from Home** Tue 7 Feb 20:45; Fri 17 Feb 18:20 (+ intro)

**Rashomon (Rashômon)** Tue 7 Feb 21:00; Thu 23 Feb 18:20

**The Piano** Wed 8 Feb 20:35; Tue 21 Feb 17:50

**Wanda** Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

### Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

**Ordet (The Word)** Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

### The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

### Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

**Barry Lyndon** Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

**Some Like It Hot** Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

**The Third Man** Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

**Killer of Sheep** Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

**Mirror (Zerkalo)** Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

**Pather Panchali** Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

**The Apartment** Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

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