

Synopsis & Treatment

Violet Culbo

Directed by Michelle Williams Gamaker

Written by Violet Culbo and Elan Gamaker

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90mins | Magic realist road movie

Tagline

A road movie without wheels.

Logline

Violet Culbo, a tattooed, mute stowaway from Asia, is discovered in a crate on the runway at Luton Airport. As she performs bodily transformations, a group of other migrants view her discovery as a miracle and become her followers. They begin a pilgrimage on foot to take her through the UK to the village of her ancestors: Culbo, Scotland.

Synopsis

England, 2015. Dust settling after a general election. A majority government making a mockery of the opinion polls. An unapologetic blue girdle of conservatism squeezing the life out of a bemused capital, and old factions in the regions resurgent, hinting at a federal future for the country. Scotland edging closer to cutting the cord.

VIOLET CULBO (mid-30s) emerges from a wooden crate on the Luton Airport runway. Dehydrated and exhausted from what must have been a harrowing journey and unable to speak, the only clue to her identity is a map of Scotland she clutches, her finger pointing to the tiny village of Culbo in the Highlands. A small team of airport employees, migrant workers themselves, smuggle her into a disused part of the terminal; the first act of kindness in a strange land. It's not entirely clear which flight she arrived on, but she appears to be South Asian, like some of those who have found her.

Violet is no ordinary stowaway. As she rolls up her sleeves, a miracle happens before the workers' eyes: upon her skin are complex markings and tattoos that come alive and seem to offer clues about her journey and who she might be. The workers quickly fashion together some offerings: they give her an unwrapped KitKat and TetraPak milk carton, place tea lights around her and hang a garland of plastic flowers around her neck. She sits slightly above them upon a neon pink inflatable rubber ring. Overqualified and fed up with their zero hour contracts, and desperate for another way, the workers resolve to help Violet to return to Culbo.

Violet travels in a palanquin steadily adorned with an assortment of objects gleaned from her journey through the country, gathering more followers along the way: a motley crew of migrant individuals, well-meaning yoga instructors, tofu-munching middle class lefties, disgruntled unionised Vauxhall mechanics and others who feel disenfranchised and homeless in neoliberal, late Capitalist Britain. They act as interlocutors for Violet, who is mute yet able to react to what she hears and sees through her tattoos and gestures. Through her silent journey she has created a popular political movement that draws disparate types together, united by common disillusionment.

Violet picks up followers along the way, individuals who feel no other choice but to opt out of their daily grind. Somehow, Violet inspires the rebellious streak that lies dormant in us all, for want of a pay packet and a quiet life. Jacking in jobs and upping sticks, those that join Violet's brigade do so out of reverence for the magic she exudes. They attribute the trauma of her journey from South Asia as the reason why their goddess cannot speak. But her silence is so precious in a world they perceive to be full of unwanted noise. Violet communicates in other ways, most intriguing of all are the symbolic signs that appear upon her arms and across her back. Her flesh *speaks* through animated tattoos and endures her fears and hopes.

One follower compares the tattoos to stigmata and it is at this point that the group decides to participate in a solemn baptism to care for Violet and protect her on her journey home. They discover a spring in a field guarded by an Ash tree; it is none other than Trewsbury Mead, the source of the Thames. For many centuries it has been a sacred place.

Soon after, with about half the journey completed, the group suffers a violent racist attack at the hands of a bunch of xenophobic jobs. They see Violet's silence as a sign of insolence and hold her down, forcing her to speak. But when they see she has no tongue in her mouth, they flee in terror. The incident serves to heighten the powerful aura of Violet in the group's eyes. They also resolve to find a way to help Violet speak.

The everyday and its apparent strangeness is also key to what Violet and her followers uncover en route. In Wallsend, near Newcastle they find angry protestors wearing cow onesies in honour of Bessie the cow, shot dead by twitchy police officers. Candles held high, they hold a nighttime vigil and ponder Violet's followers: two groups on separate journeys, each baffled by the other.

The last act of the film takes place in and around the village of Culbo, located on the north side of the Black Isle in Ross and Cromarty, Scotland. In spite of its name the Black Isle is a peninsula, and Culbo is surrounded on three sides by water – the Cromarty Firth to the north, the Beaully Firth to the south, and the Moray Firth to the east.

The group reaches Culbo and intends to live with their syncretic Goddess in her windswept self-designated *heimat* and unbeknown to local residents or the Scottish authorities set up camp in Culbo Wood. When the group discovers a silver tongue there, and therefore a potential solution to Violet's muteness, there is internal conflict as to whether or not she should be offered the tongue.

Word about the visitors gets out, and Violet's presence in a country sensitised to nationalism during the election soon draws local and international press attention. But when Violet shows no interest in being part of social media, the 24-hour news cycle or any PR campaign, locals become concerned. What threat does she pose? Are her followers embroiled in sinister religious activities? Or, most dangerous of all, does her pacifist, Luddite and anti-commercial philosophy have the potential to offer all UK residents an alternative to the politics of fear and division?

With this dramatic and bucolic setting as its climatic set piece, *Violet Culbo* ultimately reflects its title character's desire not only to retrace her past but a collective need to locate the past itself. Her resistance to the supposedly self-evident advantages of progress and modernism are thus physicalised in the simplicity of the life she finds in Culbo.

