

For a film ostensibly about foreigners in the United States, *The Dells* reveals a lot about American Culture. This tight 72 min observational documentary follows foreign exchange students in Wisconsin working via J-1 visas during their summer break. Through the eyes of the newly arrived immigrants grasping for the “American Dream,” the film dwells on minimum wage, tip culture, overtime work, healthcare, car dependence, McDonald’s, and, of course, money—all things Americana.

From the very first image in this film we are drawn into an aggressively American world. A myriad of neon signs pepper the frame: Taco Bell, Denny's, *Paul Bunyon's Lumberjack Meatballs (All You Can Eat!)*. There is a constant stream of cars buzzing by, rumbling at stoplights, crawling through drive-throughs. And a voice-over talking about a “pick up at Walgreens, not Walmart.” For an American viewer, this is an incredibly familiar setting. A layered frame of glittering capitalism. A soulless space where the individual human is decentered, and what dominates the frame is paved parking lots, bright lights, and a variety of sign fonts fighting to capture your attention, to buy your time. This could be Anywhere, USA. As it happens, it takes place in Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin.

These tableaux of Wisconsin Dells pop up throughout the film creating pauses between characters' interactions and events. A beat to breathe and really look at the environment. In many ways, this is an observational study of a place. And through the specificity of showing this very specific place, it paints broad strokes about “America.” We follow an ensemble of characters—students from Bulgaria, Türkiye, Dominican Republic, Jamaica—but we don't stay with them long enough to learn their names. Various languages weave together with broken English slanted in different accents, but we are not given the information about which language is being spoken. The viewer is kept at a distance from the characters. They are people walking through this space, but without roots in this ground. And thus, it hones in on how these new people interact with this place.

This transient cast is often filmed going to and from various locations in a “Dells Express Taxi,” which is, in and of itself, a transient environment. The characters interact with a cab driver – the only established American character. In chatting with these young immigrants, we learn how they perceive the “American Dream,” and how that concept has shifted from what it used to mean. One woman talks about her love of the “probably free” healthcare in this country, that doctors here actually care and will attend to you to the best of their power. Jason, the driver, points out the undeniable reality that healthcare is actually not a right in this country. The film quickly cuts to an idyllic clock tower show. It's an absurd cut. To think about medical debt, insurance companies, sky-high ambulance prices while watching a clock tower chime a song and dance while a mechanical voice booms about “musically enchanted rats.” The reality is that America could certainly have free healthcare, but instead we are like the mechanical rats following the pipe player. The film goes so far as to show us the inside of the clock tower—it's not pretty back there, much like the underbelly of the American healthcare system.

There is a certain irony that this place is a vacation destination for Americans, with indoor and outdoor waterparks, go-karts, rollercoasters, and arcades. Americans leisurely walk through the frame, children yip in delight, families pick their favorite in-action photograph taken by one of the J-1 workers. This is the same place that the student-immigrants work for mere dollars an hour. Where they count how much of those dollars go to rent and transportation. Where they piece together that the American Dream is

not as easy as they had believed. In countless scenes, their voices harmonize across languages about how much they make an hour, how much overtime they work, seating groups of 20 guests, their best day of tips (“for a double shift was \$187 total”). While these two groups seem to exist on opposite sides of a circus curtain, the film does nothing to exaggerate the differences visually. The Americans and the student-immigrants exist in the same place. The idyllic scenery of The Dells doesn’t change, but the disembodied feeling of cutting from happy vacationers milling about to a parking lot with 20 year olds moving their belongings into a broken down van to save money: that’s when the differences leap off the screen. It’s not that Americans don’t go through hardships, but that’s not what this film is about. It tactically peers into the systems in place that ultimately affect both groups. If the American Dream doesn’t exist for those reaching for it, then who does it exist for?

A young woman shyly proclaims: “I don’t think I like America that much.” The crowd guffaws: “America is the best country in the world!” A little bit of sarcasm seeps through. Vacationers swim in an idyllic lake. The reality is that not everyone dreams about America. Or, perhaps, America is not all that everyone has dreamt of. In the rumbling of the Taxi Express, a Jamaican woman reflects: “A lot of people, they don’t like black people. [...] They are racist, man. I ain’t used to that, I’d rather go back home.” We aren’t really given any time to process her comment. And yet it’s one we know and accept—the racist roots run deep in the States. This country’s foundation is freedom built on the backs of slaves. In continuous night scenes, one student waits for a bus with his luggage. He talks plainly about what he misses about Dominican culture: the familiarity, the community. His voice wavers; it’s a bittersweet end. For many student workers their time here ends up being about the differences to their home country, and in some instances it isn’t worth the cultural shift. An impressive and near silent thunderstorm flashes in the distance above the park. At some point someone asked why they bring these J-1 workers here. The immediate and collective response: Cheap Labor.

The Dells brings the viewer in and out of these scenes punctuated by tableaux of Wisconsin. We understand where we are, we think about what it means to be in this place. But this film isn’t really about the J-1 Visa. It isn’t about immigrant labor in the States. It’s about Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin, and what it means to be American. What we value, what we vote for, where we go when we go on vacation, and, for better or for worse, a place that we call home.