Meek's Cutoff. Dir. (Kelly Reichardt. Perf. Michelle Williams, Bruce Greenwood. Evenstar Films / Film Science, 2010. Film. 2011)

The film takes place in the year 1845. A wagon team of three families has hired Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood), a mountain man, to guide them over the Cascade Mountains. Meek claims to know a short cut and leads the group to an unmarked path across the Oregon High Desert. Gradually it becomes obvious that Meek has lost his orientation. As a result, the emigrants face hunger and thirst. When a Native American wanderer crosses their path, the families have to choose between an unreliable leader and a man who might be their natural rival.

Director Kelly Reichardt based her film on diaries written by women during the earliest days of the Oregon Trail. The script (written by Jon Howard) stays as close as possible to the historical sources, thus reflecting the film's attempt to render a painstakingly accurate version of the past. For that reasons all sequences were shot at the original locations in Oregon, and and all costumes are authentic.

The diaries offered the director an alternative view of the historical events that have come to be known as The Meek Cutoff. They focus on the daily struggle for survival, the hard work, and especially on the growing feeling of getting lost in the dry rock and sage of the high plain desert. This feeling was accompanied by a growing sense of losing contact with the calendar. Only the major changes in the weather served as a reminder that time was actually passing. Accordingly, *Meek's Cutoff* is a very silent, slow-moving film that manages to mesmerize the viewer in a state of timelessness. It is obvious that post Westerns, such as Peter Fonda's *The Hired Hand* (USA 1971), that rely on a similar concept of silence and scarcity of dramatic climaxes, have served as major sources of inspiration for the director. The film reflects Kelly Reichardt's emphatic belief in a different kind of narrative that focuses primarily on gestures and glances, as it is exemplified by the film's central female character Emily (Michelle Williams) and the way she manages to establish communication with the Native American. Just like Kelly Reichardt's previous collaboration with the actress in the melancholic road movie *Wendy and Lucy* (USA 2008), *Meek's Cutoff* equals a meditative ride into trance and tranquillity.

Simultaneously, the film questions a traditional version of American history that is based on the the idea of a cowboy who manages to imprint his identity onto the wilderness. Even an outstanding Western classic, such as William A. Wellman's *Westward The Women* (USA 1951), reaffirms the importance of the male Western hero by implying that the trek of women depicted in the film, would never have succeeded without the male guidance and surveillance provided by Robert Taylor. *Meek's Cutoff,* on the contrary, stresses the importance of women in the process of conquering the West. Accordingly, Michelle Williams's face reflects a growing sense of skepticism and doubt in Meek's qualities as a guide and guarantor of their safety. Gradually she turns into the trek's central authority and sole voice of reason. When Meek wants to shoot the Native American like an animal, she appears next to their guide pointing a gun directly at his head. In the film's last scene Meek sounds like a character in a Beckett play: “I think we all played our parts now. This is written long before we got here.” Then he looks into Emily's eyes and adds words that reflect a total erosion of male authority: “I am under your command.”

The director's attempt to introduce a female perspective to the history of the West has already been conveyed in the film's first scene in which the trek crosses a river. There are no male horsemen around; instead we watch Iinstead we watch a silent, four-minute-procession on foot as the women move through the water. Their facial expressions show the fear of stepping into nothingness and of losing the baskets on their heads that contain all their blankets, food supplies and belongings. Simultaneously the uncut sequence conveys the extreme struggle of fighting against the stream. Other key scenes show women with chapped lips and empty glances moving through time and space, close to dying of thirst. The entire film equals an existential drama that highlights the daily struggle for survival.

Meek's Cutoff has got nothing in common with those post Westerns from the late 60s and 70s which tried to demystify the American West. Instead, the outstanding camera work (provided by Christopher Blauvelt) focuses on the evocative reflection of fires and wind in the faces of characters and on the reduction of human beings to silhouettes. Again and again we see the horizon presented in a classical full shot. Scenes like this re-establish a mythological dimension by pointing to an impressionistic type of landscape painting from the 19th century. All in all, *Meek's Cutoff*

is a landmark Western with a striking political subtext, as it transforms a Native American (Rod Rondeaux) into a figure of hope for the emigrants who knows where water can be found. He is closer to nature than the whites who would later “tame” the American West in an ongoing process of industrialization. The film points to an alternate version of American history in which the whites listen to the Native Americans and learn from their understanding of nature. It must be said, however, that the ending departs from the historical source-text, which recounts how more than fifty emigrants died after the dismissal of their guide Meek. The movie has an open ending, though; we do not learn what happens to the families. Their future seems to be as open and uncertain as America's role in the world today in the wake of several wars and an ongoing financial crisis. In this respect the film might also testify to a growing sense of pessimism.

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