



An Ignominious Aura

Portland screenwriter Jonathan Raymond revamps the Western with *Meek's Cutoff*

Portland-based writer Jonathan Raymond is on a roll. In 2008, Raymond and director Kelly Reichardt joined creative forces on the indie sleeper *Wendy and Lucy*, a quiet, haunting movie about a young drifter and her dog hitting a patch of bad luck as they pass northward through Oregon. Starring Michelle Williams and adapted from Raymond's short story "Train Song" from his collection *Livability*, this film — with its tidal pacing and tight-lipped minimalism — turns the nameless face of austerity and loss into the stuff of tragedy. *Wendy and Lucy* is at once poetic and plainspoken, and about as undeclarative as movies get. It reveals a solitary life as a freefall from free will — a compound error that leads to a single, heartbreaking decision.

More recently, Raymond — who also wrote the teleplay for director Todd Haynes' adaptation of *Mildred Pierce* for HBO — has again collaborated with Reichardt (for the third time) and Williams on *Meek's Cutoff*, which tells the story of a wagon train of American immigrants in the mid-1800s traveling west across the Oregon Trail. The film has garnered reactions ranging from consternation to lofty critical acclaim — mostly, and thankfully, the latter.

Meek's Cutoff is a difficult and beautiful and brilliant film, quite unlike anything that's come before. It completely inverts the triumphalist fables of Manifest Destiny and westward settlement, focusing instead on the wages of faith and hope on a small band of pioneers seeking out the pass into

Willamette Valley, led by a blowhard guide who may be a fool or a saboteur, or neither, or a little of both. As the stark, forbidding moonscape of Eastern Oregon grinds them down, these strangers in a strange land are ravaged by sickness, doubt, paranoia and the perpetual threat of violence.

With its unsentimental vision of western expansion and its unwillingness to indulge genre expectations, *Meek's Cutoff* is not so much an anti-Western as a kind of pre-Western that pushes its godless realism to surreal extremes. Thanks to the arid beauty of Raymond's writing and Reichardt's keenly unnerving direction, the movie feels like a dilated *Twilight Zone* episode. It is mesmerizing and nightmarish at once, and it feels almost *too* real — simultaneously eerie and epic, gritty and ghostly. The film suggests the survivalist transgressions of the Donner Party, and it raises far more questions than it answers.

Speaking last week by phone from Portland, Raymond told me he first became interested in writing *Meek's Cutoff* while researching "a weird freelance gig" a few years back, when he was hired to name, of all things, a golf course in Bend. Before that, he'd never been particularly interested in Oregon Trail history, which Raymond said "always struck me as just such a boringly imperial story, the whole idea of Manifest Destiny was disgusting to me." That changed when he happened upon the idea of a lost wagon train following an untrustworthy guide into the Cascade mountain range. "It had such an ignominious aura to it," Raymond said.

As with *Wendy and Lucy*, which dramatizes with profound compassion the kind of disposable life most of us only know as a newspaper statistic, Raymond takes one of our most cherished myths — of the proud, hardy pioneer conquering the abundant West — and, in *Meek's Cutoff*, puts it to the test of truth. Rather than molding his characters to fit some abstract pioneering prototype, he bestows upon each a fragile humanity, asking what happens when individuals are confronted with the cosmic hostility of the great unknown. "Some people think it's a Jack London story," he says of the film's survivalist bent. "It's much more a Camus story in my mind. They lived, and they decimated everything."

In a recent review in *The New Yorker*, film critic David Denby described the aesthetic of *Meek's Cutoff* as "punitive," in that it lingers on the everyday hardships of the pioneers, especially the women, moving at their deathly pace and filling the screen with long, plodding scenes of a vast and dusty emptiness. Denby's grudging admiration is a political miscue, blinding him to the creeping beauty of a film that refuses, almost on principle, to clearly delineate good and evil through acts of explosive, cathartic bloodshed. The deep vein of violence that runs through *Meek's Cutoff* is no less brutal for being almost entirely implied. This is a Western without a final shootout, ending instead on a note of operatic ambivalence. Those in tune with Raymond's vision will find the movie reverberating through their dreams for weeks afterward.

"I love the idea of a Western," Raymond said. Nonetheless, he added, even in those Westerns that could be considered revisionist — such as the novels of Cormac McCarthy or later Clint Eastwood films like *Unforgiven* — the subversive critique

of Western traditions is "revisionist in a weird way," like "having your cake and eating it, too." In the novel *Blood Meridian*, for instance — which Raymond considers "a summation of the Western genre thing to the ultimate degree" — McCarthy overturns the heroic mythology of the West while still spilling buckets of blood at every turn. No matter how postmodern or deconstructed the Western, audiences expect high noon, a showdown with itchy trigger fingers that set guns blazing. In this way, Raymond said, we are at once "super self-conscious of these mythologies, but we're also going to indulge in these blood orgies."

Not so *Meek's Cutoff*. What Raymond sought to do in the screenplay was somehow dig beneath "that kind of redemptive violence that is the engine of so much of this genre." To this end, he asked himself, "How do you create tension in drama that doesn't drive toward that bloodshed?" It was "important to me to not have a Mexican standoff," Raymond said. The big question was whether there is still appeal in a film that subverts such an essential component of classic Westerns. "It turned out there is," he said. "As long as there's a threat of violence, then you have narrative tension in some way."

And, aside from Denby and other similarly thick-of-mind critics, *Meek's Cutoff* is being hailed by many as a big leap in cinematic innovation and vision — a movie that offers a new language, as it were, by which to judge our collective past.

"I've been really pleased and surprised at how many people seem to get what's happening," Raymond said. **EW**

Meek's Cutoff opens Friday, May 13, at the Bijou Art Cinemas; for further info and times, visit www.bijou-cinemas.com



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SUPER 8:30	9:15	9:15	9:15	9:15	9:15	4:50 9:15	10:15
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