

AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FEMALE FILMMAKERS:  
KELLY REICHARDT IN FOCUS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Female directors are historically underrepresented in the film industry. By studying the careers of independent women directors, scholars can identify their opportunities and challenges to create a more diverse and equitable industry. After synthesizing recent studies of women in film, this project focuses on the career of Kelly Reichardt as one example of the creative methodology, production, and content of women's work in the indie sector.

After the introduction, a current snapshot of American independent female filmmakers' careers, chapter one introduces Reichardt's early influences and growth. Chapters two through five focus on micro-budget production decisions that affect content, aesthetic, and cinematic choices. Chapter two analyzes Reichardt's experimental techniques and feminist themes in her first feature *River of Grass* (1995) and begins a discussion of genre mixing that extends to subsequent films. Chapter three examines her turn, after a twelve-year hiatus from filmmaking, to minimalism and a focus on cultural concepts of masculinity in *Old Joy* (2006). In her next film, *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), highlighted in chapter four, Reichardt responded to a lack of political will in addressing the pervasiveness of poverty and homelessness, issues complicated by gender. The chapter also explores ecofeminist themes of human collateral in the wake of natural disasters. With her largest budget to date, Reichardt made *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), a feminist Western that critiques contemporary political landscapes, as detailed in chapter five, which also discusses her strategic uses of slow cinematic techniques and 1.37:1 screen ratio. The conclusion draws from Reichardt's production model to address issues facing women in film.

By chronicling Reichardt's career and production methods, this project explores women's underrepresentation and attempts to draw conclusions about female career longevity in the independent sector. Reichardt offers a contemporary, sustainable career model for independent filmmakers; one that does not aspire to commercial success, but instead impacts scholarly and industry communities. With Kathryn Bigelow, Sofia Coppola, and Nicole Holofcener, Reichardt belongs to a small group of American women filmmakers with a distinctive and growing body of films. This project hopes to expand the existing body of research and support changes in perception and opportunity related to women in the film industry.

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### Introduction: The Film Industry and Female Directors

“[T]here has been NO sustained growth in women directors over the last decade in both narrative and documentaries. . . . So the next time someone says things are great for women directors tell them that things are not better, they have STAYED THE SAME and that we still have so much more work to do.” ~Melissa Silverstein

“I had 10 years from the mid-1990s when I couldn’t get a movie made. It had a lot to do with being a woman. That’s definitely a factor in raising money.” ~Kelly Reichardt

While the Hollywood film industry is as pervasive as ever, independent films are seeping into the American mainstream consciousness. The Cannes and Sundance film festivals have infiltrated popular culture and with more assessable distribution through Netflix, Amazon, and Vimeo, many independent directors have become household names. However, as Michael Newman indicates in *Indie: An American Film Culture*, defining independent film is challenging. Independent film has its roots in the early twentieth century, when the label indicated “production, distribution, and exhibition outside of the Hollywood studios and mainstream theater chains,” but indie or independent film now represents more than a rejection of big business or mainstream values (Newman 3). Any discussion of independent film must consider the cultural context in addition to economic forces and film content. When deciphering the differences between the terms *indie* and *independent*, Newman suggests that “indie gained salience as a more general term for nonmainstream culture in the 1990s, . . . with an added connotation of fashionab[ly] cool. But it also functions as a mystification of the more straightforward category ‘independent’” (Newman 4). This “mystification” stems

from the culture created around music, media, news outlets, texts, and businesses that want to be identified as outside the mainstream and youth oriented.

In what seems as an effort to further complicate the indie label, Hollywood studios created “indiewood,” or mini-major vintage branches beginning in the late 1990s to buy films at festivals in an effort to profit from and appeal to niche audiences. But according to Newman, “the term *indiewood*, . . . can pejoratively mock films of Hollywood mini-majors that aim to position themselves as ‘indie’” adding a level of inauthenticity or at the very least confusion (6). Ultimately, however, no matter the specific or general labels audiences use to describe the type of film they view, “[t]he value of indie cinema is generally located in difference, resistance, opposition—in the virtue of alternative representations, audiovisual and storytelling styles, and systems of cultural circulation” (Newman 2).

Within this process of resistance, indie films allow for more diverse voices, and with an ever changing and diversifying American public “[i]ndie films have functioned as an alternative American national cinema (Newman 17). No matter what cinema they operate within, however, female filmmakers represent a segment of directors that have been historically underrepresented. While female filmmakers find a stronger voice through opportunities the independent film industry offers compared to Hollywood, there is a significant lack of support in both industries. By analyzing and exploring the careers of contemporary American independent female filmmakers, scholars can identify their opportunities and challenges in an effort to create a more diverse and equitable film industry. This project synthesizes a number of recent studies on women in the film industry and, through an in-depth look at the filmmaking of independent director Kelly



Reichardt, analyzes the creative methodology, production, and content of contemporary female filmmakers. While this project makes note of female directors of color such as Julie Dash, Gurinder Chadha, Leslie Harris, and Rose Troche, an in-depth study of the different and greater struggles and challenges they face in the film industry as compared to white female directors is outside the range and scope of this project.

In January 2013, the Sundance Institute and Women in Film Los Angeles released a study conducted by University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism titled *Exploring the Barriers and Opportunities for Independent Women Filmmakers*. This study analyzes the challenges female filmmakers face when financing, marketing, and directing films in both the documentary and narrative categories. While not particularly ground breaking, it offers more information to support Martha Lauzen's 2008, 2010, and 2012 Celluloid Ceiling reports from the *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film*. Many of Lauzen's reports track women's current and historical participation within the film industry looking at employment in the top 250 films. In 2010, "Women accounted for 7% of directors . . . , the same percentage as in 2009. This figure represents a decline of two percentage points from 1998," but in the most recent 2012 report, women directors "accounted for 9%," which is the same percentage as from the 1998 data (Lauzen, "Celluloid Ceiling"). Women directors do not seem to be gaining ground, as Melissa Silverstein reports in *Indiewire* stating that there has been: "NO sustained growth in women directors over the last decade in both narrative and documentaries. . . . So the next time someone says things are great for women directors tell them that things are not better, they have STAYED THE SAME and that we still have so much more work to do."

Silverstein sums up what Lauzen's reports surmise: because of industry challenges, female directors are not moving forward, but they are not taking large strides backwards either.

While this holding pattern in Hollywood is startling, there is a more supportive culture for female participation at film festivals, especially within the documentary categories. A 2010 report tracking women's involvement in independent film shows women steer toward documentaries over features: "[I]n every behind-the-scenes role considered, a higher percentage of women worked on festival films than top grossing films. These differences are largely due to the high numbers of documentaries screening at film festivals" (Lauzen, "Independent Women"). This point is echoed by the 2013 Sundance Institute USC Annenberg study, which looked at the previous twelve years of submissions (2002-2012) and then interviewed 51 "independent filmmakers and executives/high-level talent" for their results:

Documentaries represent a more female-friendly arena than narrative film. Of the individuals who mentioned a gendered financial barrier, 36.4% indicated that the documentary community has a more democratized funding structure, is led by other women, and that lower thresholds for funding present fewer hurdles to creating films. Additionally, the points of entry and crew leadership requirements are perceived to create an environment in which women can succeed. (11)

Because the funding opportunities and production environment for documentaries are friendlier to women directors, there might be more incentive to work in documentaries or to insert autobiographical elements into narrative features.

The desire to tell women's stories is another draw for female directors to documentaries in the independent sector of American film. Similarly, many indie feature filmmakers base their narrative films on autobiographical material, which can result in realistic, complex female characters: "[c]entral female characters are allowed to be more ambiguous, not falling into the neat cinematic categories of femme fatale or wounded victim, saintly mother or young innocent," and "are instead allowed their own complicated sexuality and individuality" (Williams). This desire was especially evident during a 2014 Sundance panel session with first time director Maya Forbes whose film, *Infinitely Polar Bear*, was accepted into the U.S. dramatic competition. Forbes's film was based on her childhood while her two male panel members adapted their screenplays from novels. Two other examples of female narrative filmmaking at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival that featured either autobiographical storytelling or a documentary style included another debut director, Desiree Akhavan, who based her film, *Appropriate Behavior*, on a prior relationship, and Madeleine Olnek, who inserted mock interviews with lesbian prostitutes in the middle of her film, *The Foxy Merkins*. All of these films underscore the importance of and desire to, no matter the format, tell real and marginalized women's stories rather than stories dictated by Hollywood standards. Austrian director Jessica Hausner, who directed the 2009 independent film *Lourdes*, commented during an interview about the need for women to tell other women's stories:

On a political, societal level it is important. It's only fair that you have women directing female characters sometimes--you know what it is like to be a woman. It's also about the way women portray women in films. Men do show women as victims much more, that they are poor and need to be

protected, whereas women show women who are confident and strong.

(qtd. in Williams)

These female characters use their resilience to persevere and rise above the situation, but survival does not mean a happy ending. Often spectators are left wondering if the protagonist will manage, but independent women filmmakers often provide honest conclusions and open or unsettling endings that keep audiences contemplating the issues.

The effect on audiences from this potential contemplation was reinforced when the Sundance Institute and USC Annenberg study indicated the storyteller's gender dictated the type of story told:

There is a growing body of empirical research that documents how having a woman at the helm can affect the types of stories being told. First, female directors are more likely to feature girls and women on screen than male directors. Second, female producers and directors affect not only the prevalence of girls and women on screen, they also impact the very nature of a story, or the way in which a story is told. Examining more than 900 motion pictures, one study found that violence, guns/weapons, and blood/gore were less likely to be depicted when women were directing or producing, and thought-provoking topics were more likely to appear. (3)

Not only is the increase in representation of girls and women needed, but the impact of "thought-provoking topics" that keep the audience contemplating issues is a major benefit in a society ever more reliant on media for entertainment and social connections. No matter what connections these films foster, Hollywood still views women directors' content as noncommercial, a perception that impedes funding.

In her article, “How Female Directors Could, at Last, Infiltrate Hollywood: Go Indie First,” Govindini Murty asks Stacy Smith, co-author of the Sundance Institute and Women in Film study, why there is such a large discrepancy between the indie film circuit and Hollywood when it comes to female directed narrative film, and she explains “that ingrained attitudes about female directors and stars play a big role: ‘In Hollywood, women in front of or behind the camera still seem to be perceived as a risky investment’” (qtd. in Murty). This stereotype seems to be held tightly by the film industry because Hollywood views female filmmakers’ more realistic content as limited release or art house material that could never generate the revenue of a special effects, star-studded action film. In reality however, Lauzen found the film budget often dictated the profit generated at the box office: “Overall, when women and men filmmakers have similar budgets for their films, the resulting box office grosses are also similar. In other words, the sex of filmmakers does not determine box office grosses (Lauzen, “Women”). The larger the beginning budget, the more revenue is generated. Of course female independent film budgets are much lower than the majority of Hollywood male directed films, but what Lauzen’s study demonstrates is that the original capital is what drives success: “When the size of the budget is held constant, films with female protagonists or prominent females in an ensemble cast earn similar box office grosses (domestic, international, opening weekend) and DVD sales as films with male protagonists” (Lauzen, “Women”). While the perception that women directors or female protagonists are “box office poison” is disproven through Lauzen’s study, it has not converted opinions about narrative filmmaking. With only four women directors selected for the U.S. dramatic competition at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, down from eight in 2013,

the current challenge is how to increase opportunities for women within narrative filmmaking.

When the Sundance Institute study looked at the barriers for female narrative filmmakers, they found five areas that significantly stunted women's ability to succeed. Out of the 51 interviewees, 43.1 percent answered that there were several types of "gendered financial barriers" for women who try to make narrative films including a "funding structure that is primarily operated by males," the fact that "[f]emale-helmed projects are perceived to lack commercial viability," and the tendency for women to be viewed "as less confident when they ask for film financing" (Smith 11). The other four "spontaneously mentioned" gender barriers by the interviewees included "male-dominated networks" by 39.2 percent of participants, "stereotyping on set" by 15.7 percent, "work and family balance" by 19.6 percent, and "exclusionary hiring decisions" by 13.7 percent (Smith 11).

While the barriers to finding funding have been widely acknowledged in many studies, it is the perception issues—such as the one in which female filmmakers are seen as "less confident" when requesting funds—that is revealing. Yet the study goes on to point out the perception that the number of women filmmakers working and succeeding in the industry was growing progressively each year, which is not the case according to Lauzen's findings (11). In fact, "29.4% of respondents questioned the veracity of data on the low number of women in independent film . . . [and] disclosed that the state of gender equality for females in independent film was not different than other industries" (11). The disavowal and resistance on the part of those working in the film industry underscores the difficulties for female directors or any women employed in the industry.

Addressing whether or not American independent female director percentages are the same or in line with international female directors is very difficult because many international film industries receive state funding, and that is not the case in American independent film. Instead, American indie filmmakers must raise private capital or apply for grants such as those offered by the Sundance Institute. In her article “Women Directors, Go Global,” Marian Evans attempts to create a (2010 through 2012) global snapshot of the percentage of women directors producing narrative film. Evans uses Martha Lauzen’s 2012 “Independent Women: Behind-the-Scenes” report to compare American indie female director participation to female directorship globally and finds that while the 18 percent of female American indie directors does seem average when compared globally, Hollywood’s 9 percent is still very low in comparison (Evans; Lauzen 1). This finding is significant especially when such a high number of seasoned and executive level interviewees shared the perception that women’s participation in the film industry is improving. As stated by Smith and her co-researchers in the Sundance Institute study, “[t]hese points of resistance illustrate how industry perceptions may unknowingly perpetuate barriers for female directors and producers” (11). While it is difficult to make comparisons globally the central conclusion is easily drawn: women working in the American film industry face many challenges in regard to funding, perceptions, stereotyping, representation, and artistic control.

In an interview, Gurinder Chadha, director of *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), sees a rosier picture than what recent studies indicate: "Making films is hard. . . . Therefore, the people who are taking the risks – the financiers or distributors – tend to go with what they know. What has changed is that the comfort

zone has shifted. I'm sure women are not as overlooked as they used to be" (qtd. in Williams). It may seem that female directors and their films are not getting "overlooked," but even with Kathryn Bigelow's history making 2010 Oscar for best director there has been is a drop in female participation within Hollywood. When asked in a National Public Radio interview with Neda Ulaby if she thought about her gender when making *Hurt Locker*, Bigelow seemed very matter-of-fact until the end, suggesting that

despite what some might assume, being a woman filming a nearly all-male movie in the Middle Eastern country of Jordan was simply not a big deal. She says you don't think about being a lady while you work. 'You've got a four-story-high explosion taking place along an avenue, on which on any given day there are 250,000 cars, so ...' she pauses, 'that begins to take precedence.' Bigelow says she has no idea why even now so few women are trusted to direct major films. 'You'd have to sit somebody down here and ask them,' she says, with the slightest edge to her voice.

Ulaby focuses attention on the "edge" to Bigelow's voice as she reflects on why there are so few women in the film industry and juxtaposes this to her desire to forget gender while in the workplace. Both Chadha and Bigelow seem to understand the gendered situation within Hollywood but also downplay its serious consequences to future female filmmakers. As if to underscore Bigelow's attempt to ignore the implications her gender brings to her work, Twitter messages from fellow male directors illustrate its consequences: "According to tweets by Steve Pond of the entertainment website *The Wrap*, *Precious* director Lee Daniels said in a speech to Bigelow, 'Your movie is as



beautiful as your legs.’ Would any other director get their work praised through direct comparison with their legs?” (qtd. in Williams). Williams highlights one of the many issues that face female filmmakers.

Later in her interview, Ulaby talked with the director of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), Nia Vardalos, who commented about her first time directing for a studio:

It's no secret that female directors are treated differently by studios — even sometimes by their own crews. She [Vardalos] says she had no sense of being an *artiste* — someone entitled to challenge the budget, the number of shooting days or the rules. ‘One day my focus puller turned to me, and he said, ‘As a female filmmaker, you have one shot,’ she recalls, ‘and if you go over budget, that bond company will be here in a second, breathing down your neck. So you're right to keep everyone on schedule.’

While this was reassuring advice from Vardalos’s co-worker, it also gives a snapshot of what options female filmmakers have and what preconceived notions can form within the industry, indie or Hollywood; Rachel Millward, who runs London's Bird's Eye View female film festival commented, “I'm always amazed at the stories I hear about male actors and crew who have issues with working with female film directors – it can be a nightmare. Women have to come up with ways to set the tone, so they're not treated as either a dragon or someone to be flirted with” (qtd. in Williams). In addition to working on films, this example illustrates an invisible layer of challenges for females in the film industry. Once the film is completed, however, there are challenges to creating a sustainable career, even—or especially within the independent sector.

In her article “Just another girl outside the neo-indie,” Christina Lane notes that many independent female filmmakers are treated by the industry as one hit wonders. Lane highlights directors who have their first feature film financed, but then find it very difficult to get other movies either financed or to be successful. Filmmakers like Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991), Leslie Harris (*Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, 1992), Nancy Savoca (*True Love*, 1989), and Allison Anders (*Gas Food Lodging*, 1992) all had trouble securing financing or lacked appropriate marketing for their subsequent feature films even when their first films made money or were critically successful (197-9). Lane suggests that this phenomenon was partly the result of studio executives’ concern over content and commercial viability: “Anders faced difficulties financing her next five features, in part, she claims, because ‘[i]t’s the boy-wonder myth. . . . The girl wonder myth doesn’t exist. . . . You just end up in the girl ghetto’” (qtd. in Lane 199). The romanticized rags to riches story epitomized by Quentin Tarantino does seem to be primarily male. So in an effort to deal with the restrictive environment, many female directors turned to television, the “girl ghetto”; Anders went to cable because she wanted a larger audience than her other two films received in theaters and attributed the lack of audience to poor marketing (199). In *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, Emanuel Levy comments on female filmmakers’ treatment by saying Hollywood:

implicitly sets men’s achievements as the standards to which women should aspire and against which their progress is measured. Hence, the problem is perceived as women’s catching up to the men, rather than a problem for both men and women to resolve by changing the

socioeconomic condition of their lives, from micro- to more macrointeractions. (351)

In contrast to Tarantino's action oriented, blood soaked effects, many female directors focus on relationships, are dialogue driven, and represent cultural or ethnically diverse perspectives; this focus difference creates the perception that women's films are non-commercial but, as Lane suggests "such films might well have drawn indie audiences if they had been exposed to creative marketing campaigns and not been critically dismissed as didactic" (204). Nancy Savoca's Warner Brothers produced film *Dogfight* (1991) illustrates not only how important marketing is but what often happens when an artist insists on control over her film. Savoca refused to "change the film's conclusion to a more optimistic ending" so Warner "revok[ed] marketing support," saying, "It's your movie, your name is on it but, P.S. we won't support it one iota with prints and advertising." The film bypassed theaters completely and went straight to home video, leaving Savoca saying, "I got the movie I wanted but no one saw it" (qtd. in Lane 197). This type of studio control is what pushes independent filmmakers who have a different definition of success toward truly independent production and distribution companies and away from vintage branches owned by studios.

In the case of a privileged few, independent female auteurs such as Kathryn Bigelow and Sofia Coppola have utilized male familial ties to establish careers in the motion picture arts. In her book *Points of Resistance* Lauren Rabinovitz points out that artists such as Maya Deren, Bebe Barron, Marcia Vogel, Anais Nin and Shirley Clarke, women pioneers in male fields, each relied on help in gaining opportunities:

The stereotypical woman artist whose success depends upon her

relationship to a male artist has a historical basis. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock argue that only in the last two hundred years have women been so systematically denied access to the social institutions necessary for an arts career that they have had to depend more regularly upon familial relationships to overcome institutional restraints. (4)

Whereas male relatives once seemed necessary for women in gaining entrance into the industry, more recently women working within the industry are fulfilling that role. But while receiving support from industry women is important, it is difficult to come by at the studio level, as Lauzen's most recent Celluloid Ceiling report suggests: "the numbers for women filmmakers have been remarkably stable and reflect that this is an entrenched industry" (qtd. in Rickey). Anne Thompson, editor in chief of "Thompson on Hollywood" at *Indiewire.com*, suggests that the loss of even one woman working at the studio level, such as Nora Ephron, has consequences for female directors as noted by Carrie Rickey: "[T]he death of Nora Ephron was a huge blow.' Mourning the loss of that high-profile writer-director, she [Thompson] noted how few female filmmakers there are at the majors." While there is no debate that Hollywood is an "entrenched industry," the need for women in this industry to help other women is critical. Stars like Jodie Foster and Drew Barrymore, who have both directed and produced films, are examples of women who support other women. During the 1990's, Christine Vachon, an independent producer, contributed funding from her company Killer Films and then secured a private screening for festival programmers to increase the acceptance odds of Rose Troche's film *Go Fish* (Lane 202). *Go Fish* was the "first film to be sold to a distributor during the Sundance Film Festival" (Lane 202), and the success is not hard to connect to female

industry assistance: “Support from other women in the industry appears to be key. It was Megan Ellison of Annapurna Pictures who funded the 40\$ million dollar budget of Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), while Amy Pascal of Sony Pictures was instrumental in releasing the film” (Murty).

Since 2000, the barriers for women filmmakers have if anything increased because of the domination of the independent sector by “smart cinema,” which features white male directors like Wes Anderson, Todd Solonz, Noah Baumbach, and Spike Jonze, touting them as auteurs with a cool, hip, and ironic sensibility. “Smart films,” characterized by Jeffery Sconce as “displac[ing] the more activist emphasis on the ‘social politics’ of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity” for “ironic disdain” and a “‘personal politics’ of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture,” has been crowding out female directors with the exception of Nicole Holofcener, *Lovely and Amazing* (2001), *Friends with Money* (2006), *Please Give* (2010), and *Enough Said* (2013), and Tamara Jenkins (*The Savages*, 2007), the only two recognizable female directors in the genre (352). While “smart films” are not devoid of cultural politics, they stand apart from other indie films such as Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River* (2008) and Debra Granik’s *Winter’s Bone* (2010), which depict political and social issues more directly, or their contemporary, New York based female film director Kelly Reichardt. Since 1995, Reichardt has made five films that also focus on the under-classes of society.

Kelly Reichardt represents a compromise between overtly feminist directors such as Sally Potter, Laura Mulvey, and Chantal Akerman and the trendy personal politics or “blankness” and “ironic distance” characterizing “smart film.” She fits in with her

socially conscious contemporaries, Granik and Hunt, and like them, her work stands in opposition to “smart films” but her technique is distinct because she aligns herself with an older tradition of social realism, Italian Neorealism, and her form, like that of Iranian film, is political while avoiding overtly didactic content. In an effort to distinguish female filmmakers’ style and technique, Emanuel Levy asks: “Is there a distinctly female sensibility in indie narratives written and directed by women? Are new meanings established? Do women-directed indies address their audiences in different ways?”(349). In an interview with *Slant* magazine, Reichardt seems to answer Levy’s question about creating “new meanings” by suggesting that when political ideology is delivered subtlety and paired with an accessible but subversive form, it is an innately personal act: “I’m interested in making personal films and to me every film is political. There’s political in the personal” (qtd. in Stewart). Reichardt slows her narrative, action, and dialogue in order to challenge, engage, and create space for her audience. Her narrative style is cyclical and coiled instead of the Hollywood linear cause and effect style, which spells out character motivation and intent. Audiences are asked to fill in the blanks and actively participate, and her process underscores this intent: “In making a film or even choosing a story . . . I’m really going out of my way to not point anybody in one specific direction. I don’t really want to really sum up the scenes for anybody. I’m hoping there’s enough space in it that you could walk out of it and feel differently than the person sitting next to you” (qtd. in Rowin). In this way, Reichardt seems to have dodged the “one hit wonder” syndrome or the “girl ghetto,” even though, like Savoca and many others, she waited an extended period of time before releasing her second feature film *Old Joy* (2006). It was

her fourth feature, however, *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) that brought Reichardt a windfall of critical and scholarly attention.

By chronicling Reichardt's career and production methods, this project explores women's underrepresentation and attempts to draw conclusions about female career longevity in the independent sector. Chapter one introduces Reichardt's early influences and growth. Chapters two through five focus on micro-budget production decisions that affect content, aesthetic, and cinematic choices. Chapter two analyzes Reichardt's experimental techniques and feminist themes in her first film *River of Grass* (1995) and begins a discussion of genre mixing that extends to subsequent films. Chapter three examines her turn, after a twelve-year hiatus from filmmaking, to minimalism and a focus on cultural concepts of masculinity in *Old Joy*. In her next film, *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), highlighted in chapter four, Reichardt responded to a lack of political will in addressing the pervasiveness of poverty and homelessness, issues complicated by gender. The chapter also explores ecofeminist themes of human collateral in the wake of natural disasters. With her largest budget to date, Reichardt made *Meek's Cutoff*, a feminist Western that critiques contemporary political landscapes, as detailed in chapter five together with her strategic uses of slow cinematic techniques and 1.37:1 screen ratio. The conclusion draws from Reichardt's production model to address issues facing women in film.

Reichardt offers a contemporary, sustainable career model for independent filmmakers, one that does not aspire to commercial success, but instead impacts scholarly and industry communities. With Kathryn Bigelow, Sofia Coppola, and Nicole Holofcener, Reichardt belongs to a small group of American women filmmakers with a

distinctive and growing body of films. This project hopes to expand the existing field of research and support changes in perception and opportunity related to women in the film industry.



## Chapter II: Kelly Reichardt: An Overview

“I had this great epiphany when I was standing in a field with friends making an art project [*Ode*]. . . . how do I structure my world around this? *This* is satisfying. *This* is the pinnacle. . . . how can I sustain something like this, where I have some money to make some films . . . . I . . . don’t have a personality with the flexibility to make that system that does exist [Hollywood] work for me.” ~ Kelly Reichardt

“It’s really hard to stay small, actually. That I’ve been able to make these last two films without anybody paying any fucking attention and just go off and have complete artistic freedom—what are you gonna trade that for? . . . . I’ll also say that I can’t think of a woman who has this benefit either: Lars von Trier and Terrence Malick can put out films and not have to go out and talk about them.”  
~ Kelly Reichardt

From an unstable childhood through her couch surfing New York days to her most productive years thus far, Kelly Reichardt’s life experiences have contributed to the methods she employs to sustain her career as a director. Her early experiences and concerns as they relate to her themes and characters are explored throughout this chapter. Reichardt’s brief reflections on her childhood, collected on the website *This Long Century*, reveal significant connections between her early years and her first feature film, *River of Grass*. Reichardt excels at introducing her native land, Dade County, and bringing its atmosphere to life. Todd Haynes, film director and longtime friend, interviewed Reichardt for *Bomb*, and his introduction confirms the connection:

*River of Grass* draws on stories and images from Kelly’s own hard-boiled upbringing in suburban Florida. But unlike most movies drawn from personal experience, *River of Grass* roundly rejects the sentimentality and political correctness often associated with confessional dramas—particularly those which focus on women.

While a mother figure is only briefly mentioned in the film, the father figure, Jimmy Ryder, seems to be loosely patterned after her own father who was a crime scene investigator: “My dad worked the midnight shift. His car had Dade County Crime Scene painted on the sides” (qtd. in Haynes).

Haynes mentions that all the crime scene detectives in *River of Grass* feel as if they are “floundering in their careers,” a result of Reichardt’s incorporating her family dynamics to help shape her characters: “For my character Ryder, it’s the job that he fell into. My dad and his friends had that attitude. They were all crime-scene technicians, the guys who show up after the action. Their job is about solving a mystery rather than laying down the law—which is more up my mom’s alley.” While she pokes fun at “crouching on the floor” of her mother’s work vehicle, there is very little discussion about her mother’s influence or involvement in Reichardt’s life except in relation to police work: “My mom carried her holster in her purse and in a pinch was as likely to pull out a ratty hairbrush as a 38 . . . [she] was an undercover narcotics agent and always had a different car – ones that were non-descript and which apparently you were not supposed to transport children in” (“Kelly Reichardt” 190). Since the justice system supported Reichardt’s childhood home, it is not surprising that she used her father’s real crime lab as a set model: “The crime-scene office in the film looked like the one I used to visit when I was a kid. My dad brought all that stuff over to where we were shooting and helped Dave Doernberg, our art director, recreate the old office” (qtd. in Haynes).

Reichardt recalls splitting her time between her parents as a youth. She would stay with her father on the weekends, and that meant getting to know his four roommates who were also divorced police officers: “They had these Sunday barbeques for all us kids who

were with them on weekends. Their dates were always hanging around and everybody would be drinking and playing smile-kill-ball in the pool” (qtd. in Haynes). Reichardt’s semblance of family stability seemed to disappear after her parent’s divorce, but her family grew when her father remarried; her second feature, one that failed to find funding, was based on her father and step-mother’s introduction (Haynes). One indicator of family issues is Reichardt’s casual mention that her missing step-brother was found during a trip to the local jail during the *River of Grass* shoot: “On day two they arrested our gaffer and confiscated all of our equipment. But that worked out for the best because when my dad went down to bail out Collin he found my step-brother who had been missing for a couple of weeks” (qtd. in Haynes). This seemingly off topic and blasé admission happens while Reichardt is answering a question about police interference in her project and the difficulties she experienced trying to get through the short shooting schedule. Not only do the frustrations of filmmaking fuel the themes in Reichardt’s works, but she has also channeled the issues that stem from a lack of family stability into her features.

Political ideas come into play in almost every interview with Kelly Reichardt about her life or films; similarly, her films reflect a concern about the state of America ranging from topics about the effect of specific presidential administrations, to corporate takeovers, to disaster preparedness. In an interview in 2006, Reichardt discussed the political suggestions associated with her second feature film: “‘*Old Joy*’ can stand for everything [such as]. . . . The death of liberalism in America. . . . *Old Joy* has a feeling of my generation at a total loss” (qtd. in Rowin). Spectators might feel a lack of political motivation or message when watching her films, but in reality they are an extension of

her strong political sentiments and questions. In another interview Reichardt sheds light on what started her interest in politics:

I was born during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency, . . . If you grew up in the Seventies you have a certain perspective. The president I remember the most is Jimmy Carter. My first political memories are of being in a pool party and having to get out of the pool to see Nixon resign. You have a sense of a certain justice or an ideal of liberalism during the Carter years as a positive phenomenon. (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega)

Reichardt's awareness of politics came early, so it is no surprise that it is a backdrop for most of her features.

Besides political commentary, representations of loneliness and instability are also pervasive in most of Reichardt's films. When Cozy, the protagonist in *River of Grass*, introduces her partner in crime, Leigh, she comments on loneliness, "I wondered if there was any other person on this planet that was as lonely as me; as it turned out there was, and he was living just a county away." Everyone in the film seems to be isolated and searching, as is Wendy, the protagonist in Reichardt's third feature, *Wendy and Lucy* (2008). Wendy lacks human support, a theme in the film, and by the end, she gives up her dog, Lucy, to a better more stable life with the last shot showing her leaving on a train in route to Alaska. However, Reichardt illustrates that being lonely does not mean being alone. In *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), the protagonist in her fourth feature, Emily, seems solitary though she is always in a group. Even the pioneer caravan isolates themselves from civilization as they get further and further lost in the desert. All three female

protagonists, whether alone or in a group, convey a sense of solitude and this quality might stem directly from Reichardt's experiences growing up:

I remember Thurston Moore recalling when he was visiting Miami in those years, seeing an ad in the Herald that said, 'if anyone has heard of The Clash, please call me.' That really gets across the isolation and general feeling of being a teenager in an endless string of sunny days in a city of retired people. ("Kelly Reichardt" 190).

While regret is not an emotion her cinematic characters reflect, Reichardt seems to regret her lost adolescent opportunities and experiences: "If only I could have stumbled into Andy Sweet's photographs or for that matter Stephen Shore's. Even if I had just seen some little bit of good art as a kid I think I could have had a whole different experience. If I had met anyone . . . that had heard of The Clash those years could have all been so different" ("Kelly Reichardt" 190). The inability to find relationships or role models to guide and encourage her art, such as photographers or musical artists, motivated Reichardt to search them out and eventually find them, but the impact of those years, the searching, loneliness, journey, and self-discovery, can be seen in all of her art.

If Reichardt drew from her youth to make her films, as evident in *River of Grass*, she seems to be on a mission to depict marginalized people's experiences and frustrations that are not unlike her own. In a 2008 interview with Reichardt, Gus Van Sant comments on a theme of decay throughout all her films: "in *Old Joy*, the decay of their friendship [is a theme]. And the decay is strongest in *Wendy and Lucy*. Falling into this abyss of hopelessness" (77). Reichardt never agrees with his assessment but does comment that the hopelessness she feels is conveyed in her endings. While there are elements of

hopelessness, loneliness, and decay in her characters' relationships, Van Sant hints that they stem from Reichardt's personal experiences. Rather than Mother's Records or Blue Note Records which are featured in *River of Grass*, however, Reichardt talks about her early jobs in record shops and the lack of housing and family decay:

Somewhere in the early 80's, having secured a job at Peaches Records and Tapes, I quit The Clog Shop on 163rd street and dropped out of high school. I was no longer living at either of my parent's houses (they divorced when I was eight) but was bouncing around between my friend's parent's houses, my grandmother's condo in a retirement village and pretty much blowing it in every situation I landed. The order of things gets a little foggy here but I did get my GED and enrolled in Miami Dade Community College. ("Kelly Reichardt" 190)

She started taking pictures of Miami and found encouragement for her art by winning "sixteen dollars" in a community college photography contest, but that didn't stop her from moving north and destroying them:

Within a week of being in Boston I enrolled in night classes at Mass Art and when I was invited to flop on a couple of the art-school kids couch, I was so totally fearful of them seeing my corny Miami photos that I destroyed them all. I remember tearing them up and throwing them in a dumpster on my way to buy some plaid trousers. I felt a real need to disassociate myself with all things Miami especially since the old timers and the Mahjong scene was being quickly replaced by *Miami Vice*, body builders and super tanned rollerbladers. ("Kelly Reichardt" 190)

Many of her interviews suggest that Reichardt felt as if she grew up in a cultural wasteland and her salvation was finding a supportive art culture in Boston and New York. No matter where Reichardt landed, she found friends and support networks to help her like fellow collaborator Susan Stover: “When I first knew Kelly, she was a couch surfer. . . . There were times when I kind of got worried, like, ‘What’s the end game here? What’s going to happen?’ It wasn’t for six months she couch surfed, it was years” (qtd. in Hornaday). Undoubtedly this nomadic life style helped inform the creation of her characters as many are also in liminal spaces searching for meaning and direction. *Wendy and Lucy* highlights a darker side of Reichardt’s transient situation as the protagonist, Wendy, does not have Reichardt’s friendly support system. In an interview in *Slant* magazine, Reichardt was asked if Wendy’s experience was based on hers: “I’ve been really broke. . . . Never hungry. I did live in New York for five years without an apartment, but I always ate. I’ve been as broke as Wendy, but I’ve always had more of a network of friends who were really generous to me” (qtd. in Stewart). That network of friends included very talented artists, musicians, and filmmakers such as Jesse Hartman, Todd Haynes, and Susan Stover and many more who ultimately supported each other through successful artistic collaborations.

While these connections served her well, in an interview with *Slant*, Reichardt discussed how she grew her “technical chops,” considering that she had very little formal film training: “figuring out how to make films all came between the 10 years between my two features. . . . I never went to film school, I never studied any of that stuff. I’m a high-school dropout” (qtd. in Stewart). But in reality Reichardt is being modest about her skill and training. In an interview with Todd Haynes, she says she attended Tufts University’s

School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where she created a trilogy of super-8 road movies. While these themes, especially the journey or quest, might stem from her early Miami years of searching for role models and artistic guidance, they also developed from family interactions. In an interview by Sam Adams from the A.V. Club, Reichardt sheds light on why her themes revolve around journeys, quests or have a “road movie” feel:

It’s a theme that started at the beginning [of my career], and I look back, and I guess it’s just a good setup for different kinds of searching: question-asking, looking for the next place to go, what are you looking for, what are you leaving. All those things are good for grounding it in getting from point A to point B.

The “searching” theme extends much further than physical movement as all her characters struggle to find themselves through inner journey. Spectators often empathize in an unsentimental way since these inner searches resonate universally. That practical side of Reichardt is evident when she emphasizes the need to ground “it in getting from point A to point B” and while she is referring on the one hand to narrative devices the “it” is also a reference to the human experience and struggle. Reichardt’s family summer vacations tended to involve road trips, as she told Adams:

Ever since I was a kid, we had one of those piggyback campers where you could ride up in the bed. . . . We would go from Miami to Montana pretty much every summer and take a different route out west. . . . We would camp our way across the country. And as it’s turned out, I continued doing that [i]n my 20s.



Reichardt takes the universal desire to experience freedom, progression, and learning, all elements found in a road trip or journey, and allows her spectators to live them through her films.

After graduating and working as a prop assistant on Todd Haynes's film, *Poison*, where the two met, Reichardt was convinced to start writing *River of Grass*. While they were co-directing a music video for the heavy metal band, Helmet, Jesse Hartman suggested she write a script set near Miami. It was also a road movie with Noir-detective threads, dark humor and a feminist sensibility. Reichardt recalls her resistance to writing the script: "All through making the video Jesse kept talking about writing a script down in Miami. . . . To me it was like, anywhere but there! It took me 19 years to get out of Miami: I didn't want to go back" (qtd. in Haynes). After her first film and an attempt at a second feature, both set close to her home, Reichardt set her other films in the northwest and took back the reins on her films.

Having learned from the obstacles she encountered filming her first feature, Reichardt is a filmmaker who creates on her terms. Her life experiences provide all the ingredients to produce a person who could thrive in a restrictive film industry since in which female directors are still battling to create and reach an audience on their terms. Only "4.4 percent of Hollywood's top 100 studio movies are directed by a woman in any given year," and while the independent sector offers more support with "34 percent" at the 2013 Sundance Film festival, there is still a long way to go (Murty). It was Reichardt's early experiences making feature films that contributed to her model of filmmaking, one that can be an inspiration to others. In an interview with *Bomb* she discusses making her first feature film:

I had written this script, lived with it and raised the money, yet I still had to go to the set each day and defend my post as director. It was the first time in my life that I was like, Oh, I get it, this is happening because I'm a five-foot-tall female—I wasn't given the benefit of the doubt. . . . I fought for every shot in my film, which is such a drain and something I wasn't prepared for. (qtd. in Haynes)

Like many of her characters and fellow female filmmakers, Reichardt has to struggle to assert herself and push past obstacles.

While *River of Grass* was appreciated in reviews by *The Village Voice* touting it as “one of the year’s smartest indies,” those reviews did not help her find funding for her next project, *The Royal Court*. Reichardt moved to Los Angeles in hopes of finding support for her film and instead found multiple road blocks that led to a dead end. She explained that in addition to being pegged as a “woman director” who created “women’s films” the death nail was an African American female protagonist and that acted ‘like double dynamite’” (qtd. in Hornaday). This attitude about women directors and female protagonists is not new. In her 2008 study, “Women @ the Box Office: A Study of the Top 100 Worldwide Grossing Films,” Lauzen begins her report by stating that a leading Hollywood studio executive allegedly declared there was no room for female protagonists in movies as they were bad for the box office; she goes on to quote *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis as responding: “it is hard to believe that anyone in a position of Hollywood power would be so stupid as to actually say what many in that town think: Women can’t direct. Women can’t open movies. Women are a niche.” Reichardt’s reiterates Dargis’s point by mentioning the feedback, during her search for

funding on *The Royal Court*: “everything always started with, ‘I don’t make the rules’” (qtd. in Hornaday). Her associate producer on *River of Grass* and *Ode*, Susan Stover, explained that Reichardt “was annoyed with herself that she went down that path, where ‘I’ll call you in a couple of days’ becomes weeks becomes months becomes it never happens” (qtd. in Hornaday). These difficult experiences motivated Reichardt to create independently of the studio system or even their “independent” branches. Abandoning feature filmmaking, she went back to Super-8 shorts with minimal crews which helped create her minimalistic aesthetic.

After *The Royal Court* was dropped, Reichardt filmed *Ode*, her 48 minute short based on Bobbie Gentry’s song “Ode to Billie Joe” with a crew of four in one week: “‘There I was . . . standing outside in North Carolina with my good friend, [Susan Stover] holding the camera and hearing that loud lawn-mover sound, with two actors, just making something. It was just this huge epiphany: I’ll just find another way to make films’” (qtd. in Hornaday). Following that philosophy, Reichardt went on to make *Then, A Year* (2002) and *Travis* (2004), two short films with little to no crew, but the desire to stay completely minimalistic subsided when she was introduced to Jon Raymond’s novel *The Half-Life*. In an interview with Gus Van Sant, Reichardt comments, “[i]t’s my dream to someday make it [*The Half-Life*] into a film but it can’t exactly be done in any small way” and that “small way” is a hallmark of her filmmaking model. Keeping her costs low by adapting minimalistic stories contributes to Reichardt’s aesthetic but also reflects her earlier filmmaking trials: “The smaller-gauge work was freeing because there wasn’t any expectation put on me” (qtd. in Van Sant).

Another element of Reichardt's filmmaking model was her decision, at Todd Haynes' encouragement, to begin a teaching career; teaching first at the School of Visual Arts, in New York and then Columbia and SUNY Buffalo led not only to personal financial independence but helped her continue her independent filmmaking and culminated in her position as an Artist in Residence in Film and Electronic Arts at Bard College. She told *Slant* magazine:

I had my eye on Bard College for a long time. . . . and it's really special for me to be there. Teaching has taught me a lot, it's put me around people who are smarter than me. It's turned me on to things to read that I wouldn't know to read. The students come in and they've traveled all over the world and they've read everything and they turn me on to stuff I just never caught on to. (qtd. in Stewart)

In short, Reichardt finds making low budget films in a private way gives her the most satisfaction since it is lower risk and allows for artistic freedom and control. Teaching is one way she is able to sustain her creativity without soliciting Hollywood financing: "I had this great epiphany when I was standing in a field with friends making an art project [*Ode*]. It was like, how do I structure my world around this? *This* is satisfying. *This* is the pinnacle" (qtd. in Stewart). Reichardt explained: "That's why I started teaching, I just said to myself, how can I sustain something like this, where I have some money to make some films . . . the key is that I personally don't have a personality with the flexibility to make that system that does exist [Hollywood] work for me" (qtd. in Stewart). Reichardt might be hinting at the co-optation of creative talent and vision into more commercialized and marketable or "safe" content than Hollywood or its vintage branch studios require.

While accepting studio funding might be easier, it is a high price to pay creatively for female filmmakers whose narrative films tend to feature thought provoking content over typical, action-packed storylines.

With financing issues and artistic vision sometimes at odds, indie directors have to be creative when tracking down funding. One tactic is to find film tax credit incentives that help fund costs if the movie is filmed in a specific state, such as Pennsylvania. At its height, Pennsylvania's film tax credit program was funded with 75 million dollars and while the investment changes depending on political climate and party affiliations, the state has benefited from the additional income the films create (Dunkle). Because of the state's proximity to New York City, independent directors can find talented actors, as Mary Haverstick found when she took advantage of the program and directed *Home* in 2008 (Dunkle). Film tax credit programs might seem like small change compared to the budget Hollywood independent subdivisions used to offer independent filmmakers who circulated their movies at film festivals.

In his article, "*Never Say Never, Insurge Pictures, and the Future of Independent Film*," Robert Sickels summarizes the 2008 collapse of four studio systems' independent film branches. Paramount Vantage, Miramax, Picturehouse and Warner Independent Pictures created a bidding war, paid too much for festival films, and caused a surge in production costs, which ultimately resulted in the shutdown or selling off of studio sponsored independent film producing branches. While the collapse caused a setback within the independent film sector, like any restriction placed on artists, it also created opportunity through creativity and collaboration. Because Reichardt chooses to work with several small independent production and distribution companies for all of her films,

such as, but not limited to, *Glass Eye Pix* (1995), *Filmscience* (2005) and *Oscilloscope* (2006), she is able to continue filmmaking while adjusting to reduced opportunities.

Some independent filmmakers offset these funding needs by choosing only to distribute their films electronically, but now even they have another option, an online theater with audience interaction provided by the Constellation TV (Hart). Two independent filmmakers, James Lawler, director of 2010 film *The Lottery*, and Reid Carolin, producer for Kimberly Peirce's 2008 film *Stop-Loss*, co-founded Constellation TV; while at the Sundance film festival, they were inspired to create a presence on the Web to host a Q & A session during and after the films (Hart). The audience buys a ticket to the virtual movie theater and that includes access to the director. While independent film production companies and interactive screening via the web create avenues for independent filmmaking, if the desire is a wide distribution or a popular audience, male and female directors alike have to keep gambling on the Hollywood studio system for now.

Success for Reichardt means something very different than it does for more commercial independent filmmakers or those who work in the studio system. Though her perseverance and hard work, Reichardt has shown her model of filmmaking can be extremely fulfilling: "I want to not have to go through development, to not have to deal with agents, to not have to deal with lawyers, to not have to show anybody my script, to not have to read script notes when I really don't want them, to not have anyone look at a cut of my film and then give notes when I really don't want them" (qtd. in Stewart). In other words, Reichardt's definition of success equals complete artistic freedom, and so far she has thrived in this model. She prefers a private method of filmmaking as she reiterates in her interviews: "If you could make films and then put them out and not have

to reveal anything about yourself, that would be, for me, total dream success. . . . I don't like getting dressed up. I don't like getting my picture taken. I don't want to talk about myself. I like my privacy" (qtd. in Stewart). Success to Reichardt means creating art with no outside interference and having the luxury that many filmmakers lose when funded by Hollywood—total control over their films. According to Jennie Rose, Reichardt may be one of the few who have stopped using a patriarchal measuring stick for success and is now one of the “women creating stories, budgets and pictures, who go for a different brass ring or no brass ring at all. They've had to invent their own way to measure their worth.”

### Chapter III: Precursor— *River of Grass*

“If we aren’t killers, we aren’t anything.” ~ Cozy

“These are not commercial films. But this way, the movie is done with I say it is. . . I have the kind of freedom you can only have by not taking too much money.”  
~ Kelly Reichardt

Kelly Reichardt’s first feature film, *River of Grass* (1995), is an interesting mix of realism and minimalism but also demonstrates an experimentalism that aligns her with an older feminist counter-cinematic tradition. This chapter will explore how Reichardt addresses theoretical film concepts such as the “male gaze” by emphasizing the female look and employs Godardian techniques to remind viewers they are watching a construction of reality. In interviews about *River of Grass*, she details the work that went into a micro-budget film and explains the environmental and political messages woven throughout. As with all her films, Reichardt’s decision to stay completely independent affected the look, content, and popularity of her work, but even more importantly, the production methodology of her first feature served as a foundation for her future filmmaking model and her auteur qualities.

Making a film is far from simple, especially if it is a first feature, but micro-budget filmmaking holds its own benefits and challenges. Reichardt has been able to keep complete artistic control of her films by working in the independent sector and making films with a small budget; she went into filmmaking with some experience since she worked in the art department for several independent films such as Hal Hartley’s *The Unbelievable Truth* (1991) and Todd Haynes’s *Poison* (1991) in addition to co-directing a music video for the heavy metal band, Helmet. Reichardt recalls in an interview: “I



worked on a lot of people's first film . . . I thought I could work this hard on my own film" (qtd. in Plante). Reichardt's hard work paid off when she was one of the sixteen out of six hundred entries accepted to the 1994 Sundance Film Festival (Fick). The film was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize in the dramatic category at Sundance, and two years later Reichardt and her protagonist, Lisa Bowman, were nominated for several more, at least five nominations total, but none were awarded ("Awards"). Reichardt's frustration can be heard in a 2011 interview when she says "the door wasn't open" for her as it was for other first time directors and their films such as Kevin Smith's *Clerks* and David Russell's *Spanking the Monkey* (Longworth). Admittedly, these films stand apart in content and focus considering that Reichardt has a female protagonist and highlights female oriented concerns and issues.

*River of Grass* may be the only road movie whose characters never travel out of their own town. Interlaced with Noir, crime thriller, and comedic elements, the film keeps audiences guessing, a central feature of Reichardt's mixed genre film. The road movie, a very male genre, is turned upside down and inside out by offering a rebellious female variation with little to no violence and almost no real travel. At first glance the plot seems to resemble road movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Natural Born Killers*, but Reichardt is playing off of male genre conventions to create a strikingly unconventional protagonist in Cozy, one who "passively" contradicts all the notions of what Western women should aspire to— marriage, motherhood and domesticity. This type of protagonist is seen again in Reichardt's fourth feature, *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), which is arguably a feminist Western with a female protagonist who, like Cozy, steps out of her socially dictated role. In *River of Grass*, audiences are introduced to Cozy, a married mother of three, through her voice-

over exposition and she continues her narration throughout the film. Cozy meets a single and directionless Lee, the film's other main character, at a bar and they go on "the lam" believing they accidentally shot and killed a man. Jimmy Rider is Cozy's father who, along with the help of his co-workers, all crime scene detectives, try to track down Cozy and piece together what caused Lee and his daughter to flee. Reichardt discusses the difficulty of creating a "rebel character" during an age when everyone is encouraged to rebel: "We talked about the idea of updating the rebel character in the context of a road movie. We wondered how the lone-rebel, a fixture in every road movie, could exist in the '90s when even the Burger King slogan tells you to 'Break the Rules'" (qtd. in Haynes). By switching the gender of the rebel and highlighting female taboos in a traditionally male genre, Reichardt found an alternative formula.

In an interview, Reichardt explained that she sees independent filmmaking as a way for underrepresented people to have a voice and *River of Grass*, along with her other films, creates space for topics and behaviors that are taboo for women:

I think independent cinema is really about representing the part of the population that's not represented through mainstream media. In America we rarely look beyond the middle classes, and I think we're really not the sort of people, as a nation, to talk to about poor people. To me, that's what the heart of alternative art and independent cinema was born from, giving a voice to other parts of the population. (qtd. in Woodward)

Cozy represents segments of the "other parts" of American population—poor and female. While all the characters in *River of Grass* are poor working class, Cozy represents a mother figure who also deals with post-partum depression and extreme loneliness. In

many ways, Cozy's struggles represent Reichardt's ordeal while making the film. Reichardt suggests the connection between production and the film's content when discussing the ending in which Cozy becomes disenchanted enough to shoot Lee: "The film used to have a different ending. The way it ends now is a direct result of my experience in making the film. Cozy gets to play out my fantasy which is what gets her to the other side of all the bullshit—where, by the way, we both find out there's just more bullshit" (qtd. in Haynes).

Another theme, one that is more subtly explored is environmentalism and the impact of development on lower class populations. Reichardt's title connects the film to Florida, as it references the Everglades, but her use of a Native American name for the area reminds audiences where the land came from as explained in Cozy's narration:

Most tourists visit the Miami area for its beaches on the east coast, but if you ever mistakenly get on the Palmetto Expressway and headed west—you'd run right into the Florida Everglades—an area that Indians like to call the river of grass. People used to think this area was uninhabitable but more and more it is becoming civilized. And they say that within two years there will be a shopping center every fifteen miles.

Reichardt's dialog suggests that this area of Florida is hidden away and that tourists find it by mistake, underscoring how the land, like the people it represents, has been marginalized. The word "civilized" is reminiscent of the missionary work in the American west that ultimately lead to a systemized stripping away of cultural values and traditions of Native American communities. Furthering this connection, Cozy reminds us that the Everglades are slowly turning into retail space, and like the loss of indigenous

cultures, the slow degradation of an important environmental habitat will have a global effect. Right before Cozy's explanation, Reichardt juxtaposes a peaceful scene with an African American couple pulling a fish from the water on the bank of the Everglades with a 180-degree camera turn to show a four-lane Florida highway with cars speeding past. With these two scenes, audiences see the result of an excessive capitalistic appetite that ultimately depletes and destroys nature's resources. The following scenes show the extreme measures needed to bend nature to human progress as Cozy drives by miles of construction sites that look like a moonscape with barren, burnt earth piled high by bulldozers. The final scene in this sequence is a manicured green space, used to divide the highway, with tall palm trees and ball shaped green bushes. Reichardt is making a comment about her home and how the destruction of a natural resource that helped define it is not only a loss to the environment but to the lower working class population that might have depended on it for sustainability.

While the film illustrates Reichardt's concern for her native environment, she had to be convinced by her producer, Jesse Hartman, to return home to Miami to shoot the film. There are many obstacles for a micro-budget production but having regular police interference that begins with equipment confiscation is a difficult place to start:

Miami boasts about being film-friendly. Well, if you're Stallone I'm sure they're plenty friendly. But they don't have a concept of low-budget filmmaking. So there were these constant run-ins with the cops. It was ironic because here we were shooting a film where Cozy and Lee are on the run, and meanwhile the Miami cops actually tried to arrest Lisa Bowman on a daily basis. To be fair she was driving around Dade County

waving a prop gun. . . . Nineteen days [for the shoot]. On day two they arrested our gaffer and confiscated all of our equipment. (qtd. in Haynes)

As with all films, actors also come with limitations, and Cozy, played by Lisa Bowman, only had seven days to be on set before heading back to waitress at Two Boots in New York; the silver lining, however, is that it caused Reichardt to make interesting adjustments to the opening scenes:

I knew when we were still in Miami that it [seven days with Bowman] wasn't going to be enough. I wanted there to be some sort of a history in the beginning but I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to do. So I was writing different things and I'd lay them in my voice for the time being . . . I eventually replaced everything with photographs but there is still one piece of Super-8 footage in the opening, the make-out scene. . . . Then we shot the hatchet scene here in New York in my friend's apartment.

The yearlong search for Cozy was an unconventional aspect of the production of *River of Grass*. Even though Reichardt at first looked for the standard young female to play her lead role, she eventually found that casting an older woman contributed to the realism of the film:

I told her [Bowman] I was looking for a younger version of her for my film, so the next time I saw her she gave me this old head shot she had had taken when she was about 19. I right away thought, Wow, that's Cozy, I'll have to find someone just like her. So I carried that photo of Lisa around with me for a year. Then when we were driving down to Florida to do some local casting I started thinking about Cozy being older—closer to

my own age, I was 29 at the time. It was an age I could better relate to and it also meant Lisa could play the role. (qtd. in Haynes)

In addition to casting believable characters, Reichardt puts the working class areas of Miami and its population on screen: “Whenever it was possible we would use real people from each location, like the workers at the bus station or the cashier at the convenience store” (qtd. in Haynes). Not only does this compliment the realistic elements of the film but it is essential in micro-budget filmmaking. In an interview, Reichardt, emphasizes her debut as a filmmaker and discusses her process: “If you watch *River of Grass* you’ll see I haven’t quite figured it [filmmaking] out. I didn’t know about screenplay structure. I was just breaking down movies I liked on note cards and trying to figure out the rhyme or reason of it” (qtd. in Pante). But *River of Grass* is clearly a film that deconstructs, among other things, genre, gender, and film technique and with her next sentence there is a humorous self-admission of her talent: “Not that I would have thought of any of those words at the time” (qtd. in Pante). Reichardt might not have been able to label her filmmaking methods when she created *River of Grass*, but many of her scenes, through content and form, reflect an innate ability to address the female perspective, negate the “male gaze,” and offer a feminist counter-cinema.

Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” drew upon psychoanalysis, film, and feminist theory to suggest that the “male gaze” inherent in classical Hollywood films placed spectators in a voyeuristic position, objectifying and fetishizing women on screen. In an effort to offer an alternative perspective, Mulvey called for the creation of a counter-cinema. To achieve this, feminist filmmakers used many of the 1960’s French New Wave methods such as fragmented and deconstructed

narratives. One goal in feminist counter-cinema is to remind viewers, through self-reflexive strategies, that they are watching a film and to offer a feminist alternative to the mainstream. While there is no doubt that Mulvey's article transformed film theory, her ideas created controversy. In her 1983 book, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, E. Ann Kaplan comments, in reference to Mulvey, that "female characters can possess the look and even make the male character the object of her gaze, but, being a woman, her desire has no power . . . to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position" (30). Kaplan also suggested that because of a patriarchal social construction, a female look was difficult if not impossible to depict. Jackie Stacey in her 1987 article, "Desperately Seeking Difference" stated that "feminist film critics have written the darkest scenario possible for the female look as being male, masochist or marginal" (Cook 495). A handful of feminist critics agreed with Stacey, such as Gaylyn Studlar, who saw the possibility of female spectator pleasure through Hollywood's female characterization of the vamp or the femme fatale: "the sexual ambivalence of the vamp . . . allows for a female homoerotic pleasure that is not exclusively negotiated through the eyes of men," and Studlar argued "that visual pleasure in cinema resembles more the psychic processes of masochism than of sadism," thus allowing female viewers to escape the male gaze and "identify with and draw pleasure from the powerful femme fatale" (qtd. in Cook 495). While Studlar agreed with Stacey that Mulvey had painted a dark and limited picture for female spectator pleasure, Studlar also seemed to limit pleasure to specific types of female characters.

In 1991 feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane contributed the idea of the female masquerade. Drawing from Mulvey's theories, Doane suggested that voyeurism naturally

creates a barrier or distance and “the female spectator lacks this necessary distance because she is the image. She is consumed by the image instead of consuming it” (Cook 494). Doane concluded that the only way a woman could find pleasure in spectatorship is by creating a mask of femininity so she too could separate herself from the female images on screen, but in doing so, Doane argued, female spectators fell back into a male gaze, especially in melodrama, since the possibility of “overidentification” leads to “destroying the distance to the object of desire and turning the active desire of both the female character and the female spectator into the passive desire. [Therefore] [m]ere ‘desire to desire’ seems to be, then the only option for women” (Cook 495). The debate about female spectator pleasure continues to be discussed by many feminist film theorists such as Claire Johnston, Molly Haskell, bell hooks, and Ruby Rich, who pull away from psychoanalysis and focus on female representation, identity, and perspective. Current theorists also opened the conversation to include women of color and a diverse range of sexual orientations, the lack of which was one criticism of early feminist film research.

Kelly Reichardt contributes to the discussion of female spectator pleasure by using feminist counter-cinema techniques to construct female subjectivity and featuring female protagonists, highlighting women’s issues, and creating scenes that emphasize human connections through relationships instead of actions. These featured relationships are also free of traditional heterosexual romance plots since the focus in all her films revolves around working through issues or situations. In Reichardt’s films, female spectators are not compelled to “consume” their own image, as Doane argues happens in classical Hollywood films. Instead female spectators look at, identify with, and enjoy a centralized female image working through issues that transcend gender. Reichardt



emphasizes gender and gender relationships without creating an overt didactic feminist agenda like many 1970s feminist counter-cinema directors. There is no question that her first film, *River of Grass*, fits into a feminist tradition as it is about breaking barriers and inverting or playing against notions of the male gaze.

In *River of Grass*, Reichardt turns traditional filmmaking forms that take away female power and voice upside down so they highlight “woman” as subject. According to feminist-Marxist film theorist Christine Gledhill: “Devices such as the close-up or voice-over construct meaning less by what they show or say than by the way they organize the female image into a patriarchal position, or, conversely, offer textual opportunities for resistance” (114). Cozy’s voice-over narration in exposition scenes and throughout the film place her in control of the spectator’s experience, and as it is not filmed in first person, the voice-over serves to pull the audience back into her consciousness and remind them she is telling her story. This organization of “the female image” situates the film within the feminist theoretical conversation about realism and antirealism. While the 1970’s feminist film theorists called for “realism as the responsible goal of art and entertainment seeking to counteract the false stereotypes of capitalist and patriarchal culture,” many socially conscious artists worked toward “[a]lternative practice[s that] espoused a combative antirealism” (Gledhill 115).

Of all Reichardt’s features, *River of Grass* is her most experimental film and openly counters the patriarchal perspective of traditional cinema with an “alternative practice.” Cozy reminds viewers of their voyeurism through shots that feature her direct eye contact, and Reichardt disrupts the narrative through “foregrounding,” a term Peter Wollen explains in his article, “Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent D’est,” with still

photography, grainy super-8 film footage, and segmented chapters to make “the mechanics of the film/text visible and explicit” (501). *River of Grass* opens with audio of Cozy’s expositional voiceover while audiences are shown eight photographs woven in between four moving short segments, one on super-8. Thirty-three minutes later, viewers are given the first of four unexpected narrative breaks as the scene abruptly cuts to a black screen. The only indication that there is a segmenting of the narrative into chapters is that the black screens are numbered, one through four, each with increasing bullet holes beside the corresponding number. There is no narrative or time oriented pattern to predict when the segmenting chapter screens will appear, but each is preceded with Ryder’s drum beats. In an effort to explain why a filmmaker like Reichardt would use foregrounding in the way that Godard did, Wollen suggests the director “is looking for a way of expressing negation,” and “once the decision is made to consider a film as a process of writing in images, rather than a representation of the world, then it becomes possible to conceive of scratching the film as an erasure, a virtual negation” (502).

By exposing the filmmaking process to her audience through experimentation with “image-building’ as a kind of pictography, in which images are liberated from their role as elements of representation” (Wollen 502), Reichardt has created the least realistic feature film in her collection. In other words, Wollen points to the issue that image sequences in a film are “the problem of finding an image to signify” an emotion or thought such as oppression. Exposing this process results in a form of metacognition since the film is acknowledging its image’s failure to “signify.” Audiences see Reichardt’s “pictography” through the still photography in the opening sequence, the extended images of nature, and her decision to use numbered, black screen dividers to section off

the last half of the film. As Cozy narrates her taboo desire for a “nice couple in a station wagon to come pick her kids up” and take them away for good, viewers are watching ants crawling on the sidewalk or viewing an abrupt cut to a black numbered chapter and witnessing the inability of an image to signify her oppression. Although Reichardt moves away from this type of experimental filmmaking almost completely with her next feature, *Old Joy*, the desire to continue producing films that use foregrounding is obvious in her short experimental films, *Then A Year* (2002) and *Travis* (2004). Her strong desire to teach at Bard College is also a sign that she keeps experimental filmmaking close to her heart, as the school excels in producing and prompting experimentation in film.

In *River of Grass*, Reichardt offers alternative views of relationships through gender role reversals and taboo reactions to motherhood, parenting, crime, and heterosexuality. Subverting the male gaze, Reichardt creates a female character who steps outside of socially acceptable boundaries by performing taboo actions. As Judith Butler contends, gender is a social construct that is performed: “gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior ‘self,’ whether that ‘self’ is conceived as sexed or not.<sup>1</sup> As performance which is performative, gender is an ‘act’” (279), and Cozy is not acting out her socially scripted motherhood role. Cozy is not a traditional or even socially acceptable mother; she has no problem leaving her two youngest children crying in a play pen while she does cartwheels and stretches in the yard next to them. During a morning scene, breakfast consists of dry fruit loops in a Tupperware bowl, coke in a baby bottle, and smoke wafting from Cozy’s cigarette; the only parental image during the scene shows Bobby, her husband, holding their middle

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<sup>1</sup> See Judith Butler *Undoing Gender* for further discussion of performative gender.

child in his lap while carefully feeding him baby food. The gender role reversal in parenting is intentional and overt; Cozy smokes and carelessly hands soda to her youngest, she has a full plate of food in front of her, and Bobby is dressed for work, has no food, and lavishes attention on the child in his lap.

Post-partum depression and lack of interest in children by mothers are not topics women discuss openly or admit to publicly. Reichardt inspiration's for Cozy lies in seeing her sister deal with motherhood: "It was partly seeing my sister go through her pregnancy. . . . She didn't know if she was ready to give everything else up. But as soon as she'd express any of that, whoever was around would immediately shush her up, as if it were sacrilegious to even think that way—'Of course you'll love giving everything up!'" (qtd. in Haynes). If the breakfast images are not enough to convey the gender role reversals, Cozy's voice over says it all:

I've heard it said that the mother child bond begins at birth; for me this never occurred. And on some days, I'd sit at my window for hours, just waiting for a nice couple in a big station wagon to come and take these kids away. Too much daydreaming left me blue, so while Bobby worked day and night, I stayed home and tried to make the best of my time.

After Cozy narrates the breakfast scene, the camera cuts to her doing cartwheels in her living room that evening and when finished, she takes three bows to her pretend audience with a half-smile simulating pride in her performance. The scene feels unnaturally extended, as many in the film do when Reichardt is experimenting with "slow cinema" techniques, but it allows spectators to fully take in Cozy's lonely and unfulfilled life as a mother. She has what Betty Friedan in her foundational work *The Feminine Mystic* would

call “the problem that has no name.” While Cozy does not belong to the suburban housewife socioeconomic category that fits many of the women Friedan interviewed, she is clearly performing her role as a mother with little joy or interest. Cozy acts her part as a girl, woman, and mother, but they do not suit her and depression ensues. When Cozy leaves her home to have a beer at a local bar, a stationary camera centers on her sleeping infant while she walks into the frame, around the baby, and quietly picks up her purse, tiptoeing out the front door. Spectators realize that she is leaving her small child alone at home as the door closes and the camera lingers on an angelically sleeping baby. While this scene is intentionally shocking, and, as Todd Haynes points out in an interview, risky since viewers may dislike Cozy for her parental decisions, it highlights a motif concerning the lack of parental guidance and a theme of childhood neglect. Reichardt asks whether parents dictate their children’s behavior or if events simply happen by chance. Earlier in the film, Cozy’s concern about her daughter’s future and her mother’s influence echoes this theme: “They say that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree . . . . would my daughter grow up only to wear my shoes; did my mother’s life create my destiny?”

While Cozy’s narration at the beginning of the film states that her mother left the family at an early age, it is not until Lee and Cozy escape to a hotel and begin to discuss their childhood that audiences learn more about her role models for parenting. Cozy describes the fight she heard between her parents when, on vacation, they stopped at an RV park in their camper van: “I could hear her outside yelling, ‘Jimmy this is the devil. I want you to come out and play with me.’ And my dad yelled out, ‘And this is God and if you don’t just shut up I’m going to strike you dead.’ I rode the whole way home in the

back of the camper, not even knowing my mom wasn't with us." After her mother leaves, presumably, Cozy's father transforms into a very maternal figure, adopting abandoned animals from his crime scenes, insisting she attend a Catholic church, and making her go to weekly confessionals. In other words, the stereotypical gender roles reverse with the mother leaving the family and the father adopting religion to cope with raising a daughter: "Dad was never a religious man but after mom left, he decided to raise me Catholic." Lee adds to the theme of parental tales a few scenes later by stating that his father remarried his mother for the second time and on their honeymoon, stood up, drink in hand, fully dressed, and drowned himself in the ocean. His mother subsequently supported them by marrying different men but recently has been in a "slump" or they would not be living at his grandmother's home. In addition to creating characters who perform the opposing gender's socially dictated roles, Reichardt also rigorously excludes sentimentality from her script and character depiction. While this lack of sentimentality is found in all her films and is arguably an auteur quality, she explains her methods for *River of Grass*: "I had planned on having it so that whenever any character would open up and reveal something of themselves, nobody would be listening and that got carried over — really every intimate moment was spent alone" (qtd. in Haynes).

While Reichardt's feminist counter-cinema is evident through gender role reversals, it is also shown through denying traditional stereotypes and creating powerless men. This lack of internal or external power fills the content of her film while she emphasizes it, and in the process negates the male gaze, through her fragmented shots, framing, lack of male eyeline matches, and female-oriented point of view shots. Throughout the film, Ryder's co-workers, Bobby, Ryder, and Lee repeatedly illustrate an

emotional or physical lack which is underscored through their fragmented representation. Audiences see only parts of the male characters' bodies, as when Lee is driving, cut in half by door frames and bar counters, or shown getting a tattoo on a body part. Ryder is also halved by bar counters but mainly his drum set, and Bobby is seen only three times but never occupying the whole screen. When their bodies are seen in their entirety, it is from a distance with either Cozy's cartwheels or traffic separating viewers from the male characters. Even minor characters, such as Ryder's fellow crime scene detectives, seem inert as they follow Cozy and Lee's trail with no substantial progress even though Lee, Ryder, and a fellow detective cross paths in a local record store. As if to underscore this point, Reichardt has Ryder's co-worker pull Cozy and her children over onto the side of the road only to "pass the time" and casually discuss family issues. While this scene is seemingly irrelevant, it serves as another example that the men in *River of Grass* are stagnant and powerless.

While Bobby holds down two jobs and seems to be a responsible parent, he is simultaneously characterized as a person with no aspirations who is easily manipulated by his wife. Bobby seems to have chosen a life in a loveless marriage and insisted on having three children even though there was obviously no desire to do so from his partner. In a shared scene between Ryder and Bobby, after they discover Cozy left the children home alone, Ryder asks if they had a fight and Bobby replies: "Yeah I guess, more like an argument really." Ryder's questioning look toward Bobby expresses what the audience is thinking—with five lines in the entire film, Bobby has nothing important to share. Both men's bodies are fragmented as each holds an infant and the camera

virtually renders Bobby invisible as audiences mainly see the back of his head. Bobby could easily fit into the mother or wife role of a classical Hollywood melodrama.

While Ryder is featured much more on screen than Bobby, he still exudes defeat. One example of Ryder's powerlessness is when he takes a woman home from a bar, at her suggestion; the next morning instead of talking with her, he plays drums while she puts on make-up. Audiences have already established Ryder's lack of power since; during his introductory scene he is unable to stop a bar robbery because he is unable to find his gun or catch up to the criminal during a chase. When he stops in his chase and finds no gun in his holster, the camera pans down from his waist to show the ocean waves breaking on his feet; Ryder is literally and metaphorically washed up before the film even begins.

Lee consistently proves his inability to progress in life and Reichardt's cinematic techniques emphasize his lack. All of Lee's attempts to break the law fail; finding rather than stealing a gun, being unable to initiate a robbery and getting punched in the process, and failing to run through a tollbooth stop or resist questioning from a condescending state patrol officer. In all three of these scene sequences, Lee is permitted only two point of view shots or eyeline matches, resulting in a distancing effect for spectators. The camera is purposely held away from Lee so that audiences view him objectively, or often, as in the patrol officer scene, they view the events from Cozy's position. A manifestation of this ineffectuality is illustrated when Lee is locked out of his grandmother's house. Not only is he emasculated by living with his mother at his grandmother's home and abiding by their rules, he is unsuccessful getting back into her house when she changes the locks which gives her time to throw out all of his belongings. Audiences watch from a low



angle camera shot as he beats on her door and finally gives up. Lee is rendered homeless within half a day and, with no prospects or desire to move forward, he joins the other impotent men in Reichardt's film; in fact, instead of just joining the other male characters in their ineffectuality, he leads them. During the film's climax Cozy, driving with gun in hand, shoots Lee while he is in mid-sentence. Cozy is framed in the center of the shot until after she uses the gun and then the camera cuts to show her shutting the door after she pushes Lee's dead body out of the car. Not only does Reichardt's framing place Cozy in a position of power, but Lee is heard and framed in ways that suggest he is and has always been a peripheral character.

*River of Grass* provides alternatives to a heterosexual romance and subverts audience expectations not only about the leads' relationship but also about female behavior and desire. In many reviews, Lee and Cozy are compared to *Bonnie and Clyde* or labeled as "expectant lovers" who flirt at first sight, but on closer inspection, these descriptions are far from reality. *River of Grass* does not fit into any romanticized version of a road movie or Noir because Cozy is interested only in herself. She is not smitten by, does not seek approval or attention of, and is not dominated by any male figure. Cozy does trade her autonomy for human connection when she leaves with Lee, however, and Reichardt uses this to deconstruct the road movie genre. Cozy and Lee's inability to break through their individual loneliness and make emotional connections during their time together causes them to stagnate in Broward county without any hope of achieving real movement or progression in their situation—one convention of the road movie genre. Reviewer David Liu makes an effective comparison when he says, "Reichardt's protagonists . . . are Bonnie and Clyde for the slacker generation,

imperfectly embodying the latter's particular brand of pop-culture nihilism: 'If we weren't killers, we weren't anything.'" That "anything" includes any type of romantic or sexual relationship. Cozy never at any point seems taken with Lee. In their initial conversation, Lee attempts to be assertive by asking Cozy if he can buy her a drink, but he botches it in a moment of insecurity, when he mumbles that the purpose of his gesture is to apologize for nearly hitting her with his car. Lee seems to want to make connections and build relationships with others, but he, like the other men in the film, are completely incapable. The next scene shows them sitting together while Cozy dances in her seat, drinking a free beer, and barely noticing Lee next to her. In his unsuccessful attempts to impress Cozy, Lee empties the contents of his wallet in a grandiose style and Cozy asks, "Is that supposed to impress me?" In his next attempt, he displays his arm, emblazoned with a recent "Mom" tattoo, and she points to a picture of his mother from the wallet and says, "Mom? We already have mom here." Lee represents the Freudian idea that men look for mother figures in their relationships, and Cozy not only flatly rejects this role but finds it comical as indicated in her laughing response. The evening at the bar ends with both sitting, staring forward with no interaction, lost in reflection on their unhappy and limiting lives.

Being in "limbo" becomes a theme for all the characters in the film as none make progress or even hope to in any way whether it is socioeconomic, parental, physically or emotionally. It is during the bar scene that Lee describes himself as being in limbo and Cozy replies, "Limbo--that sounds nice." Reichardt places Cozy in two scenes where she appears to be balancing between two worlds, creating a visual limbo. The first is at the opening of the film when Cozy is half submerged in her bathtub, floating silently and

still. Spectators are confronted with Cozy staring back at them, aware of her audience. Her voiceover narration stings, reminding viewers they are voyeurs looking at a living, feeling woman during what should be a private moment. In her voice over, Cozy contemplates the violent history of the prior female owner of her home, who killed her husband: “I often thought about this woman and wondered what made her act so violently. I guess it wasn’t any one big thing but a lot of little things that just grow deeper and deeper under our skin.” The combination of Cozy’s direct eye contact with the camera, the suggestion of unhappiness in women’s lives, the word “skin,” and her naked body floating in limbo, creates a cyclical mini-narrative about women’s lives all before the film actually begins.

One thread in that narrative returns to Reichardt’s use of feminist counter-cinema and rejection of the male gaze. Cozy stares back at the camera as it invades her private space with an accusatory wrinkle in her brow and flat but knowing eyes. While viewers of both genders squirm in their seats, having been caught “looking,” male spectators find reproach while female spectators may find connection. A second thread entails a foreshadowing of violence, unhappiness and limbo. In the scenes directly before Cozy floats in limbo in her tub, spectators watch a woman drag her dead husband to the shower, presumably Cozy’s bathroom, and violently chop him to pieces. With a low angle shot, the camera stays focused on the blood-splattered wife, never moving to show her victim, as she wipes tears from her face and cries between each blow, her distress obvious. This grisly scene represents action and movement, which the characters in the film notably lack. While many films portray extreme violence, producing desensitization, spectators rarely see women performing such bloody and vicious acts. Her actions

foreshadow the ending of the film, since Cozy, like the woman, turns her anger outward instead of inward. A third thread revolves around images of the female body; Cozy's body is realistic, not a Hollywood representation of symmetrical beauty and in being so, intentionally disarming as Reichardt explains:

To me, it gives the audience a break, especially if you're a woman—to see a woman in a lead role with a body and a face that you can relate to. The window of what makes a woman beautiful seems to get smaller and smaller. A straight woman doesn't see a lot of other naked women except for what's on TV or in the movies. And it's a little freaky when seemingly everybody else's breasts are getting perkier as they get older. (qtd. in Haynes)

All three of these threads connect during Cozy's tub scene and as it fades to black, purposely leaving space before the opening credits, spectators have a moment to fully contemplate the sequence of female centered images and issues Reichardt has highlighted before the opening credits.

The second scene that illustrates Cozy's suspended state is when Lee convinces Cozy to leave the bar with him and swim in his former high school teacher's pool. Unannounced to its owner, Cozy dives into the pool completely clothed and floats on her back making water angels. Watching from a bird's eye view, spectators are not confronted with their voyeurism because Cozy is in a public location, fully clothed, and vigorously moving, in contrast to the bathtub scene. Water allows Cozy to physically float between two spaces and reflects her liminal existence as a wife, mother, and woman. In addition to water, pregnancy denotes a biological transitional state, and by

representing Cozy's body in multiple forms of suspension, Reichardt is conveying the liminal quality of the female experience, especially as defined under patriarchy. As if underscoring this point, while Cozy floats absorbed in the moment, the scene abruptly switches to her home, reminding spectators of her motherhood, as her father holds one infant and Bobby paces with another, and they work to figure out Cozy's motives for leaving. Bobby suggests that they had an argument and that was the impetus but viewers know Cozy was neither angry or in a hurry when she dressed and left for her night out. Anger implies emotional connection and while Cozy feels nothing for anyone else in the film, she does recognize her desire.

In representing female-owned desire with no masculine impetus, Cozy is rare in the world of film, and exemplifies Reichardt's subversive characterization. Some critics, however, argue that the pool scenes illustrate that Cozy is not as emotionally disconnected from Lee as she is to other parts of her life. J. J. Murphy suggests that there is a hint of sexual intimacy between the two leads: "As Cozy climbs out of the water and positions herself between Lee's legs, we expect him to kiss her as he leans forward, but, in a sexually-loaded gesture, Lee thrusts the pistol into her hands." Cozy is in control from the beginning to the end of this narrative, and she swims to Lee simply because she wants to hold the gun and not because she wants to make a connection, as Reichardt explains: "The gun in that scene is the real object of desire—at least it is for Cozy" (qtd in Haynes). Once the gun is found on the street by Lee's friend Doug, it becomes a character. Each time the gun appears, the viewer sucks in her breath, wonders whether it is loaded, and crosses her fingers as the characters carelessly wave it around and point it at friends or family. The gun is central to the plot but it is also central to Cozy's desire in

that it represents the power to create change and produce movement. In the final scenes of the film, Cozy never lets the gun out of her sight and even drives holding it against the steering wheel. As Lee narrates a possible life together, Cozy gets more and more frustrated as he unknowingly describes her current situation with Bobby. Lee embodies stagnation and the gun is Cozy's ticket to freedom so whether premeditated or not, Cozy's decision to shoot Lee with the gun, a traditionally masculine symbol, illustrates a resistance to and breaking of patriarchal rules using its own tools.

Because *River of Grass* was Reichardt's first feature, it allowed room for experimentation with style and technique and in her next three features, audiences and critics can see a refinement to those cinematic choices. While she stays away from many of the experimental elements in her features, confining them to her shorts, she continues to make use of her minimalism and realism through source sound, available light, on location shooting, and dialogue driven scenes. She continues her play with genre by intermixing the road movie with buddy movie elements in *Old Joy* and *Wendy and Lucy* and then creating a feminist Western in *Meek's Cutoff*. What becomes more pronounced through each film, starting with *River of Grass*, is her use of slow cinematic techniques. Reichardt's extensive use of long takes, subdued visual schemes that require spectators to be engaged, and an emphasis on the everyday can be seen in varying degrees in her features but culminate in *Meek's Cutoff*. She gravitates toward neorealism and "slow cinema" techniques that align her more broadly with art cinema and international avant-garde, and in a strategic career move, she distances herself from overtly feminist styles while offering a contribution to feminist counter-cinema. Reichardt's first feature might

not have opened the doors to Hollywood funding opportunities, but it does symbolize the beginnings of an auteur.

#### Chapter IV: Discovery— *Old Joy*

“Sorrow is nothing but worn out joy.” ~ Kurt

For her second feature film, *Old Joy* (2006), Kelly Reichardt adapted a short story about two men who unsuccessfully try to rekindle their past friendship. Reichardt again chose a road movie genre with a journey theme—one of self-discovery. This chapter will examine Reichardt’s adaptation of the road movie genre to explore issues and types of masculinity as well as male bonding while including a female perspective on an otherwise male-dominated narrative. Also, throughout the film, as in *River of Grass*, an environmental subtext is subtle but clear; she juxtaposes images of nature against civilization and technology, hinting at the damage done to natural resources while reveling in the beauty of the Oregon forest. The narrative consists of Mark (Daniel London) and Kurt (Will Oldham) setting off from Portland, Oregon for a short camping trip to Bagby Hot Springs but once in the forest, Kurt gets them lost and they are forced to camp at an illegal trash dump before finding their way in the morning and arriving at the hot springs. While Reichardt highlights the effort of two prior friends’ reconnection, their relationship is symbolic of the deep divide in America as it reelected a president and continued a divisive war abroad. Reichardt addresses the environment, politics, self-discovery, and interpersonal relationships as she develops her minimalist and neo-realist style. Once again, her aesthetics, affected by her micro-budget, create a distinctive look with a dialogue driven film that focuses on character.

*Old Joy* is the first of three short stories that Kelly Reichardt adapted by and with Jon Raymond. The adaptation was chosen because of its minimal and flexible budget requirements, but also because the narrative offered an artistic opportunity to film nature



and explore a strained male friendship. The short story did not contain any of the political inferences and some of the characterization was adjusted: “Mark is not married in the short story. . . . [h]e is single, so he and Kurt are closer to each other in the story; their worlds are not so far apart” (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega). By adding Tanya, Mark’s wife, in the early scenes and then having her connect with Mark throughout the camping trip via cell phone, Reichardt is following the pattern reported in the Sundance Institute findings that “female directors are more likely to feature girls and women on screen than male directors” (Smith 3). The inclusion of Tanya adds to the depth of Mark’s character as spectators see him struggle with his multiple life roles and work to rediscover his “old free-wheeling” self and friendship with Kurt.

In an interview, Reichardt discussed Raymond’s original narrative and her desire to create interpretive space for spectators:

Jon Raymond wrote about a very personal and nuanced friendship, about the elusiveness of friendship. There’s a lot of space in his writing and in my filmmaking for people to grab on to what they want and identify with what they want. I can see two people walking out of the movie and feel completely different about it. There’s space to create this kind of encounter. (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega)

Reichardt intentionally leaves space throughout her film for spectators to engage and be active in their own imaginings and reactions to its content and when pressed in an interview to reveal the meaning behind the ending or notions that might label the film’s content she says: “I don’t really want to talk it. . . . People should just watch it” (qtd. in

Rodriguez-Ortega). Her reply underscores the desire to deliver engaging and thought provoking content without a need to insert her authorship.

### **Production**

*Old Joy*, Kelly Reichardt's second feature, premiered at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival and was praised by critics as it traveled the film festival circuit. The film was nominated for at least seven awards, winning five, with one from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association for the best independent/experimental film ("Awards"). As with all her films, Reichardt works diligently to stay within the independent filmmaking realm. In an article for *Stop Smiling*, Michael Rowin explains *Old Joy* represents the essence of true independent films: "It's not only one of the best films of the year, but perhaps the only American film of the year to superbly demonstrate the true aesthetic heritage of the term *independent*." He is not the first interviewer or critic to suggest that Reichardt's process is rare; she does not work with Hollywood on any level no matter how much easier it would make creating a film as she explains, "The challenge with this kind of filmmaking is turning all the limitations into something that works in your favor, something that adds to the frailty of the story itself" (Reichardt, "*Old Joy*"). According to most reviews, Reichardt was very successful in balancing her financial restraints with the possible artistic avenues of the film. *Old Joy* was filmed in a very minimalistic style on location in natural light, with a forty-nine page script, a six person crew, a two week shooting schedule. This type of filming allows for more intimacy between the actors and a deeper and more connected feeling to the natural world around them. This was important for the film as Reichardt explains:

as we got deeper and deeper into the forest we began shooting in a way that they [the protagonists] became more and more part of the forest. This is one of the central ideas of the film: they get lost in the forest and they become part of it and one with nature . . . by keeping the apparatus very small, it is invisible to us when we make the film. It's just six people in the woods. (qtd. in Rowin)

This type of intimate filming couples well with the narrative of two friends struggling to connect, each dealing with their own private demons and feelings of isolation with Oregon's thick forests as a backdrop.

Reichardt's inclusion of art in her films is evident, and in *Old Joy* she uses nature as her centerpiece since Oregon forest almost became a character. While she was adapting Jon Raymond's short story, it was an art exhibit that inspired her to film in the Oregon forests after originally scouting locations in the south "looking for swimming holes and hot springs." After those ideas led to a dead end, Reichardt came back to New York and attended Justine Kurtland's photography exhibit which helped inspire the look of the film:

When I first got the story from Jon, I had no idea it was part of another project . . . Justine and Jon were doing a reading/slideshow . . . I was more informed by a color copy of one of the first pictures in the book, which is actually the forest around Bagby, where we ended up shooting. I had that up on my bulletin board for a long time in the search for all the other places [in the film] . . . I eventually went out to Oregon for a test shoot, out in Bagby. That photo was the real influence. (qtd. in Rowin)

Kurtland's photography of burned forests and leafless hibernating or dead trees seem a far cry from Reichardt's shots of life affirming streams, waterfalls, wildlife, and green forests, but the message behind both Kurtland's depictions and Reichardt's narrative aptly relate to Raymond's themes of alienation and life in a "fallen world." While these themes resonate differently depending on the artist, Reichardt insinuates a political failing by the George W. Bush administration. As she mentions in several interviews, the short story did not have any of the political messages audiences found in the film, but social and environmental issues are highlighted. This is evident as Reichardt begins Kurt and Mark's road trip with scenes of Mark's Volvo driving through an industrial part of town in search of last minute items before heading out into the Oregon wilderness. To emphasize working class and industrial surroundings, Reichardt places her two characters in a very drab, industrial area with reflections of cement mixers barreling down the road and railroad tracks embedded into paved streets. The urban setting is cross cut with a giant concrete plant on the edge of a river, making the contrasting associations of industry and nature apparent. Beyond juxtaposing images of nature against civilization to remind viewers of social policy, she develops a subtle "nature meets technology" motif, with birds sitting on power lines, ants crawling on sidewalks, and cell phones or motor vehicles disrupting the quiet of old growth Oregon forests. Throughout the film, there is a purposeful stark contrast created between the forest and the city, especially at the close of the film when viewers watch Kurt through a volley of passing cars and loud street noise. These scenes seem to carry a message that chaos and distraction thrive in civilization while nature holds reflection and quiet.

Another element Reichardt uses to create art from nature is her decision to film in 16mm instead of the more maneuverable digital format. By using celluloid, she is able to give audiences a richer experience of the Oregon forest and stay true to her artistic visions for the film: “I really love film, and there’s so much motion in this film that I don’t think digital video would be the way to do it. The level of colors and depth in the forest would have not been doable in DV. I was hoping to really capture the feel of the weather, and film was necessary for this sensory element” (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega). Reichardt and her director of photography, Peter Sillen, did not purposely resist a digital format, and even thought about other formats she had worked extensively in during her years in college, but by using real film Reichardt achieves her desired aesthetic and illustrates how staying small contributes to artistic control.

Using 16mm, working with only independent companies, and holding to a very small crew and budget requires dedicated actors, crew members, and investors who believe in Reichardt’s artistic vision. Filmscience, Washington Square films and VanHoy/Knudsen produced the film while Kino distributed it. Filmscience came into being in November of 2005 and its founder Anish Savjani produced Reichardt’s last three features. In an interview with Film Annex, Savjani discusses his involvement in the film: “With *Old Joy*, I came into the project during the post-production stage in order to raise money, and we stretched the budget . . . I usually put a half a million-dollar marker on the projects I’m going to work on. And I read the scripts with the budget in mind” (qtd. in Gulfidan). Savjani reiterates the budget limitations on Reichardt and other indie filmmakers to adapt or create scripts that are affordable and in doing so their films can be

produced and distributed through independent means. Kino International (now Kino Lorber) distributed *Old Joy* and Reichardt explains how they picked up her film:

I used to work in the mail room at Kino. I knew them. . . . When we started making the film, we didn't even know if it was going to be a feature or a short so we certainly were not sure someone would pick it up. Kino was great because they are a bunch of super cinephiles, and once they showed interest it was like a dream come true. I already felt tremendously lucky making the film, so this was the icing on the cake.  
(qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega)

Kino International was founded in 1977, and their webpage description indicates the emphasis on indie films by stating, since its 2009 merger with Lorber Films and Alive Mind, it is the “new leader in independent film distribution.” Finding independent avenues to produce and distribute films is “icing on the cake” since those can be daunting feats. Savjani maintains that instead of opting to release her films online “Kelly [Reichardt] . . . is a more traditional filmmaker. . . . She follows the more conventional route—theatrical, home video, and DVD. Everyone has their own distribution method. . . . Kelly use[s] the press, and a lot of good press comes from the festivals” (qtd. in Gulfidan). It is typically at festivals that filmmakers tirelessly “shop” their films in hopes that they will find distribution.

Receiving critical praise and attention is one step toward attracting a distribution company and once that is accomplished the next step is to “use the press” through interviews, as Savjani points out, to promote the film and attract more film critic reviews. One critic praised Reichardt’s minimalistic style in *Old Joy* saying, “About her directing,

after praising her simplicity, one had to praise her daring. To make this film took considerable conviction—and, for an artist, conviction usually entails courage” (Kauffmann 29). Reichardt’s filming style is “daring,” but casting male leads is a proven formula and one that is out of character compared to her other films. Reichardt might have felt she needed two male leads and perhaps wanted to play it safe after several years in LA promoting her project, *The Royal Court*, which failed possibly in part because it featured a black female protagonist. But if switching to male leads was a compromise, it was her only one, as *Old Joy* challenges audiences in every other way with pacing, content, and action. In one review, the film was categorized as a “the Listless Film” because it “carries a double melancholy for all: it makes us sad for its characters and sad for the world that has thus affected them. *Old Joy* is such a film, though it needs a bit of patience” (Kauffmann 28). While some critics might use “patience” as a warning to viewers that the film is slow paced in terms of action, even though it falls into the “road movie/buddy” genre, others, including Reichardt, prefer the word “deliberate” as a better descriptor for the camera shots: “It’s static, but it’s not always static. It’s not Jarmusch. In addition, there are many things crossing through the frame. The camera is deliberate” (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega). Reichardt had a variety of international influences when setting up her “static” shots and a major one came from watching Yasujiro Ozu films: “Last year in New York we had a full month of Ozu films. He also has a very steady camera and amazingly interesting framings” and her choice to present framed wildlife or landscape clearly shows his influence. Another probable model was “Satyajit Ray’s films and the ways he deals with nature. . . . If I had to say which one of these is my main influence I’d say Ray” (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega). Through her use of static shots and

deliberate filming, Reichardt is employing slow cinematic techniques as the characters work out issues in real time, have long silences or pauses, or rely on dialogue with little action to move the narrative and this creates deeper and more complex characterizations.

### **Complicating Masculinity**

In *Old Joy*, Kelly Reichardt introduces her audience to male stereotypes and then deeply complicates them. On the back of the DVD, Kurt is described as “a post-hippie with never-present promise” while Mark has a more flattering introduction as “the father-to-be, intent on putting the Kurt part of his life behind him.” The meaning behind “Kurt part of his life” is purposely vague as is their relationship throughout the film. Reichardt asks spectators to fill in the blanks, causing a constant struggle throughout the film, for most American audiences, to categorize Kurt and Mark’s masculinity. The desire to judge them according to neat, organized, and easily understood gender identities is tempting, but Reichardt’s nuances keep audiences guessing. Ambiguity of all kinds, but especially gender identity, is difficult to take seriously or understand if not outright rejected by most media outlets, as seen in the overwhelming representation of LGBTQ in comedy sitcoms or as the butt of a joke. What makes Reichardt’s character Kurt so much more complicated is not only his sexual ambiguity and liberal philosophies but her use of realism and minimalism in his depiction. She scripted Kurt to be a real person who has flaws and is able to create an uneven distancing effect on the spectator. One critic wrote: “Will Oldham plays Kurt like a man who has survived an existence that was supposed to have nullified him and who has some quiet pride in it” (“Parting” 29).

Also, Reichardt counts on the fact that American spectators who are so driven to “grow up” and “make something of themselves” will be both jealous and appalled by



Kurt. While jealousy might not seem an appropriate reaction for spectators, Reichardt considers the idea that Mark is jealous of Kurt's life so in extension her audience might be as well: "Is Mark jealous that Kurt is free? This is a possibility the film opens up. Ultimately . . . I have gone out of the way in the filmmaking to leave these possibilities open . . . there are so many ways to read each of the characters" (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega). Kurt is the persona many overworked and exhausted Americans secretly wish they could assume. Reichardt exposes this stereotype and in an interview she explains the perceptions around her character: "You're living a certain way in your twenties that may be romantic, but when you get to your mid-thirties and you have that same lifestyle it becomes slightly questionable and taxing to people's lives that you move in and out of. . . . My freedom at the expense of everyone I know, basically" (qtd. in Rowin). Spectators are jealous that Kurt has survived that "nullified" existence, but they also see the downfalls of such an extended lifestyle.<sup>1</sup>

In his book, *Man and Masculinities*, Michael Kimmel touches on these "guilty pleasures" in relation to power in American society.<sup>2</sup> Kimmel explains that "[m]anhood is equated with power—over women, over other men" (106) and if Kurt has any power at all in society, it is a fleeting nostalgia for missed freedom. Mark is struggling with rekindling his friendship because Kurt represents men who are powerless as deemed by society and according to Kimmel if Mark reconnects fully with Kurt he too will be relinquishing his access to power. Kimmel speaks to Mark's reluctance:

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<sup>1</sup> In the same interview, Reichardt discusses how she and Will Oldham worked to cast a "real" Kurt in the role but were unsuccessful: "Will ended up in the Kurt role. For a while he was trying to turn me on to people he knew who were 'truly Kurt.' People living in their van, no phone, and two months later they'd call—'Hey, I'm a friend of Will's.' Okay, that won't work for a movie" (qtd. in Rowin).

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Kimmel's *The History of Men* (2005) for further discussion.

In contrast to women's lives, men's lives are structured around relationships of power and men's differential access to power, as well as the differential access to that power of men as a group. Our imperfect analysis of our own situation leads us to believe that we men need more power, rather than leading us to support feminists' efforts to rearrange power relationships along more equitable lines. (Kimmel 107)

Mark has worked hard to attain a certain status in society, and whether happy or not, he has managed to achieve and affirm his access to power, through normative masculinity, since his days with Kurt. Kimmel asks why American men feel so powerless that they have to constantly strive to align themselves with a hegemonic masculine ideology and then elaborates:

the answer is because we've constructed the rules of manhood so that only the tiniest fraction of men come to believe that they are the biggest of wheels, the sturdiest of oaks, the most virulent repudiators of femininity, the most daring and aggressive. We've managed to disempower the overwhelming majority of American men by other means—such as discriminat[ion]. (108)

There is no attempt to fit Kurt into the cultural normalization that Mark has experienced through keeping a job, marriage, and preparing to raise a child. In fact, audiences work to identify with Mark who, according to society's rules has his "life together" and his "priorities straight," but as the film progresses Reichardt cleverly creates a tug of war with spectator's emotional allegiance as they bounce from one character to the other finding points of identification as well as frustration.

Kurt does not just represent a “free-spirit” as described by Daniel London in an interview; from the beginning his actions spell out someone who is unreliable, opportunistic, confused, and lazy. After Mark has worked out his trip with Tanya, he arrives to an empty house and after knocking and tapping on doors and windows, sits for an unspecified amount of time on the front porch waiting for Kurt to arrive. Spectators feel relief that Kurt shows up since they are invested in Mark, having watched his struggles, and form a reserved opinion of Kurt as his fuzzy form appears across the street, pulling a child’s Radio wagon with a TV precariously perched inside and holding a borrowed green cooler. He is late, his wrinkled shirt is unevenly buttoned and he shows no remorse for making Mark wait or wonder about his whereabouts. This scene foreshadows the “lost” scenes later in the film where Kurt, after assuring Mark he knows where they are, keeps them driving in the Oregon woods until well past nightfall never finding the original camp site and causing them to camp near a illegal trash dump. But even with the many signals audiences receive about Kurt’s unsympathetic characterization, his honesty and vulnerability concerning his desire for a renewed friendship, the very qualities that make him powerless in a hyper masculine society, keeps viewers invested.

When there is a lack of traditional heterosexual masculine cues in a film about men, as in *Old Joy*, spectators struggle with gender and sexual ambiguity. Reichardt purposely leaves their prior relationship undefined, so viewers work to understand and process male friendships. The underlying tension between Kurt and Mark is really not about whether they were lovers, but rather whether or not Mark will open up to Kurt and show any emotional vulnerability. Viewers keep waiting, but Mark simply cannot allow

himself to reclaim their prior friendship in all its manifestations. This friendship was a safe space for both of them and not the debilitating cycle that Kimmel describes in his book: “As young men we are constantly riding those gender boundaries, checking the fences we have constructed on the perimeter, making sure that nothing even remotely feminine might show through. The possibilities of being unmasked are everywhere” (184). Kurt and Mark were able to find a comfortable and intimate male friendship, in their past, and while we see their struggle to find that place again throughout the movie, the struggle reaches an emotional climax in the campfire scene. As Kurt begins the pivotal conversation in which he attempts to explain his interpretation of String theory that he was too embarrassed to share with his physics class, the metaphors are thick: “The entire universe is in the shape of a tear falling down through space. This tear has been drooping now forever; it just doesn’t stop.” Spectators quickly realize that Kurt is talking about his emotional perception of the world and specifically his feelings about the lost friendship he has not been able to rekindle during the trip with Mark. Kurt continues by saying, “I miss you Mark. I miss you really really bad. I want us to be real friends again. There is something between us and I don’t like it. I want it to go away.” This type of open and honest confession leaves Kurt very vulnerable, and his depth is not met by Mark who instead works to pacify and deny any issues by saying, “We’re fine. We’re totally fine.” Kurt has no recourse but to apologize for his emotional plea and retreat: “God I’m sorry. I’m just being crazy. I’m sorry. I’m just being crazy. I know. Don’t pay any attention to me. We’re fine. Everything is totally fine. I feel a lot better now.” This is Mark’s chance to talk to Kurt about the real issue between them and Mark cannot bring himself to do it. Kurt desires the ability to be with another man beyond what Kimmel

calls “riding those gender boundaries” because that is such a rarity in male relationships.

Reichardt is also testing audience comfort levels by placing such an emotional and intimate scene at night right before they share a tent. Spectators wonder if they were sexually intimate in the past and whether their relationship will reignite that evening. In his article, “Sundance focuses on GLBT films,” John Esther discusses how the film “[b]lur[s] the lines between camaraderie, male bonding, and homoeroticism with the possible homosexuality of Kurt and Mark.” Could it be, however, that American culture simply does not know what to make of male friendship in the absence of adventure, violence, women, comedy, and children? There are no super powers or extraordinary distractions for the duo to handle and no urgency to save the day or take revenge. Offering a visual metaphor for the path of their friendship the following morning, the camera cuts between a beautiful cloudy sky and shots of decaying trash, with the dump that they were forced to camp at reflecting the gradual decay of their friendship.

In his chapter “Masculinity as Homophobia,” Kimmel explains, “Violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight” (104) and Reichardt, in her attempt to portray real men working on a friendship instead of a mass marketed representation of maleness, opted to leave violence or any hint of it out of *Old Joy*. Reichardt took a risk by not including action or violence. While the lack of action keeps the production budget manageable, a study by Cerridwen and Simonton shows when American audiences go to movies, violence and suspense appears to be a draw: “violence tends to have a positive effect on U.S. and world gross, a pattern paralleled by guns/weapons” (204). In *Old Joy*, instead of violence, spectators see laughter, nostalgia, intimacy, frustration, angst, deep sadness and a sense of loss or regret.

There is no fight scene, no blood, no death or abusive shouting and the lack of traditional masculinity cues for the American spectator translates into ambiguity which creates active and engaged discovery. In their study, Cerridwen and Simonton asked the question:

do films that involve a larger proportion of women as producers, directors, writers, or actors differ substantially on sex, violence, and other variables? The answer was affirmative. To the extent that women dominate in these positions, the resulting films tend to display much less violence, including less weaponry, fear-inducing editing and music, blood and gore, and so forth. At the same time, the female presence shows up in more thought-provoking films. (208)

Instead of explicit violence, Reichardt creates suspense by denying spectators easily defined gender roles through traditional cues. She gives audiences a long overdue opportunity, no matter how exhaustive or uncomfortable, to confront an alternative masculinity, culminating in the sequence when Kurt and Mark reach their destination.

The bath house represents more than just a hot springs; it is portrayed as a safe space for homosocial intimacies and connection. Even though the bath house was in high demand at the time of the shoot, it is depicted as a place where nature offers a soothing calm and peaceful rejuvenation for hikers. Part of what makes the bath house safe is the shared rituals and traditions of the activity. Each step of their progress toward experiencing the baths is recorded from their excitement at arriving to relaxing in the tubs and telling stories. It is clear that Kurt holds power in these scenes. He is in charge of the action and he maintains that authority through language; Kurt gives detailed instructions

to Mark on how to plug up the tubs, use the buckets, and he is even comfortable enough to toss a beer to Mark. One reason might be that Kurt is making up for his directional failure that delayed them the night before, but either way, these hiking and camping rituals reinforce male camaraderie that allows them to work toward a common goal. His story telling is another sign of Kurt's authority, but it also shows his openness and desire for reconciliation. Kurt's new found authority might also explain why he feels empowered to rub Mark's shoulders at the conclusion of his long and seemingly meaningless narrative. It is in this story that Kurt coins the partial title of the film: "Sorrow is nothing but worn out joy."

When Kurt stands up after concluding his story, he approaches Mark's tub as Mark is soaking, eyes closed, and begins to rub his shoulders. Mark's initial reaction is one of surprise saying, "Hey what's going on?" and Kurt quickly asserts his control over the situation replying, "Just relax man; just settle in." Viewers cannot tell if Mark is just tolerating Kurt or if he is really giving himself over to the moment since actor Daniel London keeps Mark's character emotionally inaccessible. Reichardt's use of suggestive and sensual imagery to indicate her characters' internal communications and connections leave little doubt they have shared a moment. While the moment is ambiguous, sensual imagery such as Mark's wedding banded hand slowly releasing its grip on his tub and falling into the water followed by cascading water drops, running water down a long wooden gutter, bubbling waterfalls, and steam drifting out of the bath house all indicate a deep connection between the two friends. While the bath house scene is homoerotic, indicated by the release of tension in Mark and the sexualized images of nature after, it

also illustrates Kurt's empowerment and implied responsibility for Mark's "back to nature" experience.

During the film festival circuit tour, critics debated as to the nature of their relationship, referring to imagery in the bath house scene such as their feet sticking out of the tubs as if they were tangled together after sex, a slug on a flower, and Mark's looks of ecstasy. Some reviews, however, such as Manohla Dargis's, suggest that there was no romantic intention in Reichardt's characterization: "Much like Ms. Reichardt's first feature, *River of Grass* (1995), about a young woman who dreams of escaping her dreary life by going on the lam, *Old Joy* briefly borrows the conventions of the road movie while keeping its romance safely at bay" ("A Journey"). In his article, "Dude, Where's My Gender," David Greven notes that while there may be safe spaces in public for male "homosocial" interaction, such as the bath house, our society does not expect those spaces to be used in a sexualized manner: "The term 'homosocial,' . . . succinctly describes the sphere and realms of same-sex relations—the relationships and spaces in which both male power and intimacy are concentrated. Homosocial relations may include homosexual ones, but, in our homophobic culture, they are not meant to" (15). While critics and audiences will have to be satisfied with the ambiguity of their relationship, it is clear that Reichardt wants to discuss more than masculinity and sexuality through her characters.

### **Politics and Personal Identity**

The deep divide between Mark and Kurt is mirrored in several driving scenes in which Mark listens to Air America radio as divisions between political parties and stances are hashed out. Air America talk radio is heard from the moment the two begin



their trip to until they reach a bridge that leads out of town. It acts almost like a physical barrier for the protagonists and for spectators as Air America is not heard again until Mark drops Kurt off at the end of the film. Throughout the montage of scenes, even though there is some dialogue and a hint of background music, Air American commentary is front and center, reminding audiences of the frustration and impotence of liberals and the Democratic Party in the early 2000's. In an interview, Reichardt talks about her intentions: "I did want to set the exact period of time with Bush was reelected, not just a loss, but another old joy: both elections were stolen, the loss of democracy . . . the Air American segments—that's just liberals fighting amongst themselves" (qtd. in Rowin). As evidence, there is a radio clip of commentary about how the presidential candidate missed an opportunity to champion the working class and go after corporate corruption. This conversation is perfectly matched with the industrial backdrop and creates a subtle political commentary. Reichardt sheds light on the politics behind including radio in the film:

As a viewer you experience these crazy, arguing voices, and by the tone of it you encounter politics. . . . During the John Kerry campaign you could see the democrats were really lost. To sum it up: liberalism has become a dirty word. What is that? . . . these are two friends who embark on a weekend trip to connect, and they can't. . . . There is a feeling that the Democratic party has struggled to do this as well. (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega)

Critics, such as Manohla Dargis, discuss Reichardt's insertion of politics through radio segments making the point that the film is about a "specific moment in time and space"

and is able to capture America's deep political division in that moment: "progressive radio . . . delivers the relentless grind of bad news that Mark can only listen to without comment and with a face locked in worry, a face on which Ms. Reichardt invites us to project the shell shock, despair and hopelessness of everyone else listening in across the country." Dargis refers to the displacement liberals in America felt during the 2000-2009 presidency of George W. Bush when many of their social and political ideas, ranging from a mishandled election to greenhouse gas emissions, were blocked or vetoed. Vicente Rodriguez-Ortega agrees with Dargis's assessment adding "[t]he result [*Old Joy*] is beautifully minimalist, capturing in visual terms the disenchantment of the Left in the current era of rampant conservatism." Mark is an example of a liberal who does nothing but "worry" and listen to divisive talk radio; Reichardt is showing audiences that action is needed: "Mark is not really doing anything, . . . as if the act of listening is enough. At the end of the day Mark is this guy that wants world peace. However, he needs to connect with a friend or his wife about this, but he is unable to cross the bridge so it makes one feel defeated about the bigger picture" (qtd. in Rodriguez-Ortega). She mentions her own need to make a statement about where American was during this time period:

I know I'm not capable of making an out-and out political film, but I did think there were elements in the film of what I was experiencing—ineffectualness . . . I concentrated on the friendship—the other stuff [political comments] were ideas for myself, ideas that make you feel like you're doing something relevant. (qtd. in Rowin)

Reichardt fulfils her wish to be "relevant" by inserting political commentary in what would seemingly be an apolitical narrative.

While Kurt and Mark's friendship can be symbolic of the ineffectual political parties in America, the desire to reconnect to a past friend and in doing so, reassert a personal identity is a universal theme. Interestingly enough, Reichardt does this reasserting with very sparse dialogue. From the first moment Kurt and Mark see each other, their relationship is defined by the use of silence. After they greet each other at the beginning of the film and stand beside Kurt's van, Mark asks Kurt: "How was Ashland?" and from the moment he asks the question, Mark stares directly into Kurt's face, unwaveringly with narrowed eyes as if to pry the truth out. Mark is searching to see if he would have had the same experience as Kurt if he had been at the retreat. The silences between Mark's question and the broken reply from Kurt say volumes. Ashland represents a trip Mark could not participate in because of his social and domestic responsibilities and expectations, and he is frustrated by Kurt's ability to live in seeming freedom. Kurt replies, "Ashland?!" with a question in his voice as if he has to remember, signifying that he has experienced many "Ashlands" as opposed to Mark. Kurt pauses, making Mark wait and then says, "Amazing [pause] transformative [pause] I'm at a whole new place now [pause] really" and his long pauses indicate his need to convince himself that he really is at this "new place." The power dynamic that happens within the silences speaks to Kimmel's suggestion that men feel masculinity is about who appears the "biggest of wheels." Kurt is struggling to hold on to his "free spirit" identity as a traveling Renaissance man while fighting the inevitable judgment he knows will come from Mark. At this point in his life, as he probably deals with judgments about his lifestyle and identity from friends who have normed themselves with a hegemonic masculinity. The silence after Kurt proclaims his experience in Ashland and Mark's

steady, piercing gaze freeze Kurt for a moment until the tension becomes uncomfortable and Kurt gives way by shaking his head “no” and then shifting his eyes down. Mark’s next phrase is meant for all the clutter and collection of Kurt’s van as they look into the opened back door but it resonates with the silence they both just shared: “Wow—you really have it all goin’ on,” and Kurt replies, “Hell yeah—where’s your shit.” Mark means Kurt seems to have his life figured out and is still living in the twenty-something “freedomland” especially after his intentionally ambiguous statement about being transformed by a recent retreat. But there is a laugh in Mark’s voice, showing that he does not believe Kurt; Mark is struggling to take the power back from Kurt and Kurt’s reply to this is “Where’s your shit?” Of course he means camping gear but metaphorically Mark’s “shit” is at home in a mortgage, a job, and pregnant partner, and his material existence is way too involved to fit into the back of a van. This is just another symbol for both that Mark’s chosen normative path in society weighs him down emotionally.

### **Inserting the Feminine**

Although *Old Joy* seems to be primarily about masculinity and relationships between men, it is also as concerned with male-female relationships, the uncertainties of pregnancy, and Mark’s looming family responsibilities. At the opening of the film spectators are greeted by birds chirping, the sound of humming Tibetan bowls and then the images of animals in nature. Audiences move from nature sounds mixed with the chimes of meditation aids while Mark sits cross-legged, barefoot, in his grassy yard to an abrupt cut of Tanya, his very pregnant wife, loudly blending a smoothie, listening to the radio, and a phone ringing. Reichardt uses sound and images to illustrate technology’s

intrusive behavior and references gender stereotypes by drawing boundaries between the domestic inside world of the home that Tanya occupies and the outside world of nature that Mark and Kurt inhabit. As Mark struggles to meditate outside with the sound of children playing, Tanya seems to stay in a mindless meditation inside even though she is surrounded by noise and interruptions. The dull look in her eyes changes only slightly as she hears Kurt leave a message for Mark about camping that evening. Spectators are denied a close-up of her face as she taps her fingers on the doorway and stares down at the machine.

Reichardt is saying volumes with Tanya in a very short period of time considering she is only on screen for three to four minutes. The first and shallower interpretation might unfortunately be the most popular. Tanya is self-absorbed and miserable and therefore wants her partner to suffer as well. There should be no changes, fun, or newness in either one's life. But this reading and quick judgment of Tanya are complicated by Reichardt's depiction.<sup>3</sup> Tanya seems ready to be done with pregnancy and to own her body again; this feeling might be why her gaze is inward even with all the distractions during her first scenes. She is also aware that any time Kurt visits, she loses her partner for a period of time. Reichardt creates several cues that contribute to a very fair picture of Tanya and allows audiences to understand their relationship. After all, Tanya does not have to tell Mark about the message; she could have deleted it, knowing Kurt would probably move on to another friend. Reichardt agrees that Kurt might have found another camping buddy: "I don't necessarily think that Mark was the first person that

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<sup>3</sup> See Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* for further discussion of alternative depictions of masculinity.

Kurt called that day” (qtd. in Rowin). And she backs this assertion up in the script when later, upon the men’s first face-to-face meeting in the film, Kurt says, “I’m really glad you could come. I didn’t know if you could make it on such short notice—everyone is so busy now.” Kurt basically confesses that Mark was not the first nor would he have been the last call Kurt would have made to invite a friend to camp. As the machine clicks off, the camera cuts to more power lines and birds outside, and spectators hear Mark greeting Kurt on the phone. Tanya at this point has been pretending to be uninterested, with her back to the couple on the phone until actual plans begin to form and Mark sounds as if he is committing; then she inserts her body, physically, into their conversation as a reminder to Mark that he has responsibilities. Their lack of sustained eye contact tells spectators that both want something they are not getting from each other; Tanya wants him to reject the trip on his own, noting that he is now a “family man” and understands he is needed at home while Mark wants his partner to give him permission to be free and return, briefly, to what he sees himself giving up for marriage and family. Reichardt inserts a theme common to many relationships through Tanya’s dialogue: “Look, we’re just waiting for me to tell you you can go. We know you’re going, so I don’t know why we have to go through this thing of me letting you off the hook.” While the close-up shots of each are almost equal in number they tend to linger on Tanya and American audiences might see this as a suggestion of who they should side with; however, Reichardt complicates the interactions by playing off the stereotype of a “nagging” wife who will not allow her husband any freedom. Visually the shots support Tanya’s reasoning, but emotionally spectators are probably quick to come to Mark’s aid. Reichardt is working to hold a

mirror up to her audience and through the use of close-ups, she leaves spectators squirming in their seats as the witness the emotional exchange.

In this sequence, Reichardt achieves Andre Bazin's "total cinema" with her use of minimalism and universal themes of marital conflict. The last shot of their exchange is of Tanya's face with downcast eyes but with traces of defiance that audiences guess will fade to hopeless resolution. The sound of a lawnmower begins before we cut to Mark packing up the car and loading his dog, Wendy, into his Volvo Station Wagon. The camera lingers on the closed trunk while in an unfocused background a woman mows her yard. Reichardt seems to be saying that while Mark goes off to play, women stay home and take care of the chores no matter whether it is inside or outside. The last spectators see of Tanya is a side profile shot from behind in a very quiet house as she looks down and then back up again. In that moment, audiences take in the full extent of her unhappiness. For a film with two male protagonists, Reichardt outlines so much about pregnancy and motherhood—the frustrations, worry, boredom, and uncertainty. Spectators wonder if Mark is truly ready for fatherhood, and that sets up Mark's quest narrative, as he goes in search of what he has lost, freedom and male bonds but ends up reaffirming the embrace of socially dictated behavior and responsibility codes. Only during the climax of the film in the bath house, does Mark seem to accomplish his goal and completely lose himself to a fleeting moment of freedom.

Reichardt concludes Mark's story as he drives home, looking reflective but not about his camping experience, as we hear Air America once again discussing political stagnation. The announcer mirrors Mark's anxiety about becoming a father and taking on socially acceptable roles when he refers to the cost of ignoring labor and environmental

issues: “When you notice that housing costs, health care costs, and energy costs are exploding, you’re talking about things that make up the overwhelming share of the budget of an ordinary family. And so the combination of the uncertainty of the future and the pressure on the present create this move.”

The Air America commentary serves several functions to conclude the film. Air America bookends the film reminding viewers of Mark’s political nature but also reinforces the comparison between their irreconcilable friendship and American’s divided political landscape. The words “uncertainty” and “pressure” also echo Mark’s fears of becoming a father which are physically conveyed as he reluctantly parks his car, glancing unhappily toward his home, and then slowly prepares himself to return to his reality. Kurt’s future, however, is much more uncertain than Mark’s as Reichardt’s cinematic choices illustrate. Filming from across a busy street, the camera zooms in capturing Kurt wandering aimlessly, as if in a daze, unable to even decide what direction he should take. The use of selective focus with a zoom creates distance and underscores the audience’s voyeuristic connection to Kurt verses the earlier more intimate audience relationship. Reichardt wants to remind viewers that Kurt is socially undesirable. By creating a connection to an “other” and then displacing that connection, Reichardt is reiterating the damage to individuals when they are stereotyped and the importance of underfunded social entities, such as homeless shelters. Kurt’s eyes dart from side to side and finally after following him from a distance, audiences are allowed one close-up shot only for Kurt to walk out of the frame as the camera stays stationary. Audiences are not allowed to follow Kurt as his path is too sporadic and “uncertain.” *Old Joy*’s sad and open ending leaves viewers wondering if Kurt and Mark will ever see each other again and if Kurt will



survive his wanderlust. Much like *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt's third feature, audiences see their protagonists adrift in a society that demands conformity, with little to no hope of a sustainable future.

### Chapter V: Breakthrough—*Wendy and Lucy*

“You can’t get an address without an address. You can’t get a job without a job. It’s all fixed.” ~ Wally

*Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt’s third feature, builds on the mixed genre tradition of her earlier films: the film draws on the road movie genre but denies the full experience in an effort to convey social and political messages about the working class and homeless in America. This chapter explores those messages in addition to issues of female citizenship. While the narrative unravels in a small setting within the span of a few days, Reichardt uses it to broaden viewers’ perspectives and assumptions about the identities and lives of America’s lower working class and homeless. By making a young female her protagonist, Reichardt complicates issues of homelessness and poverty through the lens of gender. She contributes to conversations surrounding girlhood, specifically Anita Harris’s “at-risk girl” vs. “can do girl” theories, and illustrates the pitfalls for girls who are pushed to participate in a disposable consumer culture. By connecting ecofeminist concerns with Reichardt’s content, this chapter explores a capitalistic culture’s effects on marginalized members of the population.

The film follows Wendy Carroll (Michelle Williams) as she journeys across America to find work in the Alaskan canneries. When her car breaks down and she loses her dog Lucy, she meets Wally, a sympathetic Walgreen’s security guard (Walter Dalton) who represents the working class poor. He provides a cell phone number for her lost dog posters and hands her what he can afford to spare, six dollars, as a going away present. In an effort to repair her only means of shelter and transportation, Wendy engages with an unsympathetic mechanic, Bill (Will Patton), who represents capitalistic ideology, and

his news that her car is unfixable, leaves Wendy homeless. Much as Reichardt manages the challenges of her micro-budget filmmaking, Wendy wrestles to control her future by being creative, determined, and owning her choices no matter how difficult. In this same spirit, Reichardt's definition of success rests outside the mainstream standards.

### **Production**

*Wendy and Lucy* premiered at the 46<sup>th</sup> Annual New York Film Festival's Forum in September of 2008 before making its rounds to multiple film festivals such as the Toronto International, Chicago International, and Cannes. In competition, the film won AFI's Top Movie of the Year and NBR's Award for Top Independent film and was nominated for six more ("Awards"). *Wendy and Lucy* made approximately \$1,192,655 worldwide and had a domestic total gross of \$865,695, according to *Box Office Mojo*. It was important to Reichardt that these totals be moderately profitable for the production and distribution companies. As she explains, keeping a solid filmmaking team has importance for her artistic process: "I'm trying to surround myself with people that know me and give me the space to do that [be creative] and that's been very hard to find" (qtd. in Liu). Both production companies that worked on *Wendy and Lucy* were repeat customers for Reichardt; Glass Eye Pix helped to produce *River of Grass* and Filmscience, along with others, produced *Old Joy*. In addition, Reichardt hired independent producer Neil Kopp, with whom she had made her last three films, explaining that "Neil can get his head around how he can physically make it [the film] happen while keeping the budget as low as possible. I do try and set up the production in a way that it creates an atmosphere that I can be creative in" (qtd. in Liu). Another familiar face in Reichardt's team was Jon Raymond, whose short story "Train Choir" was

the basis for the film. Reichardt thought the original title was too “poetic” so she opted for *Wendy and Lucy*, which features the co-star, her dog, Lucy (Liu). Raymond and Reichardt worked together to adapt his story into a screenplay just as they had done for *Old Joy*: “With *Wendy and Lucy*, we devised the storyline together, and then he went off to write it as a full-fledged short story. Jon’s interested in writing about landscapes, narratives of the road, friendships—themes that are close to my own interests” (qtd. in Sholis). The only newcomer was Oscilloscope Laboratories, a New York based company established in 2008 by Adam Yauch, formerly of the music group Beastie Boys, who distributed the film and stayed on to distribute her next feature, *Meek’s Cutoff* (2010). When co-founder David Fenkel, formerly with FilmThink, was asked about how his company selected *Wendy and Lucy*, which “helped seal Oscilloscope’s reputation for quality and good results,” he explained:

‘The film had a marquee name and great buzz. And we were all very passionate about it. It did under a million theatrically but was very cost-effective. The budget to make the film was frugal and the release wasn’t advertising-driven, which drives up costs. . . . There was also much critical support. We also carefully positioned it as a prestigious film by setting the release date for December. And we did very well in ancillary because the theatrical release caught the attention of big-box retailers like Best Buy who took us on. (Tourmarkine 10)

By using a distributor who is willing to take on indie women’s films, Reichardt’s work can be distributed on DVD and receive a wider audience, as Patricia White, editor of *Camera Obscura*, notes: “Oscilloscope’s business model seems scaled to the modesty of

and targeted to the specifics of its slate and its films” (160). But even seemingly up-and-coming distributors whose mission is to fund and support independent art find doing so difficult, as seen when Fenkel left Oscilloscope a month before Adam Yach’s death in 2012. In a *New York Times* article chronicling Oscilloscope’s first year without its founders, Tim Roston found, “Of 11 theatrical releases under Oscilloscope’s current regime, none has been a critical home run, and eight took in \$100,000 or less — often much less — at the box office.” Fenkel on the other hand founded his own company, A24, and released more commercially viable films, such as the 2013 film *Spring Breakers*. Independent filmmakers need as many avenues as possible when shopping their films, and the fate of entities like Oscilloscope, a company previously able to take risks on distributing “less commercial” festival films, matters to the independent film industry.

Budget concerns are never far from independent filmmakers’ minds, and Reichardt’s budget has grown slightly with each feature film. At its release, the \$300,000 dollar budget for *Wendy and Lucy* was the largest for Reichardt. From the opening scenes, however, her creativity in making a small budget stretch through her typical aesthetic, a minimalistic neorealistic style, is evident throughout the film. During the opening scenes, Reichardt uses natural lighting and source sound as Wendy and her dog Lucy walk beside a train track. She takes advantage of the established train track to create a long dolly shot. Lucy is Reichardt’s pet, so there is no need for an animal handler, and the only sound track, for the moment, is the humming from Wendy. The exposition scenes after the film’s title credits are shot using a large campfire that serves to create shadows across Wendy’s anxious face and reinforce the instability and vulnerability of

her existence. Wendy searches for Lucy, and as dusk falls, she finds her dog with a group of “gutter punks.” Reichardt uses non-actors except for Icky (Will Oldham), for the group of travelers who are camping by the train tracks that evening. She discusses the challenges and opportunities in working with those non-actors in a *Bomb* interview with Gus Van Sant explaining that while they fit a micro-budget film’s needs they came with strings attached:

They *are* authentic train-hopping gutter punks. That was one of the hardest nights of shooting. They were demanding drugs and alcohol, and some of them were really young and pissed that we weren’t getting them drunk. A lot is gained by them being authentic, I loved shooting them through the firelight; I mean, their faces are amazing. (81)

And while Reichardt cleverly uses any available resource to shoot all her films, a matter of necessity, those types of experiences cultivate her appreciation for trained actors: “I’ve become completely sold on the art of acting over the years. It’s great to be able to do nuanced things with an actor like Michelle who is really a master of her craft. I always thought it would be easier shooting with non-actors. If you love what they’re doing when they’re doing it, then it’s the greatest, but if you want to change anything” it is very difficult (qtd. in Van Sant 81). Reichardt explained by disguising Williams, they were able to enjoy some anonymity while filming: “Michelle really loved the way she was so invisible as Wendy, how she slipped into this landscape; I don’t remember anybody recognizing her during shooting. We didn’t have the manpower to close off streets, and so it was important to slip into the environment relatively unnoticed” (qtd. in Sholis). During another outdoor scene, Wendy encounters a violent homeless man who is played

by Larry Fessenden, cofounder of Glass Eye Pix a co-producer of the film and the male lead in *River of Grass* (1995). Cutting costs by limiting personnel to six named actors and ten to thirteen crew members, casting production members as actors, and utilizing non-actors, Reichardt demonstrated the ingenuity necessary for micro-budget indie filmmaking.

While practical decisions about production are driven in part by budget concerns, they are also influenced by the aesthetic Reichardt strives to convey. Because she adheres to a minimalist style, Reichardt is very deliberate about her decisions with sound throughout the film. The only soundtrack other than source sound is the “Wendy Theme Music.” Spectators are introduced to the whimsical hum during the opening shot of Wendy walking and playing with Lucy and immediately begin to associate Wendy with the song. Williams was asked about the creation of “Wendy Theme Music” during a question and answer session at the film’s premier:

I spend a lot of time preparing for it [the role] alone, . . . There is something you do when you are unobserved for hours and hours and hours on end [as the role required]. I thought about humming and every time I would hum I would find myself humming a copyright song. I couldn’t make my own melody . . . he [Will Oldham] threw me a song with guitar picking . . . so it is some combination of his song and something in my head. (qtd. in Reichardt)

Spectators hear a variation of Williams’s humming broadcast over the grocery store sound system when Wendy enters to steal dog food. It is another way to imprint her theme music on the audience and was arranged by Smokey Hormel, a musician who

worked with Reichardt on *Old Joy*. Besides the “Wendy Theme Music,” Reichardt opted for naturally occurring sound. Parking dogs in an animal shelter, busy traffic at a four way intersection, doves cooing on electrical street lines, starts and stops from a bus, Mattress World advertisements and even Wendy’s tears and sobs are all used as a soundtrack throughout the film. Besides the hum, the most iconic sounds Reichardt inserts are of the trains. She explains her process by saying: “I do have a list of sounds that I want when we start filming. . . . I just didn’t want to romanticize the film in any way. I tried to use the train and traffic as I would use a score” (qtd. in Liu). The film opens in a train yard and closes in one with train tracks featured throughout so viewers have a foreshadowing of the last scene. While it might seem like a simple matter of recording actual trains, filming logistics are a challenge: “Recording trains is just so incredibly hard. They’re far, and then they’re close, and when they’re close, they’re noisy. So some of these trains are stolen from Gus Van Sant’s *Paranoid Park*, trains they didn’t use . . . I was like, ‘I need a train! Yours are so much better than ours’” (qtd. in Liu). Networking with a fellow indie filmmaker who uses the same producer, Neil Kopp, and the same sound designer, Leslie Shatz, is yet another way Reichardt keeps costs controlled. These budget saving ideas also drive Reichardt’s filming techniques and add to her aesthetic.

### **Neo-Neorealism**

Reichardt’s aesthetic, closely linked to the 1940s Italian Neorealism, is used to expose social injustice and socioeconomic issues of the working class poor in *Wendy and Lucy*. In several interviews, Reichardt discusses how her influences inspired the focus of her film. “We [Jon Raymond] were watching a lot of Italian Neorealism and thinking the



themes of those films seem to ring true for life in American in the Bush years,” she explained to Van Sant (78). She returned to the point in another interview, saying: “we definitely went back to neorealism, since many of those themes seemed so relevant at the time: the unions, the depression and so on” (Liu). Reichardt explores what happens to people when they seemingly hold no value to society, a theme from the Italian Neorealist films. Wendy, like many in Italy after World War II who were jobless, desperately wants to find work but until she gets to Alaska, she is a “blight” on those around her: “In those films [Italian Neorealist] there’s the theme of certain people not being of any use to society—maybe they’re too old or poor so they’re a blight—they’re like stray dogs” (qtd. in Van Sant 78). The open ending of Reichardt’s film leaves spectators space to decide themselves whether Wendy is a “blight” on society or if her struggles will elevate her economic situation. When asked about the inception for the film during a New York Film festival interview and in *Bomb* magazine, Reichardt interweaves struggles between capitalism and environmentalism to explain:

the seeds of the story came about right after Katrina . . . after hearing talk about people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, and hearing the presumption that people’s lives were so precarious due to some laziness on their part. In the country, poverty isn’t something you just ignore anymore. There is a real distain for it . . . we imagined Wendy as a renter; no insurance, just making ends meet, and a fire occurs due to no fault of her own and she loses her place to live. We don’t know her back story in the film but we imagined Wendy was in that kind of predicament.

(Reichardt; Van Sant 78)

In Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, Lamberto Maggiorani is in a similar predicament—deemed valueless by society until finding a job—one that requires transportation. He reacquires his pawned bike only for it to be stolen. He, like Wendy, loses himself through unethical behavior, although Wendy does not seem as vexed about her decision to steal dog food as Maggiorani does about stealing a bike—after all the stakes for the victim of a stolen bike in 1940's Italy are much higher. Reichardt explains that she was revisiting and influenced by the New German cinema and the British Angry Young Men films as well as the Italians—"films that were rooted in issues of class and whose heroes are confronted with difficult situations that often seem beyond their control" (qtd. in Sholis). While spectators feel sympathy for Lamberto, Reichardt believes Americans who live in an abundant society, unlike Italians after World War II, might have a different take on Wendy: "There was a time when this kind of character would seem heroic, but nowadays there doesn't seem to be too much support in American for any kind of truly alternative lifestyle" (qtd. in Sholis). This "alternative lifestyle" in reference to *Wendy and Lucy* translates as extreme poverty and homelessness. In a 2009 article, *New York Times* critic, A.O. Scott asks "why realism" is used so prevalently in contemporary indie film; he answers by suggesting the connection between Reichardt's characters and the Italian Neorealist style is that "[n]eorealism rests equally on the acknowledgment that life is hard and the recognition that life goes on, that there is something in human nature that will persist in the face of defeat" (A38). Critics like A.O. Scott call *Wendy and Lucy*'s aesthetic neo-neorealism and explains that "in the United States, Neorealism had sent up only fragile shoots, popping up at the edges even of what is habitually and somewhat misleadingly known as independent film" (A38).

Reichardt's decision to use neorealist techniques, whether out of economic necessity or not, give her works a distinctive look. Neorealism allows Reichardt an artistic avenue for political and social expression through form, avoiding prior feminist films' overt didacticism: "Their [neorealists'] art lies not in their messages but in their discovery of a mysterious, volatile alloy of documentary and theatrical elements" (Scott A38). This is evident in Reichardt's film as she mixes neorealism with innovative forms such as "slow cinema" and stark minimalism to create distinctive films that command audience engagement and reflection.

Reichardt uses realism, the adopted tool of dominant ideologies, to show audiences the overlooked or marginalized: women, poor and working class people, and the homeless. In "Image and Voice: Approaches to Marxist-Feminist Film Criticism," Christine Gledhill discusses Roland Barthes's claim that "Realism . . . produces myth" instead of a reflection of reality and concludes technology and form, such as newsreel footage, can be just as, or at times more, realistic than a film's content (115). D. W. Griffith found that mixing a representation of history with fiction in *Birth of a Nation* gave the illusion of reality, and Gledhill underscores this: "Realism, as a particular mode, depends on adherence to historically specific conventions that 'signify' (rather than 'reflect') reality" (113). Filmmakers perpetuate or 'signify' patriarchal and capitalist agendas, knowingly or not, because "the realistic image of the world is not a simple reflection of real life but a highly mediated production of cinematic practice" (113). If this means all representations of reality are really "myth" and a "production" instead of a reflection, subversive filming techniques and content are central to obtaining alternative versions of reality. Gledhill suggests that neo-Marxism "changes the projection of

criticism from the discovery of meaning to that of uncovering the means of its production” (114).

In a 1995 interview with *Bomb* magazine, Todd Haynes asked Reichardt whether “truth in movies motivated” her and she replied: “I do like realism in the movies—just not to the point where you aren’t sure why you’re at the movies.” Reichardt uses a realistic aesthetic to subversively deconstruct patriarchal and capitalistic agendas. While her use of narrative deconstruction varies, her most recent films work in a seamless way, without drawing attention to the act of filming, and instead ask spectators to read into her contradictions. One example of these contradictions is seen in the choice to cast a well-known star, Michelle Williams, to represent a lower class woman tumbling toward homelessness, turning her into an “everywoman” who buys into the capitalistic ideology that leads to extreme poverty thus using the medium to speak to the current economic downturn endured by many Americans when the film was released in 2008.

Kelly Reichardt’s work subtly but effectively exposes capitalist ideologies using a female-centered narrative, “neo-neorealism,” and socioeconomically conscious content. Gledhill quotes Jean Luc Godard, director of *Breathless* (1960) in asserting that a filmmaker’s job is “not to reflect reality but to expose the reality of the reflection” and in so doing-subvert the normalizing effect that capitalism and patriarchal culture impose on art through its “construction of reality” (115). In *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt reflects a picture of social realities for the American working class and poor in the wake of unexpected widespread natural devastation, such as Hurricane Katrina, the homeless lower working classes without savings or insurance were unable to recover reinforcing that for them, the “American Dream” is a myth. In both versions of the narrative,

Raymond's short story and Reichardt's film adaptation, Wendy is unable to get back on her feet after an unexpected loss in her hometown of Muncie, Indiana. Like many Americans teetering toward homelessness, Wendy has bought into the myth of an American Dream that is unobtainable.

In her adaptation, Reichardt removes the expositional dialogue from Raymond's short story which would explain Wendy's prior situation and current contemplations so audiences rely on Michelle Williams's body language and inferences; in fact in an interview Reichardt says "there is so much internal about her" when referring to Williams's style of acting. Viewers are left to guess at Wendy's thoughts while Raymond's readers get narration concerning the American Dream she thinks will be one step closer once she arrives in Alaska to work: "[Wendy] refused to let the fantasy get any larger than that. The notion of actually getting ahead was not even worth contemplating. All she hoped for was firm ground under her feet. The dream of a house with a fenced-in yard and rosebushes would wait for another time" (217). Raymond's words, more hopeful in tone, correlate to the opening scene of the film as Wendy and Lucy walk together and play. By the end of the story and the film, however, Wendy chooses to say goodbye to her dog since Lucy is closer than Wendy to achieving a stable life in her foster home. This is one example of how both artists examine a crippling neoliberal economy and a capitalism that marginalizes poor populations. Wendy wants the house with a picket fence and this fantasy serves the patriarchal and capitalistic bottom line, but in reality, as shown in Reichardt's film, when Wendy tearfully lets Lucy stay at her new home, these dreams are not only myths for many working class people, such as Wally, but contribute to their poverty. In Raymond's short story, Wendy ties her

missteps to consumerism: “Somewhere, she knew, she has gone wrong, but for the life of her she couldn’t tell where. Images of her new couch—destroyed by the flood—plagued her, and she tried to banish them from her mind” (242-43). While viewers never receive this back story in the film, it is an easily imagined scenario for Americans. Toward the beginning of the short story, Wendy mentions wanting to pay off her Visa card indicating, that like many Americans, she worked low wage jobs, lived hand to mouth, and bought the capitalist vision of “having it all” by putting purchases on credit. If disaster strikes, of any form, working class poor, like Wendy, can teeter toward homelessness. It is in the final scene with the mechanic, Will Patton, as he is explaining her car cannot be fixed, that audiences see this realization hit Wendy. She stands, listening to his technical explanation, eyes wide at first in anger, then denial, and then finally after he takes a phone call, allowing her a moment to turn away and fully grasp the situation, defeat. With a few sentences, Raymond says what Reichardt is working to convey in body language—that consumerism and the mythical American dream have begun Wendy’s spiral into homelessness.

### **Gender and the Narrative of Homelessness**

It is through the lens of gender that *Wendy and Lucy* makes spectators grapple with stereotypes and realities of being homeless in America. Reichardt’s stark neorealistic style tells a hidden story of homeless women, one that contradicts stereotypes of homelessness—being black, Hispanic, or mentally unstable. As pointed out by Michael Sicinski in his review of *Wendy and Lucy* for *Cineaste*, Wendy seems to lack the identifying characteristics of homelessness. She is Caucasian, lacks dirt under her fingernails, stained clothing, and blackened or missing teeth. Sicinski asks whether Raymond

and Reichardt are proposing two unreconciled images of Wendy, the “rebellious college student” mixed with the “fashion accoutrements” of the “drifter, tramp, hobo, derelict” to construct a narrative so “an upscale, mostly white bourgeois art-house audience [can] mentally elide [those tropes] during the act of spectatorship.” Viewers might compare Wendy to a typical college student who is a novice on the streets as illustrated by her inability to successfully shoplift, but there are many indications that Wendy is not a “rebellious college student” on a road trip. Not only does the opening scene show viewers a possible future for Wendy, since she too is reduced to train hopping by the end, but it also creates space for the introduction of Icky (Will Oldham). His inclusion functions to create an expectation or model of the typical Alaskan cannery employee; a college education is not necessary for the labor intensive work required at the Alaskan canneries. Besides the choice of future employment, the fact that Wendy does not have a reliable phone number or an address is a tell-tale sign she is not simply a college student on a road trip but instead one misstep away from complete homelessness. She is one of the many women in America who as Rose Aguilar, host of the radio show *The Call* and author of a 2013 article on homeless women in *The Nation*, discusses in an interview on National Public Radio’s *Here and Now*:

You’ll notice that 95 percent of them [San Francisco’s homeless] are men because the streets of San Francisco are far too dangerous for women. And so the women are mostly invisible. And the women that I’ve found, they don’t ‘look homeless.’ We’ve got that media image of that guy on the corner screaming, well these women take good care of themselves. They don’t have tattered clothing. They don’t smell. They might be riding on a

public transportation system sitting next to you and you don't even know it.

According to Aguilar, many homeless women ride all night on busses or find twenty-four-hour coffee shops because being a homeless woman is very dangerous. After Wendy reluctantly phones her sister and brother-in-law, viewers realize she has no familial support since her sister, after hearing about the Honda breakdown, offers nothing financially or even emotionally saying, "What does she want us to do about it. We can't do anything. We're strapped. I don't know what she wants," and then hangs up. Her brother-in-law, while more emotionally accessible, simply repeats to Wendy, before hanging up, "everything is fine" to seemingly satisfy only himself. Many homeless women have families, like Wendy, and one interviewed by Aguilar, Susan, seemed particularly reminiscent of Wendy's own family disconnect: "I have six children, but I'm not close to them currently. I have lived with my family in the past but it just didn't work out." Susan, like Wendy, is on the west coast and with the approach of spring was soon to be kicked out of her winter shelter. Susan's comment echoes Wendy's possible thoughts as she faces costly car repairs and walks away from the fruitless family phone call: "You always think it's someone else and when you are in this situation you can't believe it's you and I think you think your family will be there for you and they're not." For Wendy, her only reliable family is her dog Lucy, and their relationship represented far more than simply companionship.

While not focusing exclusively on homeless women, Ari Shapiro, on his radio broadcast *Talk of the Nation* tackled questions about American poverty and



homelessness. One female caller identified as Elbe from San Antonio, Texas, touched on why homeless women need animal companionship:

I just want to say, when I was homeless, I had a dog. I used my dog as protection because I was just a single young woman on the streets . . . there's a lot of young women that are out on the street that are completely homeless . . . a lot of them have dogs for protection so they don't get raped or murdered or something.

Andy, the young male grocery employee who catches Wendy stealing dog food, like many middle-class Americans, does not understand the importance of a dog to homeless women and opines: “If a person can’t afford dog food, they shouldn’t have a dog!” Elbe’s rationalizations for keeping a dog are reinforced by Reichardt when Wendy camps without her dog at the back of a wooded community park. A homeless man (Larry Fessenden) finds Wendy asleep, near the train tracks, and after sorting through her pack, wakes her up with his deranged rants. At one point Wendy looks up directly at the man and he immediately yells, “Don’t look at me.” Reichardt forces audiences to lie still with Wendy, eyes shut tight, as he works himself up into a rage saying: “I’m out here trying to be a good boy, but they won’t let me. They’ve got to know I’ve killed over 700 people with my bare hands.” One loose implication is that he might be a military veteran and is now reduced to homelessness, poverty, and untreated mental illness. In Raymond’s short story, the homeless man shares a much more violent and graphic tale and alludes to his veteran status by saying, “We’re never going to win this war” and “we lost, man” (246). Not only is Reichardt commenting on the vulnerability of homeless women but also the high numbers of veterans in poverty or homeless. Viewers leave the scene, like Wendy,

shaken and terrified at what could have happened and wondering what might happen in her future without a dog or safe shelter. Reichardt revealed that she did not see much hope at the end of *Wendy and Lucy*, and in fact Gus Van Sant went further by saying, “This one [compared to her prior films] has a sense of downward spiral to the point where it’s devastating” reflecting the hopelessness and dangers homeless women face on a daily basis (78).

Reichardt creates space in her characterization of Wendy in an effort to broaden viewer definitions of poverty and homelessness, and in effect, offers an alternative to the stereotypical privileged white patriarchal perspective. Many might argue that Wendy’s bad judgments created her precarious position since she decided to drive cross country in a twenty-year-old car, budgeted no emergency money, opted to travel to Alaska for a job, stole dog food, slept in a park at night, decided against receiving money for aluminum cans, and did not carry a cell phone. However, others would argue these were not choices but instead a result of economical demands and/or lack of education or family support. When she steals food for Lucy, Wendy’s focus is to feed her family. She is not thinking about repercussions nor does she seem disturbed morally by stealing from the store, which might indicate the frequency of this act. Either way, there is no trace of “rebellion or a competitive sport,” as some critics have indicated, in her approach to finding food.

A more focused look at the grocery store debate and a deeper knowledge of the original short story rebuke the idea that Wendy’s characterization is crafted to appeal to a “white bourgeois art-house audience.” While Reichardt decides not to adapt what would seemingly have been a lengthy shot of Wendy’s internal monologue at the grocery store, Jon Raymond goes into detail about her grocery trip in the short story. Through internal

narrative, readers learn Wendy prefers to buy in bulk as opposed to single cans, and Reichardt hints at this preference when Wendy pulls the large, empty dog food bag out of her trunk. In the story, she compares prices and ingredients before deciding to steal, indicating that her decision is fueled by logic:

In the worst-case scenario, she figured, she could always steal food, but that was not the case with such things as gas or car repairs. . . . Three cans of premium dog food equaled almost two gallons of gas, [Wendy] calculated, which in turn equaled almost fifty miles of road. . . . She and Lucy needed just enough to last a matter of days, that was all. (217-18)

Wendy is prioritizing her safety over food as do many lower working class or homeless women.

*Wendy and Lucy* not only focuses on the precarious position of the lower working classes and homeless American women but also questions social and governmental responsibilities to its citizens. Collecting recyclable items often helps support those in poverty, and Wendy is no different. During the recycle center scene, Wendy tries to turn in a bag of aluminum cans but is pressured by a wheelchair bound man to leave as the wait is not worth her time, so Wendy reluctantly hands her collection to him. In essence the scene is about assumptions; Wendy is being judged by her appearance and then pressured by the assumption that she is not in real need and does not belong in an aluminum can recycle line. In this scene, the film illustrates hierarchies within the homeless communities and debunks assumptions about the authenticity of homelessness. Wendy seems to be in a liminal position as she does not meet either a white patriarchal society's homeless image or the poverty level dictated by under-classes. The reality,

however, is that the money from those cans might have kept Wendy from stealing dog food, which would have contributed to a more hopeful ending.

### **Social Realism and the At-Risk vs. the Can-do Girl**

While Raymond and Reichardt fault a capitalistic society for Wendy's situation, a discussion of individual accountability and poor judgment might suggest that Wendy should be labeled as an "at-risk girl." In her book *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-first Century*, Anita Harris discusses socially desirable "can-do girl" in comparison to the undesirable "at-risk girl." The can-do girl is an example of a girl who has professional aspirations and the support structures to attain those goals. She is what many western countries see as the future work force and ideal citizen. Harris discusses the many ways can-do girl is monitored so she follows a path toward success, which is symbolized through her ability to purchase and consume (21). Because Wendy, and others like her, have no access to cell phones or social media, they are less easily monitored and conditioned to follow through with the can-do girl ideology of achievement. Capitalistic and consumer markets have a strong interest in creating as many can-do girls as possible and vilifying those who choose or fall into alternative life paths: "the emphasis on the resilience and achievements of young women is matched by a concern, even a moral panic, that at least some of them are not succeeding as they should be. . . . The construction of the can-do girls and the remaindering of the others in the at-risk category" are crucial to create and maintain a regulatory system for their behavior (Harris 16). At every turn Wendy is sanctioned by this "regulatory system" for not fitting into American middle class consumerism, but no more so than in her dealings with the mechanic. The Honda, her most valuable monetary position, is cast as worthless by the

standards of a disposable culture, so much so that the option of selling the vehicle for scrap metal is never mentioned. As an at-risk girl, Wendy herself becomes disposable when the mechanic suggests solution to her: “I tell you what, just make it thirty bucks for the tow, for the [pause] to junk it and everything and that will be it.” The mechanic is fulfilling the monitoring role for society by explaining his priority is to make a profit, as hers should be, and he must get her car off his lot to make room for paying customers. In other words, Wendy should give up her Alaskan trip, go home, and fall in line with young women who contribute economically to society. While the grocery store clerk, Andy, also monitors Wendy’s behavior, the interactions between Wendy and the mechanic illustrate the extreme vulnerability of the lower classes.

As seen in Wendy’s case, Harris explains the at-risk girl is one who may have professional aspirations but lacks the support structure to achieve those goals; she may live in a violent neighborhood or extremely rural one with parents who are either uneducated about the process of reaching their daughter’s goals or have a different vision for her—one that may include working to support the family instead of pursuing further education (26-7). Harris notes that since western governments have a vested interest in creating consumer oriented can-do girls with little concern about the effects of constant achievement, the “at risk girl” is demonized as not having tried hard enough and placing herself in jeopardy resulting from poor choices: “Success and failure are constructed as though they were dependent on strategic effort and good personal choices” (Harris 32) and “failure is deemed to be the consequence of an individual limitation . . . it is the idea that good choices, effort, and ambition alone are responsible for success that has come to separate the can-dos from the at-risks” (Harris 15). While Reichardt’s protagonist

qualifies as an at-risk girl because of her rural roots, lack of family support structure, and her poor choices, Wendy is Caucasian and has delayed motherhood, the latter being one of the qualities of the can-do girl. Reichardt mixes qualities of Harris's two categories in her characterization to create an emotional conflict for audiences who have been conditioned to monitor and regulate girls at risk. Viewers are introduced to the complexity of poverty in America and instead of faulting individual motivation and accomplishment, they might begin to question their own adherence to a social system that fails an at-risk-girl: "The construction of the at-risk girl serves to house a diversity of marginalized youth whose problems are rarely named as structural" (Harris 35). These categories are ultimately created, as Harris indicates, to take focus away from the failures of the social system and place them back on the individual who typically has little to no options. Whether from the grocery store manager, the police, or the mechanic, viewers keep waiting for Wendy to find assistance, but with Reichardt's neo-realistic style, it never happens and she is forced to leave Lucy and train-hop to Alaska. Reichardt is filming a hauntingly universal story for the under-classes of America, especially in the wake of climate change and natural disasters.

### **Ecofeminist Concerns**

Reichardt interweaves gender and social politics with subtle environmental commentary, while her form highlights feminist concerns. Spectators see through the eyes of a female protagonist, living her fears, anxieties, and loneliness as the camera privileges her through point of view shots. Reichardt uses this combination to voice her social and environmental concerns without being overly didactic, and Wendy's victimization by a neoliberal economy can be analyzed through the lens of ecofeminist

theory. Ecofeminist Serpil Oppermann defines ecofeminism as “subverting all gendered associations. It sheds light on the complex interconnections of gender, sexuality, ecology, and ideology that have impacts beyond women’s bodies” (2-3). In this context, ecofeminism draws comparisons between unjust treatment of humans to the pollution and destruction of the environment. Ecofeminism emphasizes the cyclical nature of human connections to each other and to the planet. As Reichardt mentions, the inception of her film stemmed from witnessing the devastation of lower working class populations after natural disasters and Wendy, according to Raymond’s story, has lost everything to flooding. One of the larger implications of Reichardt’s film is the political idea, championed by ecofeminism, to raise the average middle class American’s awareness of the impact capitalist practices have on the lower working classes and the environment. Through her chapter, “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina” in *Material Feminisms*, Nancy Tuana echoes Reichardt’s environmental message in *Wendy and Lucy*:

As the phenomenon of Katrina’s devastation had taught us all too well, the knowledge that is too often missing and is often desperately needed is at the intersection between things and people . . . between experiences and bodies. . . . [Hurricane] Katrina then is emblematic of the porosity between humans and our environment, between social practices and natural phenomena. (189, 193)

As Tuana indicates, the consequences of natural disasters include personal disasters and are inherently linked, illustrating the fragility of lower classes worldwide and the need for capitalist societies to make changes in consumption and slow destructive impacts on the environment.

Each of Reichardt's feature films juxtapose natural beauty with scenes of environmental exploitation and its consequences starting with the development of the Florida Everglades, the illegal dumping or urban sprawl in Oregon, to the 1800's rush for land settlements near the Cascade Mountains. All of these environments represent a home for their inhabitants, but in *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt seems to be challenging middle class definitions of what constitutes a home. The idea or definition of home is also complicated by ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard's in her article "New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism." Besides articulating the need for ecocriticism to further acknowledge contributions by feminist ideology, she discusses the similarities between place studies and ecofeminist ecoregionalism saying "'place studies' seems to have pre-empted earlier concerns about bioregionalism and the 'nature of home' that have been foundational issues in ecofeminism" (654). By using historical placement of women in the home, Gaard discusses the potential isolating affect and the "undervaluing" of the domestic sphere by patriarchal culture since "home" is a place for "women, children, slaves, servants, and nonhuman animals" noting that "a person's worth is gauged in monetary terms" in the public sphere (655). In *Wendy and Lucy*, viewers are given a different set of circumstances to grapple with: a woman in the public sphere, with no obvious home, and no monetary worth. According to Gaard, "'Home' needs to be understood as 'a set of relationships, a series of contextual experiences,' and a place of connection where one lives physically, where one is emotionally connected, and where one is part of a community of beings" (656). Gaard's resonating message is for material and resource consumers to conceive of the environment as a shared home in an effort to reduce negative environmental impacts (656). As ecofeminists push for a



redefinition of “home,” Gaard’s ideology applies to the meaning of home in *Wendy and Lucy*. Using Gaard’s definition of home, Wendy becomes homeless, first, by losing her apartment through natural causes, second, by losing Lucy, who acts as her “home” in the sense of emotional investment and connection, and third, by losing her car which is the last signifier of value to the “community of [consumer] beings.” Traditional vestiges of home are represented during Wendy’s pay phone conversation with her sister right after she loses Lucy. It is clear that Wendy lacks a family home with her sister or brother-in-law, and there is no parallel scene in Raymond’s short story of the pay phone exchange suggesting that Reichardt wants to highlight Wendy’s lack of options as well as her loss of support or access to any traditional home. Instead of a pay phone scene, Raymond addresses Wendy’s loss of home, as interpreted through Gaard’s definition, “one is part of a community of beings,” with his description of her reaction to the cost of the car repair: “Overhead, the lights seemed to flutter, and for a moment she worried the whole world might disappear. But in fact nothing happened; the world remained as it was. . . . Her problems had no discernible effect on anything beyond herself whatsoever” (253). Wendy feels outside of any community and her isolation is enhanced by the stoicism projected by Williams after the pay phone and the mechanic scenes. In both cases, Williams elicits tense motionlessness with no emotional outbursts giving her spiral into complete homelessness an almost tangible weight.

By opting to adapt Raymond’s short story about the effects of capitalism on the poor and adding environmental elements connecting consumerism to natural disasters, Reichardt uses narrative to hold an audience’s emotional involvement in a way news clips covering disasters are incapable of achieving. Reichardt’s film seeks to overcome

the “materializ[ation] [of] ignorance” that exists before and shortly after life altering storms such as Hurricane Katrina, as Tuana explains:

the poverty Katrina forced us to witness came as a ‘shock’ to the nation as it watched news coverage of Katrina’s wake. This serves as an interesting lens for considering some of the ways that ignorance is materialized and the various institutions and motives that have a stake in the production and maintenance of ignorance. (203)

Tuana insinuates that ignorance about Americans in poverty serves corporate interests since maintaining an image of economic status quo perpetuates middle class spending. In interviews, Reichardt agrees with ecofeminists’ agenda stating “[t]here’s political in the personal” and thus creates a need for “restructuring power and challenging unequal power relationships [with] the goal of transforming economic, political, and institutional structures, . . . for the defense of threatened areas and oppressed groups [with an agreement that] there is no separating the personal from the political” (Stewart; Gaard 656). *Wendy and Lucy* supports this agenda by reminding viewers who the “oppressed groups” are and how quickly they fade from memory after disaster strikes, as the following editorial from the September 19, 2005, issue of *Newsweek* notes:

It takes a hurricane. It takes a catastrophe like Katrina to strip away the old evasions, hypocrisies and not-so-benign neglect. . . . For the moment, at least, Americans are ready to fix their restless gaze on enduring problems of poverty, race, and class that have escaped their attention. Does this mean a new war on poverty? No, especially with Katrina’s gargantuan price tag. (qtd. in Tuana 204)

The fragmentation of documentaries and news programs can distance viewers from a tragedy especially when they involve large numbers of victims; however, Reichardt's use of a narrative instead of photography, documentary, or news clips seems to keep audiences fully present and invested in Wendy's plight. Gus Van Sant explains how the film's narrative about poverty resonated with him: "After watching *Wendy and Lucy*, it [realization of poverty's effects] was just palpable. It was so omnipresent. I was part of the film, but the film had stopped. . . . It's a delicate thing to get somebody into a feeling that they can't actually get rid of right away" (78). Using a narrative format to depict her characters' situations, Reichardt keeps poverty and survival in the forefront of audiences' minds during and long after viewing the film.

The ability for audiences and critics to broaden their perspective concerning homelessness is key to Reichardt's agenda as she explains in a 2008 interview with *Artforum*: "I think of [*Wendy and Lucy*] as being shot in 'ugly America'—it's a beige film, full of flat, anonymous walls that were difficult to deal with (qtd. in Sholis). This style creates a claustrophobic effect allowing spectators to empathize with Wendy's trapped situation. While the entire film voices concern for those in poverty, a discussion between Wendy and Wally reflects the fears and frustrations experienced by Americans during the US housing crisis which began in early 2006 and cost thousands of Americans their homes and livelihood. In an unprecedented move, the Bush Administration subsidized the private and governmental agencies that made housing loans or financed risky mortgages in an effort to stabilize the economy. Many blamed these banks and organizations for the economic downturn, but according to *The Journal of Business Inquiry* "the primary cause of the recession was the credit crisis resulting from the

bursting of the housing bubble” (Holt 120). While trust in government support teetered, trust in private corporations and economic systems such as the markets were lost. The fear, lack of trust, and the frustrations with a jobless economy is articulated as Wendy sits beside Wally, the Walgreen’s Security Guard, discussing the decline of jobs in the area and the widening gap between economic classes:

Wendy. Not a lot of jobs around here, are there?

Wally. I’ll say. I don’t know what the people do all day. Used to be a mill, but that’s been closed a long time now.

Wendy. You can’t get a job without an address anyway, or a phone.

Wally. You can’t get an address without an address. You can’t get a job without a job. It’s all fixed.

When Wally implies that the system is “fixed” he is directly referring to corporate greed and capitalistic mentalities as a rationale for why lower working class and poverty stricken Americans cannot improve their economic status or secure a job. Reichardt has created two “everyperson” characters and in this scene they discuss the key themes of the film; audiences clearly hear Raymond and Reichardt’s own frustration with the government inability to support its citizens.

While *Wendy and Lucy* does not highlight a working class woman’s struggle to feed and shelter her children as does Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River* (2008) and Debra Granik’s *Winter’s Bone* (2010), it is a similar story of struggle and sacrifice. Unlike her counterparts, Reichardt makes the care of a dog, not children, central to the plot while still focusing on “the terrible effects of a neoliberal capitalism [that] have become much more visible and tangible” (Ortner 194). In her book, *Not Hollywood: Independent Film*

at the *Twilight of the American Dream*, Sherry Ortner discusses the vulnerability of America's working class and echoes Reichardt's and other female filmmakers' concerns: "The point about people in lower-class positions, . . . is not just that they're poor—have less money, less things—but that their lives are much more insecure. They have less margin of error and are much closer to some edge where their lives may start coming apart" (194). By focusing on class structure, *Wendy and Lucy* speaks to the financial fears of middle class American women as discussed by Ortner:

For many Americans, then, the working class can never be totally Other, or at least, it is always part Other and part self. Unlike most Others, working-class figures thus create very powerful possibilities for identification and dis-identification . . . these films can be read as telling stories about the implications of the contemporary neoliberal economy not only for poor women but for many middle-class women who face the specter of downward mobility for themselves and their children. (190)

Contemporary women's films that focus on poverty and female struggle use class issues as an equalizer as well as an attempt to illuminate poor women's struggles. By using neo-realism and minimalistic aesthetics, Reichardt confronts the damage done by a neoliberal economy and mirrors a possible reality for many middle-class women who would prefer to keep this depiction of the Other an impossibility. She differs from her contemporaries, however, by depicting a lower class woman sinking deeper into poverty with little to no hope while Granik and Hunt end with a glimmer of hope for their female protagonists. The emphasis on consumer goods in *Wendy and Lucy*, such as the Honda and the dog food, reflects the post-feminist concerns that consumerism gives power to

women and a middle-class fear of that lack of power: “the loss of the ability to shop and consume is seen as one of the worst imaginable fates for a middle-class women” (Ortner 195). In Granik and Hunt’s films, the female protagonists find a way to perpetuate this post-feminist version of power, securing their purchases, but Wendy not only fails at keeping her home but also loses her “child” in the process. This type of open ending, Ortner points out, illustrates that “people in the lower levels of society can always drop down even lower, with even more disastrous effects” and when Wendy begins her slow economic decent, the film “creates even more powerful images of the potential devastation of downward mobility” for middle-class audiences (194). While Ortner reads these films as “allegories of the potential fate of any women in the new social order, in which neoliberal policies, greater likelihood of divorce, and various patriarchal biases combine to render women particularly vulnerable to downward mobility,” with these films, female filmmakers are also working to define a new style or representation of feminist politics (197-8). Reichardt and many of her contemporary female filmmakers shy away from officially declaring themselves feminists as many women do who use post-feminist concerns to define their ideology. Ortner discusses Mary Harron (*Anna Nicole*, 2013) who, like Reichardt, also claims not to be a feminist filmmaker nor one that is pushing a political agenda. This type of post-feminism is explained by Ortner as a lack of organizational structure for third wave feminism which second wave depended upon:

In that sense they [female directed films] are indeed ‘post-feminist,’ that is, they have absorbed the concerns of the feminist movement and to some degree take them for granted. But this does not mean that the filmmakers

do not see—and represent—the continuing urgency of those concerns in the contemporary world. (195)

In keeping with a trend in independent women's films of raising awareness through telling marginalized women's stories, Reichardt highlights women's concerns in all her films but refuses to offer lasting political or social solutions, possibly to avoid didacticism. While both Granik and Hunt have more hopeful endings compared to Reichardt's film, they also offer no sustainable path for their protagonists who will still have to feed and provide safety and shelter for themselves and their families.

Through raising public awareness with *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt seems to be filing a formal complaint against a government that allows private markets to wreak havoc on working class and poor populations. Wendy is unable to maintain society's economic or behavioral expectations of the can-do girl and is deemed disposable. Her downward spiral into homelessness with no safety net, family or financial, is only one life story in thousands since the mid-2000s environmental and economic disasters. Reichardt's choice to highlight American women's experience of poverty through Wendy creates a non-didactic space for spectators to redefine their definition of homelessness and demonstrates how, from an ecofeminist point of view, all Americans should share a measure of accountability. Reichardt's critique of American values as they relate to women and the environment continues in her subsequent 2010 film. In *Meek's Cutoff*, *Wendy and Lucy's* social realist concern with current environmental and political crisis is subtly shifted back to the nineteenth century debate around Manifest Destiny and its effects on the landscape and native peoples.

## Chapter VI: Expectations – *Meek's Cutoff*

“Is he ignorant or is he just plan evil? That’s my quandary. It’s impossible to know.” ~ Emily

“The challenge with this kind of filmmaking is turning all the limitations into something that works in your favor, something that adds to the frailty of the story itself.” ~ Kelly Reichardt

Based on true events in the history of the Oregon Trail, Kelly Reichardt’s fourth feature, *Meek’s Cutoff* (2010) is a story of survival, endurance, and trust. Chapter five focuses on the film’s female perspective of settling the American west from the mundane daily tasks to extraordinary and frightening encounters. Highlighting “Otherness” as an issue, Reichardt interweaves issues of race, leadership, community, and gender into her film, which is based on historical accounts of the infamous “Terrible Trail.” Set in 1845, it is a period piece that tells the difficult journey of immigrants in search of homesteads. Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood) convinces a group of pioneers to take a supposedly safer and shorter route through the Oregon desert and audiences join the caravan just as the travelers realize they are lost. When Meek and Solomon Tetherow (Will Paton) capture a Cayuse tribesman (Rob Rondeaux) it is Emily Tetherow (Michelle Williams) who ultimately assumes leadership, confronts Meek, and establishes trust in their Cayuse guide. Reichardt offers a subversive allegory, questioning representations of traditional genre, style, and content with her feminist Western that is presented in a “slow cinematic” style, with political and social content that connects history to the present day.



### **The Real Story of Meek**

Kelly Reichardt again engaged Jon Raymond's talents for *Meek's Cutoff*, but instead of co-writing an adaptation from one of his stories as with *Old Joy* and *Wendy and Lucy*, Raymond, as Reichardt laughingly explains,

selfishly, selfishly, went directly to the script. . . . I'm usually figuring out how to shoot during the process of adapting his short stories into screenplays, but this time he really screwed me on that. And as much as I love the voices Jon created for the nine characters . . . the heart of things rests almost completely outside the dialogue. (S.Adams; Ponsoldt)

The true story of "The Terrible Trail" was rediscovered by Raymond as he was conducting research for a development company in Bend, Oregon. His employers wanted local historical names to brand golf courses or properties with and it was this that inspired his work on the screenplay. In several interviews both Raymond and Reichardt discuss how the "infamous episode of the early Oregon Trail" inspired the film (S. Adams). Stephen Meek (1808-86) was the younger brother of a very successful mountain man and governor of the Oregon territory, Joe Meek (S. Adams). In an early scene, Meek is entertaining ten-year-old Jimmy White (Tommy Nelson) with a story of his brother Joe fighting and then eating a grizzly bear; he ends the story of his brother's bravery with the lines that become synonymous with his character, "Hell is full of bears, Jimmy, but there are no bears here." As the mistrust for him grows, Meek fills silence with references to what hell is filled with and the irony that they are in their own hell is not lost on the audience. Stephen Meek lived in the shadow of his brother and thought taking Tetherow and 1000 to 1500 immigrants on a short cut from "Fort Boise, Idaho, to across the centre

of Oregon Country to the plentiful Willamette Valley, thus avoiding the hostile Cayuse and Walla Walla Indians on the tried route that led northwest into the Blue Mountains and along the Columbia River to the Dalles settlement” might be his claim to fame (Fuller 41). Instead, the company, just as in the film, become lost and capture a Native American, offering him a blanket in exchange for guidance out of the desert. Meek is said to have deserted the caravan with his “young bride,” shouldering the deaths of “twenty-four people known to have died enroute and another twenty, mostly children, after the party arrived,” making it “the worst disaster to befall the pioneers who set out for California or Oregon” (Fuller 41-2). While the film was ironically inspired from a commercial research job, Raymond’s screenplay with the corroboration of Reichardt, lends itself to contemporary political and social situations. Western expansion invites discussion about “the great experiment of liberty” or Manifest Destiny, a contested ideology even at its height in the mid-nineteenth century (McCracken 68). Reichardt only hints at Meek’s views concerning Manifest Destiny, a Providential decree to settle the Western frontier spreading “republican democracy” at all costs, but during 1845 to 1846, a political battle raged over which nation, Britain or America, would control the Oregon territory (McCracken 68). The immigrants were caught in the middle as the film illustrates through multiple hushed conversations and one campfire debate where Millie Gately (Zoe Kazan), seemingly speaking for everyone except Meek, hopes “the territory will go American.” This political sentiment is what endangers them if their fears are founded that Meek has led them astray simply to keep immigrants out of the territory. Reichardt manages to encapsulate historical bias and political debate projecting these fears onto

contemporary issues concerning immigration reform, faulty leadership, and racial prejudice.

### **Production**

Even as she was making her breakthrough film *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt was researching and planning *Meek's Cutoff* by “reading . . . journals from people who made the journey west” (S. Adams). With a two million dollar budget, it was a film unlike any she had attempted due to its sheer size and scope: “The cost of feeding the oxen and horses on *Meek's Cutoff* was equal to the entire budget of Reichardt's second film [*Old Joy*]” (Gilbey). The film was her most expensive project and even with careful budgeting, it lost money. While some academics and many film critics wrote extensively about *Meek's Cutoff*, the loss of profit was due to a lack of commercial appeal. According to Box Office Mojo, *Meek's Cutoff* made approximately \$1,205,257 worldwide (domestic gross \$977,772) with the widest release domestically at 45 theaters. When compared to *Wendy and Lucy*, *Meek's Cutoff* was a commercial risk. It was shown in only five more theaters, domestically, and was in theaters one week less than *Wendy and Lucy* (Box Office Mojo). There was a predictable box office boost from the UK with a gross total of \$191,882, since Shirley Henderson, a popular British actress, played Glory White, but the increase in ticket sales did not make up the close to one million dollar discrepancy.

*Meek's Cutoff* seemingly breaks Reichardt's unwritten minimalist filmmaking production rules because it is a period piece in the Oregon desert with thirty to fifty crew members, animals, and a child actor. However, it is directly in line with her artistic vision and independent philosophy. After all, a two million dollar filming budget is a drop in the bucket for most Hollywood films with stars like Michelle Williams. When Reichardt

talked artistic control with *The Guardian*, she repeated her independent ethos, “The more money you take, the more hands there are in the pie. . . . Right now, there’s no one telling me what to do. I can edit on my own schedule. No one gives me notes outside the same friends who I’ve been showing my films to since I started” and these include her executive producers Phil Morrison (*Junebug*, 2005) and Todd Haynes (*I’m Not There*, 2007) the latter of whom she has worked with since *River of Grass* (qtd. in Gilbey). Other production members from prior films who worked on *Meek’s Cutoff* were Neil Kopp and Filmscience’s Anish Savjani. When asked specifically about their roles, Reichardt joked that an additional job they acquired on this film was to dig “vehicles out of many piles of sand,” but other than that she went on to explain: “Both were with the film the whole time, and there is overlap, but for the most part, Neil is preproduction and production, they are together on post, and then Anish takes the helm for all that comes next” (qtd. in Ponsoldt).

Evenstar Films and Harmony/Primitive Nero production companies were new additions to her team, but her American distributor Oscilloscope Laboratories was not. Considering how successful *Wendy and Lucy* had been for Oscilloscope, Adam Yauch’s company, the decision to be her domestic distributor was not difficult. From reviewing the team that helped release and distribute the picture, it is clear that Reichardt needed a much larger crew in all areas. Soda Pictures, a UK distributor founded in 2002, signed up to market and distribute the film and Cinetic Media, a New York based financing company, established in 2001, which specializes in connecting producers to financiers was brought on board to help with the “intersection of financing and distribution.” Reichardt worked with a variety of extra assistance such as historical consultants, animal

handlers, an onset teacher for Tommy Nelson and a composer, Jeff Grace, who is responsible for the exquisite but eerie cello melodies throughout the film. It seems that even with all the extra investors, production and distribution companies, and seven executive producers, Reichardt once again made a film following her philosophy— independent, artistic, and private.

*Meek's Cutoff* premiered in September 2010 at the 67<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival before heading to Toronto, New York, and Sundance Film Festivals. The film was nominated for six awards, winning best director at the Gijon International Film Festival, the SIGNIS Award at the Venice Film Festival, and best producer at the Independent Spirit Awards (“Awards”). When location scouting for *Meek's Cutoff*, Reichardt and Kopp decided to opt for the aesthetic appeal and authenticity which they found in the deserts surrounding Burns, Oregon even though the second choice Marfa, Texas would have been more convenient in every way, with “Fed Ex, good food, access to everything you need. Clearly a more practical place to make the movie” (Ponsoldt). To educate and prepare the actors, Reichardt asked them to attend training prior to filming: “The actors all came out a week before shooting for what we called Pioneer Camp. There they learned how to start a fire without matches, how to fire a gun, pitch a tent, cook in the ground, load a wagon and most importantly how to drive the oxen” (qtd. in Ponsoldt). While it was probably close quarters for the actors and crew who occupied the 32 rooms at the Horseshoe Inn, it was better than sleeping under the wagons, which is where the real pioneers slept. And if Reichardt is known for a having minimal crew, *Meek's Cutoff* required a much bigger staff: “I always had a fear of working with a bigger crew and on some days, when we had the stunt people there and all, it was a crew of 50, but when

everybody's really good at their jobs, it doesn't really matter what the size of the crew is" (qtd. in Saito). But the crew did dwindle to five when she was unable to capture the original ending of the film during the shoot:

I would like it so that, if the sun's going to set, you're not going home without the ending of your movie. . . . [But that's] basically what happened to us: The sun went down, everyone was leaving the next day, and we couldn't afford the animals another day. So a new ending had to be constructed. Michelle, Rod, and I went back with a five-person crew and shot it. (Longworth)

The ending illustrates Reichardt's penchant for framing images in *Meek's Cutoff*, and while this technique seems more intentional than in her prior films the tension of controlling her artistic decisions is still prevalent: "with these low-budget films . . . I'm happy for ideas but I don't want to have to negotiate with my D.P. over the frame or the lens I choose (qtd. in Ponsoldt). This tension and her unique framing techniques are also apparent when it came to her attested aesthetic decision to film in a nonstandard format ratio.

### **Format Ratio**

One of the most distinctive elements in *Meek's Cutoff* is the square screen, an aspect ratio of 1:37:1, instead of the more accessible and widely used rectangle or widescreen. By choosing this mode of presentation, Reichardt realized she limited access to her film, but success means no compromises to her art: "I knew going into it that it would limit the amount of theaters we can play *Meek's* at. Sadly, very few theaters have the capabilities" (qtd. in Ficks). In reality, this was not an issue as *Meek's* widest release

was approximately the same as Reichardt's last film. Reichardt responds to questions about the "kitschy" element of using the old Hollywood aspect ratio by saying: "[W]hen you read back about the period, widescreen was what was kitschy. It was a gimmick! It's what 3D or IMAX is to us today" (qtd. in Cheryl). The choice of screen ratio did make a difference in spectators' viewing experience and that was Reichardt's aim. It was a topic discussed in an interview with Terry Gross on her National Public Radio show, *Fresh Air*. Gross begins their interview saying she thought something was wrong with the film and kept wanting to pull back the curtain on either side of the theatre. She asks what Reichardt wanted to accomplish: "the square was typical for the early Westerns . . . [but it also] gave you . . . the closed view that the women have . . . because of their bonnets. . . . We used the real size ones and they come out a foot on either side." Gross comments that the bonnets and the square frame contributed to her "claustrophobia in a wide open space" as it might have done for the pioneer women. Inspired by the square framing in Robert Adams's contemporary western photography, Reichardt wants to achieve a "practical and aesthetic" effect: "The square . . . changes the landscape completely—enabling you to get the height over the mountain range and the foreground of the desert—and changes time. It keeps you in the present, where the characters are. I had a rule that there would be no vistas, because I didn't want to be romanticizing the West" (qtd. in Fuller 42). The film succeeds in its depiction of a difficult, alienating, and dangerous journey for the women. This aesthetic of authenticity made it risky for the actors, as Reichardt attests: "the combination of the oxen and the bonnets . . . take away any peripheral vision. So if oxen have gone nuts next to one of the actresses, they can't necessarily tell" (qtd. in Ponsoldt). Working with period dress and transportation,

Reichardt and her crew gained a deeper level of respect and understanding for the effort and ingenuity required by the pioneers to complete a westward journey.

Creating (with Leslie Shatz, from *Wendy and Lucy*) the right mix of silence and sound was another challenge, Reichardt explains: “A soundscape this quiet was so much harder than what we’ve done in my other films. There’s nothing to hide behind. You hear every mic bump, every hiccup. It’s actually really layered, the sound design, but it’s very quiet, and that was much harder to mix” (qtd. in Ponsoldt). During production, Reichardt worked with Felix Andrew to capture as much as possible, but this proved overwhelming: “he mic’d the oxen, he mic’d the wagons — there were mics everywhere. That was a lot to sort out in the editing room, weeding everything out that I wanted, coming up with the sounds, like the wagons’ squeaky wheels. Just getting the particular sounds so that the quiet is emphasized” proved too difficult, so what work had been done for a musical soundtrack was scratched (qtd. in Ponsoldt). Instead of using a musical group from LA, the Sun City Girls, Reichardt was introduced to Jeff Grace in New York by Larry Fessenden, Glass Eye Pix founder. “I knew from the beginning that I wanted wind instruments because the Cayuse were flute players,” but Reichardt was concerned about the soundtrack sounding like a new age album (qtd. in Ponsoldt). If in *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt opted for an on-location natural soundtrack instead of a musical score, Grace’s beautiful but ominous cello and flute melody that highlights the growing distance between each character is an effective compromise. The longer the caravan is lost in the desert, the more individually isolated they become, and the intermittent melody contributes to the oppressive atmosphere and the pioneers’ squeaky wagon wheel represents their plight. Each time spectators hear the squeaks, they know the trancelike



march is beginning again. The cello melody accompanied by the hollow flute sound symbolizes the characters' unvoiced questions and their worry etched faces reminds spectators the caravan members might not survive their journey.

Silence and muffled discussions create a secondary score for the film; Reichardt comments on the silence saying, "I feel like a lot is being said all the time, it's just not in dialogue. . . . I was hoping that the rawness of the land would work for how completely raw they are at this point in the journey, worn down to the point of barely being able to have a conversation" (Gilbey; Fuller 42). Reichardt's use of silence mixed with a very minimalistic soundtrack is effective, but it is her play with volume that invites audiences to be active and engaged. In an effort to place spectators in the pioneer women's shoes, Reichardt intentionally distances the camera and muffles the men's meetings to frustrate but also engage viewers: "Usually when you're making a film you expect the camera to be on the person who is doing the talking. In the case of *Meek's Cutoff*, the men are doing a lot of the talking. So yeah, there was some tension at times and it emphasized the assumption of power both on film and in life" (qtd. in Ponsoldt). Turning up the volume does not help decipher their words as spectators are only allowed to hear key phrases as if standing on a ridge, collecting firewood with the ever busy women. Besides the distant muffles of men's conversations and the click of bundled sticks, Reichardt uses the crackling of fire, the kneading of dough, the grinding of coffee beans, the clatter of utensils on tin plates, and the crashes of weighty but beloved objects tossed out the back opening of wagons to remind viewers of the daily chores and rising anxiety felt by the pioneer women.

One scene that seems to melt the women's anxiety and silence is when Glory White tells the only joke in the film as the group sits around a camp fire finishing the dwindling rations. The camera is focused on Glory's husband and son, so spectators are unsure if Glory is sobbing or laughing as she jokes about being jealous of pigs but either way the outpouring of emotion is jarring in the stoic and restrained narrative: "I'm just thinking of my father's pigs back home all safe and warm in their beds." After the second muffled sound from Glory, viewers realize she is genuinely laughing and in what seems like an unguarded moment, Glory and Emily turn toward each other, lock eyes, and begin chuckling; the first and only full, broad smile of the film spreads across Emily's face and as she looks up past the camera (maybe at Reichardt) the audience feels a release from the extreme tension that is pervasive throughout the film. The joke however has a back story as Williams explains, "I was actually reading in the women's journals, and I came across a joke. I showed it to Kelly, and I said, 'Can I say this? Look at this! It's amazing!' And she goes, 'Whoa, yeah, Michelle, that's incredible.' And she puts it in the movie—and she gives it to another character" (qtd. in Vanairsdale). While Williams seems playfully upset about losing those lines, her research adds more angles to the women's multifaceted experience.

Another playful moment between the women is during the knitting scene when the three men are working to fix Thomas Gately's (Paul Dano) broken axle while Meek wanders around camp. Not only does the group work of knitting serve as a common interest, albeit a necessity, between the women, but it gives spectators a chance to see their unspoken disapproval of Meek as their husbands decide to follow his directions. Reichardt discussed the female bonding she found in the pioneer diaries as she depicted

in the kitting scene: “because the men had separate chores, people’s journals showed how alienating it was between husbands and wives, how the friendships really formed were with the other women on the trail” (qtd. in S. Adams). The exchange of sarcastic looks illustrates their trust and agreement about the incompetency of Meek. The looks also reiterate what Emily all but growls at Meek, “You don’t know much about women, do you Stephen Meek?” after he comments that she does not appear to “care for him.” Of course his proclamation comes after a disrespectful burp, indicating a saturation of plenty that none of the rest feel, especially while the women’s husbands struggle to make repairs in the heat. It also comes on the heels of a racist and sexist comment about “having” Native American women which evokes an “Oh dear” from Glory. This scene is one of the first to establish Emily’s leadership and decision making abilities, skills she has reluctantly reined in because of gendered social expectations. The smirk from Glory and the feminine “humph” from Emily are all the women are allowed, however, before a stumbling and defensive Meek proclaims, “I know women are different from men; I know that much.” He continues with: “Women, women are created on the principle of chaos. The chaos of creation, disorder, bringing new things into the world. Men are created on the principle of destruction--cleansing, order and destruction. Chaos and destruction, the two genders have always had it.” Meek’s sexist philosophy implies women need to have order imposed upon them by men and they may need “cleansing” or elimination if they hold radically different beliefs from the mainstream. His comment can be perceived as a veiled threat since, during the last third of the film, Meek seems as ready, at times, to shoot Emily as he is the Cayuse captive. Female spectators may find pleasure in the transfer of power from Meek to Emily even as he spouts rationalizations

about his right to power. In a later tension filled “stand-off” scene, Meek implies Emily’s “Otherness” and need for “cleansing,” saying to Solomon, “Looks like your woman got some Indian blood in her, Mr. Teethow.” This comment brings out the racial tensions threaded throughout the film and serves to connect Meek’s associations of the feminine with racial otherness since, to him, both are chaotic and in need of white male ordering, and if necessary, cleansing. From the beginning Emily creates a bond with their captive because, as she explains to Millie, “I want him to owe me something” and while she holds the same racist assumptions as everyone else, she seems capable of identifying and empathizing with others who are marginalized. Meek attempts to remain relevant and remain a force in the group, but is rebuffed by Emily’s display of leadership and principals. If one interviewer comments that “Reichardt may not consider herself a feminist filmmaker” (Dunn) scenes like these, submerge audiences in a female experience of settling the west, a story rarely articulated.

By the same token, *Meek’s Cutoff* is full of social, ethnic, and racial “Others,” considering that the pioneers are immigrants who are trying to settle on land that does not belong to them. Their conversations reflect the historical tensions of the period, in particular when Solomon calms fears that Meek is really driving them on a death march. As the audience strains to hear the men’s conversation, they are allowed only as much information as Emily and Glory are, so it is through a female prospective that viewers hear the first bits of this news. Later Solomon tells Emily what was said: “Thomas argued that Meek has taken us off track on purpose. That he was hired to get rid of American immigrants. The more of us that come, the more likely the territory will go American—it has a logic.” This internal fear gives way to the perceived external threat by the Cayuse

tribesman and his search party, so that the film begins to focus on racial bias and stereotypes. A hierarchy has clearly been established even before the capture of the Native American, as indicated by the multiple white male conclaves, but Reichardt continually subverts this by keeping Emily the focus of the film and having her slowly take leadership in addition to defending their captive. At the risk of spectator alienation, the Cayuse tribesman never speaks English. He communicates through the Nez Perce tribal language, facial expressions, and gestures, and both Reichardt and Raymond shared a concern viewers would not connect to his character (S. Adams). When Jon Raymond was asked about this decision he replied, “It was something we were very conscientious of. For myself, the movie ends up being in many ways about racism and racist projections on kind of a cipher. It’s a fine line . . . how to create a kind of screen for those kind of projections without also dehumanizing a person” (qtd. in S. Adams).

An event that turns the tide for the captive is his show of concern and assistance when William, Glory’s husband, succumbs to dehydration. In a wide-long shot of the entire caravan, William falls and immediately the women run to his aid. Glory stops the oxen and the next shot is of her cradling her husband’s head in her lap, softly explaining that he had refused to drink water all day. The scene is framed by the concerned pioneers huddling closely around William and his wife, as Emily retrieves a cooking pot of water, showing the futility of any medical care they can provide. Viewers quickly realize how isolated they are and how their medical methods are ineffectual. As the camera pans for a close up of Jimmy’s face behind him the Cayuse tribesman walks up, begins singing, and sprinkles dust near William’s head. It is clear to viewers and the stunned pioneers that William is receiving a Native American healing ceremony and that the concern for life is

not simply a white man's preoccupation. The camera takes its time panning from character to character and when it cuts to Meek, viewers interpret slight shame in his downcast eyes; the next shot shows a threesome, Millie's tear streaked and disbelieving face, Solomon's gentle shock, and after a full gaze at the singing and dancing Cayuse, Thomas looks shamefully down and adjusts his hat. The camera lingers on Glory's resigned face with freely flowing tears, and when she looks down, not bothering to wipe them away, the camera shows Emily turning to stare at the Cayuse as he finishes and walks away. While spectators only see the back of her bonneted head and a bit of her profile, they register her new sense of faith in their Native American guide. Viewers might not be so fully convinced of the Cayuse's religious intentions because of the language differences, but Raymond emphasizes the importance of the communication barrier: "I think it's really important that the audience not understand what he was saying . . . keeping the audience in that position of not knowing was really one of the goals, and the whole ending really depends on just not knowing what his program is" (qtd. in S. Adams).

The Cayuse's prayer for William's health is not the first time religion is inserted into the film. Religious sentiments are sprinkled throughout, thanks to the White family, and the representation of spirituality from the Cayuse might be what helped shame the pioneers during the prayer dance scene. Meek uses religion as a means to justify his racism and his continued call for hanging or shooting the Cayuse captive. Words familiar to the Western genre like "savage" and "heathen" come to Meek's aid when convincing the group that in a Native American attack, everyone is slaughtered, including women and children. Meek's resistance to their captive's spirituality, which helps to humanize

him, suggests modern extreme right-wing Christian ideology as it was historically the early roots of Christian practice during the settlement of the west. The choice to call the most religious of the pioneer families the Whites could be an indication of this ideological link between Christianity and racist or intolerant practices. Even as the ending is informed by the Cayuse prayer song and dance scene, the audience, however, can only guess whether the Cayuse is truly leading them to salvation.

### **“Politicking,” Race, and Violence**

Many analogies have been drawn between the Bush administration’s second term and Meek’s consistent reassurances that the group is “not lost, [we] are just finding our way.” Both Raymond and Reichardt felt the storyline developed into a comment on issues of race and oppression as she explains:

When we were working on the script it was the time of Guantanamo. . . . Certainly what was appealing about Meek’s story was that it felt as though there were a lot of contemporary themes in it. We had to back away from that and get into the pioneers’ story, but throughout the making of the film, and as I was cutting, the political landscape changed. I found that whatever was happening in the news daily was so easy to project on to what I was working with. . . . American history is so repetitive . . . [since often it highlights] issues of conquest and whose life has more value—which comes down to racism. (qtd. in Fuller 42)

If the abuse endured by the Cayuse captive, a kick to the head when Meek is questioning him and the reluctance of anyone other than Emily to give him food and water, is supposed to represent the Bush administration terror suspect interrogations, it is not a far

stretch of the imagination: “Meek increasingly becomes a Rorschach test, resembling a number of leaders, elected and otherwise, we might all know. Meek’s very existence begs the question: Can nations expand without violence — and violent men?” (Ponsoldt).

After the Tetherow wagon crashes in a ravine and Meek threatens to kill the Cayuse for not obeying his shouts demanding that he drop the sewing basket Emily used to repair his shoe, it seems reminiscent of the water boarding torture scenes of Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty*. Both films are linked by the Bush era war tactics and the use of fear and torture to coerce their captives. While Reichardt backs away from political interpretations, in one interview she refers to historical evidence about Meek’s character and then makes an unguarded joke comparing Bush and Meek’s writing abilities: “Meek was perceived in different ways by different people, but definitely was thought of as someone who didn't know what he was doing by pretty much everyone,” which, she explains, is supported in his fourteen-page autobiography, where he illustrates his incompetency, “Ten pages is this long-winded joke, and then he's just like, 'I led the first wagon train through Oregon territory. Completely successful.' Probably just like George W. Bush's new book: ‘Everything went great. Not to worry’” (qtd. in Longworth).

Regardless of her humor, Reichardt tends to play down direct connections to any political administration saying the film revolves around the question of leadership and community decisions:

[it is]this idea of a persuasive blowhard persuading a bunch of people out into the middle of the desert without really knowing the lay of the land or possibly being without any kind of real plan and just overestimating himself and this situation and then winding up at the mercy of people that



he is culturally completely different than and is mistrustful of . . . it has all these contemporary components to it” (qtd. in Saito).

Emily might represent a new administration with a more humane answer to such interrogation methods when she pulls her gun on Meek and says “I’d be wary.” While their confrontation involves few words, the scene is extremely powerful. Unlike the knitting scene where her leadership is hinted at, Emily assumes true ownership of the caravan but at a price. As one critic suggests, she does have to use the threat of violence: “Ironically, Emily has to act like a man—by threatening to shoot meek—in order to for a détente” (Fuller 41). The pioneers’ misguided trust in Meek did not ultimately turn deadly for many who followed him, but it does serve as a cautionary tale.

As seen in the standoff between Emily and Meek, the threat of violence is ever present on the screen. Reichardt builds suspense through tension, bubbling just under the surface ready to explode at any point, as the narrative sequences progress. Spectators brace themselves for an angry revolt against Meek, a racially motivated attack by Meek upon their Native American captive, or the slaughter of their caravan by a Cayuse slave trading party. Millie is a big part of the anxiety as she progressively spirals downward into the delirium of terror, most notably one evening after finding a chalk symbol written on a rock by the Cayuse captive and then again after finding a symbolic lone tree in the desert. In her usual high pitched whine, she pleads to her husband to turn back, that “we still have time.” This comes after her earlier chants of “They’re coming; they’re coming,” referring to the possibility of a Cayuse search party. Millie’s reactions remind spectators of the precarious situation endured each minute by the caravan. Besides Millie’s dialogue, Reichardt conveys the deepening sense of fear through body language and

sound on the last day of their journey. Beginning with a high angle shot from the top of the cliffs that the group is walking beside, spectators see white chalk symbols covering the cliffs, leaving the viewers and the pioneers nervous and fearful. Reichardt uses Millie's body and mannerisms as an unnerving symbol of their destitution. The eerie cello music begins softly, almost unnoticeable until the camera falls upon Millie and the volume rises sharply, reminding viewers that any member of the group could begin spiraling into her terrorized state of mind. While each character is observed by the camera as they walk by the marked rock walls, Millie is undoubtedly the focal point as she stumbles along, arms bent and away from her body, and at times childlike in her attempts to reach toward her husband, who avoids all contact with his wife. Meek, on his horse with gun cocked, mumbles to himself and in a close-up laughs as if contemplating their violent murder at the hands of the Cayuse. Solomon and the White family, in their separate cameos, turn their heads as if hearing something off screen and even the robust and reassuring Emily looks grave and concerned that at any moment they could all be slaughtered. The fear of violence is accentuated within this scene through body language, close-ups, and music and the audience's endurance is rewarded by a nerve splitting finale as the scene smash cuts to complete silence and a still, flat landscape.

### **Questions of Genre: Feminist Western**

*Meek's Cutoff* teeters on the edge of experimental cinema with its use of silence, time, abrupt cuts, and square film ratio, but more importantly Reichardt manipulates the traditional Western genre. According to Rick Altman, the concept of genre is a process that is ever shifting and crossing because it is "a record not of the past, but of a living geography, of an ongoing process" that depends on "cultural forces" (70, 82). Genres

emerge because the industry is not dealing with a fixed point but instead a process and so critics' language is ever changing. Altman cites the first commonly agreed upon Western, Edwin S. Porter's 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery*, as part of the crime film genre, illustrating it spawned other crime films, and the Western did not emerge as a fully-fledged genre until much later in the decade (35). By packing a film into a neatly theorized and discussible category, critics and Hollywood find films easier to market. If it has a horse and a Native American in the film, the industry accepts it as a Western and audiences know what to expect. Altman calls this stereotyping the "Producer's Game" (41). The game allows the industry to quickly reproduce films that are successful, and this is one explanation for the many films that were better defined as another, or mixed, genre but were marketed as Westerns (40). Altman suggests that Hollywood uses genre to market films, and critics have fallen into the "trap" of easy but miscategorizing of genre (218). With *Meek's Cutoff*, Reichardt intentionally keeps the packaged Western genre label at bay. On her DVD description, the film is called "a stark and poetic drama set in 1845," with the word "Western" noticeably missing. In an interview on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross, who points out that the film lacks "any of the things we associate with Westerns"-- "there's no swelling theme music [or] . . . charismatic heroic characters and gunplay and showdowns" – and Reichardt explains that she purposely never used the term with her actors. While Reichardt deconstructs and improvises on genre in all her films, she seems to deconstruct the Western more thoroughly and incisively, via a study of history, quest narrative, gender, and race. It is this study of pioneer women's journals and allegiance to realism that guides her answer to Gross: "there's this trancelike quality about the journey that I haven't really experienced in tales of going west . . . [I wanted to

build] tension by basically not delivering the heightened moment, but working with the way time might have seemed in 1845.” It was this experimentation in style and genre that excited scholarly interest but left mainstream viewers seemingly unsatisfied.

Watching *Meek’s Cutoff*, spectators cross into a “non-Hollywood” zone, and the experience of time feels very real. Some critics claim that Reichardt’s genre adjustments and pacing create spectator displeasure, calling her film “a chore at times” to watch, which might explain the low box office turnout. And while others argue that her pacing makes the cinematic experience more realistic, many critics felt obligated to question audience satisfaction:

It is a bold move for indie favourite Kelly Reichardt to put her own distinctive subtle spin onto the Western genre, and while the presence of the likes of Michelle Williams, Will Patton, Paul Dano and Bruce Greenwood will guarantee respectful reviews it will be tough to find a mainstream audience for her nuanced tale of settlers toughing it out on the Oregon trail. (M. Adams)

However, Reichardt said repeatedly that she was not concerned with attracting a wide audience or appealing reviews and felt she was making a film more akin to *Nanook of the North*: “When we were shooting we tried to keep as far away from a man-on-a-horse western as we could . . . it’s a desert poem, more *Nanook of the North* than a western” (qtd. in Thompson). Although the film has documentary aspects—Reichardt’s use of historical journals to create realist depictions, for instance—it does more than represent the female experience; it stages “what if” scenarios for spectators:

‘Making a film like this, you can’t help but wonder, would I have made the journey?’ . . . ‘And then you realize, I wouldn’t even have had a choice, My husband would have made the decision. In reading the diaries, I got a different picture . . . [than] captured in westerns, which are made up of masculine moments of conflict and conquering. You see that the women are in a similar situation as the Indian or the little boy. Basically, if you’re not a white man, you’re outside the decision-making process. You have to do your politicking at night in the tent, if you can” (qtd. in Fuller 41).

An evening tent scene between Solomon and Emily highlights the frustration Reichardt found in pioneer women’s diaries. In their tent, after Emily has stood up for her beliefs by threatening Meek at gun point, she realizes her husband doubts her judgment:

Solomon. You think he’s trustworthy?

Emily. The Indian? I can’t say as I do. Just you, that’s all.

Solomon. But you’re putting your trust in him?

Emily. You’re doubtful?

Solomon. I have my doubts.

Emily. What are you thinking, Solomon?

Solomon. I hope Meek hasn’t twisted you up, that’s all.

A close-up of Emily, as her husband get ups and exits the tent, shows a stunned blank expression that turns into a wrinkled brow and then a struggle to stay composed. This conversation with Solomon suggests that Emily is acting out of uncontained emotion and is putting the group at risk.

Reichardt has offered a revolutionized feminist Western by using a female protagonist who assumes leadership, and historical documents to create a realistic experience of 1845, but she also changes the expectations of genre by using real time pacing for the dialogue and action of the film:

Nothing is quick. In Westerns, everything is quick and highlighted. So we really wanted to play with that. . . . I'm taken aback by the comment that it's slow, but then I guess if I go to a new film and sit through the trailers, I feel a little bombarded by the instant everything . . . our sense of time has changed so dramatically. Our expectations about time in cinema in the U.S., I don't know where it goes from here. (qtd. in S. Adams)

Hollywood viewers are trained to expect fast-paced narratives, and *Meek's Cutoff* offers the opposite, but mixing “slow cinema” with alternatives to traditional genres can be a very powerful and liberating tool. One scene that illustrates Reichardt's desire to slow the narrative action is Emily and the Cayuse's initial surprise meeting. Emily is gathering firewood and several of the men, if not all, have left to scout the trail. The camera stays ahead of Emily as she walks and slowly it tilts down focusing on her apron and then to her feet. The camera mirrors Emily's motion, and as she gains ground, she bends to pick up a stick and audiences see the Cayuse moccasin-covered foot at the same moment she does. Emily freezes, drops the wood, and they both run from each other—he toward his horse and she for a rifle. Spectators watch Emily run almost all the way to her wagon, pull the gun out and begin to painstakingly load it, shoot once, clean it, and reload to finally deliver the second warning shot. Watching in real-time, spectators realize how completely alone Emily, Millie, Glory and her son Jimmy are in the Oregon desert. By

allowing audiences to witness the time it takes to retrieve, load, shoot, clean and reload a rifle, they experience the intensity of the pioneers' growing fear in the dawning knowledge that no one is close enough to come to their aid. There are no shot/reverse shots, time lapse, music cues, or any action at all that would indicate a resolution. While this type of scene is atypical of the fast action Western genre, by keeping viewers in real-time, the film gives spectators the opportunity to contemplate the caravan's situation and have it resonate, deeply.

### **Slow Cinema and Neo-Neorealism**

In her interviews, Reichardt emphasized the role of time, not only in the pacing of her films but also how that choice of slowing down effected the actors and crew: "Paul and Zoe were saying that the strangest thing for them was after walking across that desert for a month, to get in a plane and fly across that area in a minute" (qtd. in S. Adams.) The emphasis on slowing down during production due to the harsh landscape mirrored Reichardt's desired aesthetic. The exposition scenes in Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* exemplify the characteristics of slow cinema. It begins with a three-minute and 38-second segment with no dialogue. The intertitle orients spectators by stating that the setting is 1845 Oregon; then, with the sound of rushing water, a man leads a team of oxen followed by a covered wagon through a deepening river. The camera follows the team until the very last piece of wagon can be seen and then cuts to the second location to show a family, very slowly, unloading a wagon to carry items across the river. No character speaks until seven minutes into the film; this silence enables viewers to visually absorb the situation. When a film opens in such a manner, it resists what David Bordwell calls "intensified continuity" editing that has taken over mainstream Hollywood film --

for example, *The Borune Ultimatum* (2007) "generates a shot length of just under 2 seconds" (qtd. in Flanagan). Reichardt is working with what Matthew Flanagan labels the "aesthetic of slow" and in doing so, helping to solidify the newly budding but resistance evoking "slow cinema" movement or genre.

One indication that slow cinema is not considered a fully developed movement or genre is the lack of a centralized definition or characteristics. While slow cinema is a trend that is cropping up throughout contemporary filmmaking, pinning it down takes research and multiple sources. In his 2010 *Sight and Sound* article, "In Search of Lost Time," Jonathan Romney defines slow cinema as "slow, poetic, contemplative -- cinema that downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality. Such films highlight the viewing process itself as a real-time experience." In addition to Romney's definition, other criteria include the use of ambiguity and openness as a way to help audience reflection and contemplation.<sup>1</sup> But critics of slow cinema give it other, less flattering, characteristics such as "ultra-long takes, slender or non-existent narrative, and what they regard as its indifference or even hostility to audiences" (Sandhu). In his article, "Slow Cinema Backlash" for IFC, Vadim Rizov said, "The problem isn't the masters. It's the second-tier wave of films that premiere at Berlin and smaller festivals . . . and simply stagnate in their own self-righteous slowness . . . those that do [see them] instantly understand why someone would wish a pox upon the whole

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<sup>1</sup> This trend does have characteristics which are strikingly similar to American independent film and New Iranian Cinema and they share a commonality with the Dogme95 movement due to their use of long takes, available sound and lighting, and shooting on location. Flanagan's list combined with Sukhdev Sandhu's description in "Slow Cinema Fights Back Against Bourne's Supremacy," the characteristics of filmmakers who are labeled "active practitioners" of slow cinema include long takes, de-centered and understated modes of storytelling, a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday, ambient noises or field recordings, subdued visual schemes that require the viewer's eye to do more work, a sense of mystery evoked from landscapes and local customs, and the character-driven narratives and action sequences emphasized equally. While many films make use of one or two of these traits, it is the use of many, if not all, that indicates an "aesthetic of slow" or slow cinema.



movement.” Rizov closes his article with this startling and over-generalized statement, leaving the distinction between “masters” and “second-tier” filmmakers open. This oversimplification of “slow” aesthetics by many critics overlooks a connection between slow cinema and Andre Bazin’s concept of “total cinema,” which posits that early filmmakers “saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a thrice the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief” (201). While Bazin is discussing technical innovations which move cinema closer to the ability to replicate reality, he also refers to an “integral realism” that creates “an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time” that can easily be seen in the open or ambiguous images and gaps left intentionally by slow cinema (202). Working within Bazin’s theoretical framework, filmmakers like Reichardt who practice slow cinema and whose goals match, whether intentionally or not, those of “total cinema’s” effort to replicate reality fit into a larger cinematic tradition; slow cinema then begins to complicate larger questions and debates around crafting film.

Some of these complications involve the amount of reality to replicate and the extent to which action occurs throughout a film. In his article, “Beyond Neo-Neo Realism,” James Lattimer refocuses the link between Bazin and Reichardt by arguing that Reichardt’s style at first seems to epitomize Bazin’s “episodic mode” narrative requirements by using real-time to create a “cinema of duration” and giving everyday occurrences equal narrative weight (38). Lattimer suggests she complicates Bazin’s requirements. Through her emphasis on unusual events such as Emily loading a gun and shooting warning shots in the air. In other words, audiences see her action in real-time and it “carries equal weight” but Reichardt “gives [the scene and others like it] the kind

of additional weight that Bazin's episodic model is concerned with avoiding (40). Instead of highlighting only realistic moments as Bazin discusses, Reichardt creates "a new strategy . . . that aims to accentuate the narrative's dramatic construction rather than allowing it to disappear into realist transparency" (Lattimer 40). By doing this, Reichardt keeps spectators aware of the film narrative instead of being lost in the representation of reality, and this exposes the influence of her earlier, more experimental style found in *River of Grass*. Showing "central dramatic episodes in real time" is the opposite of Bazin's "episodic mode," which calls for a focus on the everyday action, but as Lattimer suggests, many of the seemingly nondaily actions are in reality everyday actions for a pioneer working to settle in the American West. Lattimer concludes that Reichardt is "retooling" neorealism and this in conjunction with her slow cinematic techniques allows her audience time to grasp her political layerings.

By unpacking the layers of pioneer women's mundane acts, Reichardt inserts political commentary and creates a film that engages audiences in a visual conversation about female leadership, drive, determination, and perseverance as well as their social limitations and expectations. In a 3-minute and 22-second scene, Reichardt illustrates the morning responsibilities of pioneer women traveling west. Using only available light, the scene opens with a shot of the early morning sky and then cuts to Emily who lights a lantern and begins to comb out her hair, the first act of her morning routine; the next scene is a 43 second wide angle shot that shows her lighting a campfire as two identical fires are started behind her by Glory and Millie. The camera creates a pattern of abrupt cuts which linger long enough to keep spectators off balance. As viewers watch in real-time, Emily pours water into a coffee tin and then slowly grinds coffee beans. Operating

with little to no light was challenging for Reichardt's crew, but she wanted to depict realistic conditions for pioneer women: "I wanted it to appear to be all lanterns and firelight, to get the sense of how dark it was while, in some scenes, being able to see the whole camp set up — the wagons, the tents, actors coming and going through the camp. Chris [Blauvelt, the cinematographer] was able to achieve that using fires and candles and a really minimal lighting kit" (qtd. in Ponsoldt). Not only do these shots illustrate how difficult life was for pioneers, with little to no dialogue, they also explain the expectations placed on women. While history books acknowledge male accomplishments and record extraordinary male heroic feats of survival, there is usually very little said traditionally about pioneer women's bravery and even less discussion of their everyday tasks. These scenes reveal Reichardt's political and social commentary which uncover or "rediscover" female pioneer struggle. Romney comments on the ability of slow cinema to address politics and culture through slowing down action and creating gaps: "But while certain films reward us with an exalted reverie, certainly of value in itself, Slow Cinema's capacity to suspend our impulses and reactions can also help us to engage more reflexively with the world in a way that can be critical and indeed political." By extending the length of each shot and engaging the audience's attention, Reichardt creates a space for additional narrative controlled by the audience. In an industry that has the power to hold spectators' attention and dictate narrative, providing this space can be interpreted by some as a subversive act.

The most obvious reason slow cinema is subversive is implicit in its name; slow cinema is slow. Film critic, Sukhdev Sandhu deepens the connections by suggesting slow cinema is like the slow food movement: "slowness—in its distrust of cultural

standardization—is an inherently political concept.” Because slow cinema resists Hollywood style temporal editing, critics have characterized slow cinema as “a form of cultural resistance” (Sandhu). Flanagan’s “cinema of acceleration” is an apt label when he suggests how intensified continuity “has transformed a cinema of efficacy into a cinema of acceleration, giving way to a dominant practice” which creates ““perpetual, perspectiveless flux, a flux which defers judgment to a later, saner time, which never comes.”” Slow cinema is in direct opposition to this “cinema of acceleration.” Critics who also questioned the value of films like *Meek’s Cutoff* miss an opportunity to reevaluate the “cinema of acceleration,” which might lead to questioning films that leave audiences in “perspectiveless flux.” Many critics hide behind the word “boring,” and miss the political and social openings offered by slow cinema.

In her jointly written article, “In Defense of Slow and Boring” with A. O. Scott for *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis offers tips to audiences of slow cinema: “Faced with duration not distraction, your mind may wander, but there’s no need for panic: it will come back. In wandering there can be revelation as you meditate, trance out, bliss out, luxuriate in your own thoughts, think.” Since Reichardt shows action in real time, she creates empathy that, it could be argued, is hard to achieve with intensified continuity editing. Through its subversion, slow cinema may be helping audiences to find and solidify fleeting empathic threads, so they experience a greater understanding as well as a means of reflection and, as Dargis implies, mediation on the human spirit.

### The Open Image in Slow Cinema

Besides spirituality,<sup>2</sup> a core attribute of slow cinema revolves around ambiguity and openness. By its very nature, slow cinema invites viewer input and spectator ownership with its gaps and pauses. In their article, “The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema,” Chaudhuri and Finn suggest that through the use of the open image Iranian cinema allows spectators to realize multiple truths: “The open images of Iranian film remind us of the loss of such images in most contemporary cinema, the loss of cinema’s particular space for creative interpretation and critical reflection” (179). While Chaudhuri and Finn make a convincing case that the open image is pervasive in Iranian cinema, it is not exclusive to New Iranian Cinema. The neorealist settings of American indie films like *Meek’s Cutoff* allows for what Chaudhuri and Finn characterize as an “aesthetic of stasis” that can be traced to Italian neorealism (165). They cite the freeze frame ending of Francois Truffaut’s *400 Blows* and suggest that just like the open image, these freeze frame images not only defer the ending but when the image is in stasis or ““stops, the viewer keeps going, moving deeper and deeper, one might say, into the image”” (qtd. in Chaudhuri and Finn 167). A merging of image and spectator for prolonged meditation is one of the desired outcomes for slow cinema audiences and the open image is the perfect vehicle.

Chaudhuri and Finn’s discussion of “obsessive framing” (from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s essay “The Cinema of Poetry”) as a characteristic of the open image is applicable when focusing on Reichardt’s decision to shoot her film in 1:37:1 ratio. As

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<sup>2</sup> According to Romney, “the current Slow Cinema might be seen as a response to a bruisingly pragmatic decade in which, post-9/11, the oppressive everyday awareness of life as overwhelmingly political, economic and ecological would seem to preclude (in the West, at least) any spiritual dimension in art.”

many Iranian filmmakers like those trained in the House of Makhmalbaf or Abbas Kiarostami frame their scenes with doorways or “close ups of disembodied women’s hands,” Reichardt pushes this concept and frames every scene so that neither the pioneers nor viewers “see what tomorrow is and what yesterday was” as they march through the desert (qtd. in Gross). In addition to the ratio framing, the women’s bonnets and the covered wagons function much like the doorways by creating an “internal frame, marking the barrier to our vision, and emphasizing the selectiveness of what we see,” which helps create tension and empathy for the characters in addition to propelling the aesthetic (qtd. in Gross). No matter the method or type, any open image in slow cinema is meant to create thought and contemplation.

Reichardt also makes use of the open image in a sequence in which Emily tries to lighten the load in the wagon by throwing out possessions. The camera moves into the covered wagon as Emily picks up a rocking chair and after some effort hoists it out the back opening. The camera stays stationary and after a moment the chair, seat facing down, comes into focus and is centered within the arch of the wagon “bonnet” covering. The covering reminds spectators of other point of view shots which are framed by the women’s bonnets. This “obsessive framing” of the chair becomes the open image and it stays centered within the wagon bonnet frame. The chair’s meaning is open as it represents more than just a practical plan for survival. It might represent the lack of respect for the land and culture of Native Americans by settlers or it could be symbolic of the displacement of the domestic and “feminine” comforts in a harsh reality, but no matter the meaning, situating the chair as an open image contributes to spectator ownership and input.

Reichardt closes her film with a specific type of open image, the “crystal image,” or as Chaudhuri and Finn describe it, one that “is too ambiguous, too ‘strong,’ to be reduced to one level of interpretation” (179). This ambiguity allows audiences to create space for reflection and inner debate. At the end of the film, the caravan finds a lone tree in the desert. A stationary camera centers the tree in the frame as the community, one by one, rush toward it. The tree suggests a close water source but once again the issue of trust crops up. After the group confirms their agreement to follow their Cayuse guide, Emily looks through two intertwined branches and the camera does a shot/reverse shot sequence framing her worried, soot streaked, and intent face in between the branches. Spectators see, with the reverse shot, Emily looking at their Native American guide, as she contemplates their decision to trust and follow him. He returns her gaze and then turns and slowly walks away from the group, framed between the same branches and when the screen fades to black, viewers are left creating multiple narratives and possibilities for the survival story of Emily’s lost pioneer caravan.

Through a female perspective on settling the American west, Reichardt magnifies a piece of American history highlighting prominent cultural and racial bias and connects 1845 political and social commentary to contemporary issues. *Meek’s Cutoff* is an example of how slow cinema is more than a trend with its relatively stable characteristics and its shared qualities with established cinematic features such as the open image. Critics who claim “slow” films like *Meek’s Cutoff* are unappealing compared to mainstream or Hollywood films should consider A. O. Scott’s suggestion that boring “is a subjective hunch masquerading as a description. . . . I would like to think there is room in the cinematic diet for various flavors, including some that may seem on first encounter,

unfamiliar or even unpleasant.” Slow cinema shows the everyday in real-time, revives a spiritual component through art, and forms open images through stasis, but its contribution to the deceleration of our culture may be its most important legacy. Kelly Reichardt contributes to this legacy in all her films, but most notably through her cinematic style in *Meek’s Cutoff*.



## Chapter VII—Conclusion

"It feels like the kind of thing I'm doing — shooting film, projecting in theaters — is a sinking ship, for sure, . . . However it's going to change, maybe the bright side of that is that it'll [internet viewing] be an equalizer. It'll bring in more voices, more variety." ~Kelly Reichardt

"I teach for a living, and I make movies when I can. I've never made money from my films." ~ Kelly Reichardt

Although Reichardt explains that teaching at Bard College stimulates creativity, her assertion also indicates a financial necessity, especially when relying on private capital to help finance films. At times, the sentiments and scenes in *Meek's Cutoff* depicting the pioneer women's frustration speak to the conditions independent female filmmakers endure during the production and distribution process. Indie female filmmakers fight stereotypical perception issues on many levels, as the 2013 Sundance Institute and Women in Film report indicates, and the scenes between Emily and Meek act as a concise and succinct comment on those issues. The many shots of Emily, Glory, and Millie walking endlessly on unforgiving desert ground, navigating hidden, dangerous wildlife, rationing water for themselves and their families, and fighting doubts about their decisions parallels the reality of limited resources and opportunities indie filmmakers manage, but it is the subtleties in *Meek's Cutoff* that complete the comparison. When the three women are left out of conversations about leadership and directions or do seemingly small chores that are crucial to the group's survival, the film circles industry perception issues for female filmmakers. Many female filmmakers report they find their authority challenged on set, and when considering Meek's behavior toward Emily,

*Meek's Cutoff* functions well as a metaphor for the experience of many women in the American indie sector.

The Sundance Institute and Women in Film apparently recognized a need for action even before the official findings were reported in January 2013, as they initiated a 2012 “fellowship program for emerging and mid-level American female directors and producers, pairing them with high level mentors for a year-long advisory and support relationship” (Smith, et al. 4). As the report suggests, however, other initiatives are needed to stem gender inequality in the film industry, and researchers compiled a list of organizations that were already working toward solutions or whom they intended to enter into collaborative activities with presently (Smith, et al. 4). The report’s conclusion looked toward future actions with clearly stated goals:

**The career sustainability of female filmmakers—both narrative and documentary storytellers—must be enhanced by examining hiring and financing practices.** Issues of work and family balance, which serve as one method of minimizing the impact of imbalanced production environments and biases in financial investing, need to be addressed. **Finally, valuing the artistic merit of female-created stories and recognizing their commercial appeal is crucial for future change.** (*emphasis in original*, Smith, et al. 33)

Often studios view female-centered narratives as too risky and requires content to be adjusted so it is commercially appealing. Kelly Reichardt’s model of filmmaking offers encouragement to other up-and-coming female filmmakers who are determined not to compromise artistic vision or be co-opted by commercial demands. However other

filmmaking models who are more commercially based remind them that the reverse compromise might be about wider audiences and career sustainability. Exploring what is lost and gained in these two different models of filmmaking will benefit the industry and scholars, but ultimately provide a voice for filmmakers.

One recent voice that seems to be following in Reichardt's mode of micro-budget, independent production is Australian director Sophie Hyde, who earned the World Cinematic Directing Award for her first feature drama, one of the few female directors to win at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival. Hyde's production methods and content show her ability to ignore commercial demands. Her film, *52 Tuesdays*, used first time or non-actors, several of which were still in high school, and focuses on a young girl who negotiates a new relationship with her mother who is transitioning toward a sex change operation.<sup>1</sup> Hyde experimented with production, taking a year to film, shooting only on Tuesdays, and writing the script with weekly deadlines. Like Reichardt's second film, *Old Joy*, Hyde's film is distributed by Kino Lober but in limited release (Tartaglione). It is difficult to make comparisons between American indie filmmakers and foreign directors since often, as in the case with Hyde, they receive more government funding opportunities, but there are several private corporations in the U.S. that hope to change the odds.

In a 2014 Sundance Film Festival Women in Film panel session, Anne Hubbell, co-founder of Tangerine Entertainment, introduced The Juice Fund, a tax deductible, donation driven fund to support female directors. The fund grants ten one thousand dollar

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<sup>1</sup> See Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* for further discussion of transgender.

awards a year to first or second time female narrative film directors in an effort to support their participation in film festivals; on top of funding, the award includes five hours of mentoring and inclusion in community networking events at film festivals (Macaulay). Fellow panel member, Kamal Sinclair, senior manager for the New Frontier Story Lab, highlighted the Sundance Institute's opportunities for female feature filmmakers such as the Adrienne Shelly Female Filmmaker \$5000 grant. The Women in Film panel, hosted by *YouTube*, was the only one of its kind at the festival and, because it was an invitation-only event, a very limited option. Publicity for new funding opportunities was somewhat haphazard. It was by chance at a question and answer session after the premier of Lynn Shelton's film *Laggies* that Jacki Zehner, president of Women Moving Millions mentioned the newly organized Gamechanger Films, a for-profit film fund for female narrative filmmakers. While it is encouraging that several more organizations are addressing the lack of funding for female narrative filmmaking, marketing these opportunities is still spotty.

Industry reporting by Smith, et al., and Martha Lauzen of the *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film* has provided statistics and research, but setting an agenda from those findings and creating change is challenging. Correcting the unbalanced perception issues and addressing the lack of support for female directors requires a comprehensive plan, one in which the academic arena can contribute to with wider acknowledgement and appreciation for women's films. Female filmmakers need to be incorporated into syllabuses and textbooks on all academic levels much more pervasively. Like Kelly Reichardt, I too teach for a living. During an introductory film course discussion that highlighted Martha Lauzen's reports and Melissa Silverstein's

pieces from *Indiewire.com*, I asked students why there was lack of emphasis on female directors overall. The course came with a departmental textbook, and while the author is nationally known and respected, he does not highlight many women directors. I held up the text as I asked the question, and none of my students, even with the visual aid, could connect the dots. The first student to answer my question, a popular culture and film double major, replied with an earnest expression: “Because women directors don’t make the quality of films male directors do. I mean that’s why we’re studying male directors, right?” This college freshman summarized a stereotype that according both Smith et al., and Lauzen’s reports is pervasive throughout the film industry. If instructors of film courses and those who teach production do not have sufficient tools, such as textbooks, that adequately incorporate female directors, the nation’s budding filmmakers, critics, scholars, and teachers will continue to under-represent women in the film industry or be denied role models from sheer lack of knowledge. As Smith, et al., point out, many within the industry do little to “challenge systemic issues of inequality that may still exist,” therefore “[a]ssisting women as they navigate these obstacles and sensitizing decision-makers to the very real injustices females face should be a priority for concerned groups in the future” (33). To promote and create change outside the industry, scholars and academics can make an effort to embrace the current pedagogical resources available and support new research related to women in the film industry. Introducing students to the study of women’s films can be a step in changing perception and opportunity for future and contemporary female filmmakers.

As Reichardt becomes more recognized in the industry like Kathryn Bigelow, or more commercially viable, as Nicole Holofcener has, especially with *Enough Said*

(2013), her artistic use of neorealism and minimalism might fall to the wayside. There are hints of style adjustments in her 2013 film *Night Moves*, which premiered at the Venice Film festival to reviews stating: “few would have predicted that [her next film] would be “a crackling little suspense thriller/morality play indebted to **Dostoyevsky** and **Hitchcock**. But while it’s a left turn, it’s at least as good as the films that came before it, and still with the same recognizable DNA intact” (*emphasis in original*, Lyttelton). True to her model, Reichardt secured a foreign distributor and co-producer at the Toronto International Film Festival instead of seeking funding through the mini-majors of Hollywood studios. Funding opportunities are difficult to find for female filmmakers, and the co-optation of female filmmakers through the lure of easier financing might impact choices concerning content and form; thus an analysis of the film industry’s legitimization and reward system with a comparison between female filmmakers’ might illustrate those artistic compromises. Perception and funding issues for women in the industry are institutional and cultural hurdles making for slow progress toward change, but with every female filmmaker who creates a sustainable career path and each new organization that supports female directors, especially in underrepresented areas such as narrative film, the industry becomes more diverse and its content more inclusive. A film industry that values all voices is a richer resource for all involved, women in the industry, film students, and studios, but most especially for audiences.

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APPENDIXES

## APPENDIX A

**Kelly Reichardt Life Timeline:**

- 1964 Born in Miami-Dade County to parents in the police force (crime scene detective father and narcotics undercover agent mother)
- 1972 Parents divorce (age eight)
- 1974 First political memory was of being pulled out of the pool during a party to watch Nixon resign
- 1976 Seventh grade--Attended Bob Rich School of Photography
- 1980s job at Peaches Records and Tapes/dropped out of high school  
Got GED  
Enrolled in Miami Dade Community College/rented an apartment in North Miami moved to Boston/lived with friends  
Enrolled in night classes at Massachusetts College of Art and Design  
Graduated with a BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Tufts University  
Film project while in school--made road movie trilogy on Super-8
- 1987/8 Moved to New York City  
Couch surfed for five years  
Co-directed music video for Helmet with Jesse Hartman (teamed up to explore making *River of Grass*)
- 1991 Prop assistant on *Poison* and meets Todd Haynes
- 1995 *River of Grass* is released (made with a crew of thirteen with a nineteen day shoot-16mm)  
Moves to LA and works on *The Royal Court* but it is not released  
Teaches at School of Visual Arts, Columbia University, and SUNY Buffalo, respectively
- 1999 *Ode* is finished (made with a crew of two)  
Meets Jonathan Raymond through Todd Haynes
- 2002 *Then, a Year* (fourteen minute short)
- 2004 *Travis* is created (eleven minute short)  
Begins collaboration with Jon Raymond on *Old Joy*
- 2006 *Old Joy* is released (made with a crew of six with a two week shoot) premiered at the Sundance Film Festival  
Begins teaching as an Artist-in-Residence at Bard College, New York
- 2008 *Wendy and Lucy* is released (crew of ten to thirteen with an eighteen to twenty day shoot) premiered at Cannes Film Festival
- 2010 *Meek's Cutoff* is released (crew of thirty to fifty) and premiered at the Venice Film Festival
- 2012 Begins filming *Night Moves*  
Sued by Clarke Abby for copyright infringement whose husband wrote *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1974) but settled out of court
- 2013 Premiered *Night Moves* at Cannes Film Festival