

CONCLUSION

Coming to Terms with Mr Meek

It is an exciting time to be engaging in debates about cinema and the material world. Not only has the critical and theoretical literature relating to the ethics and aesthetics of environmental representation been expanding hugely in recent years, but also film-theory debates about the medium's 'special relationship' with material firstness have been complicated and reinvigorated by digital cinematography. (Dudley Andrew's 2010 'manifesto', *What Cinema Is!*, is a particularly fascinating contribution to this discussion.) Over the last decade, Hollywood blockbusters have struggled to incorporate or thematize global environmental awareness, and the much-discussed 'slow cinema' aesthetic of Lisandro Alonso, Jia Zhangke and Carlos Reygadas, for example, has taken centre stage in world cinema (however problematic an image that may be). So much activity in cinema today seems to invite or require ecocritical exploration, but there is an understandable, and perhaps even vital, reluctance on the part of writers in the field to settle on anything like a stable ecocinema canon or methodology. David Ingram's chapter, 'The Aesthetics and Ethics of Eco-Film Criticism' (2013) is instructive in this regard; aptly placed early on in an edited collection, it asks what we, as ecocritical film scholars, *want from* the films we watch and write about. 'What', Ingram wonders, 'are the implications for the activist ambitions and aesthetic tastes of eco-film criticism if "bad" art inspires people just as much, if not more than, the "good"?' (2013: 53).

If there is an anxiety about quite how and where to apply and explore ecocritical theories of cinema, it has manifested itself in the study of a dizzying range of films, themes, national cinemas and genres, often within the space of a single book, or even essay. In many respects this is to be welcomed; ecocritical film studies has certainly been 'opened out', and there can be few remaining doubts

about its potentially vast contribution to film studies as a discipline. But have we been too quick to build ideas and arguments out of vivid and stimulating snapshots, in lieu of something more sustained? In *Transactions with the World*, I have deliberately – and sometimes counterintuitively – narrowed my focus, and lingered with a particular body of work, in an attempt to explore its own variety of ecocritical complexities. Yes, New Hollywood is already large and diverse, but it has (I think) a unity of sorts, and one which I hope has provided the opportunity for the building of a multi-faceted but coherent portrait. At a number of points, I have been tempted to carry questions and ideas beyond New Hollywood, and ask them of other films and periods, in and beyond American cinema. Does locational presence have a different ecocritical currency in the films of Dogme 95? Does *Pierrot le fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965), and its take on the fugitive film, develop a substantially different type of environmental liberation? And if so, does this tell us anything more broadly about the environmental imagination of the French New Wave, or perhaps even European modernist cinema in general? Do silent comedy films shot in a fledgling Los Angeles and its environs warrant attention as regional texts? How do propaganda films (attempt to) contain the potential of material singularity and vibrancy, in their lurches toward abstraction and generalization? I reluctantly put these ideas aside for the present time, concerned that they would only muddy my discussion of a particular film-historical moment.

One key question that arises from this study, then, is: If there is such a thing as an ecocritically coherent body of work, to what extent does it make sense to draw dividing lines along national and historical parameters? Is ecocriticism not teaching us to study cinema, its categories and its theories, according to new points of reference? Wondering about the merits and integrity of my own approach, I take a good deal of confidence from watching and re-watching *Meek's Cutoff* (Kelly Reichardt, 2010), a film which seems to establish a firm continuity with, and crucial variation from, the environmental sensibility of New Hollywood as it has been described in this book. Its subject and aesthetics are most meaningful in relation to American filmmaking traditions, in such a way that does not limit – but instead sharpens and deepens – its ecocritical insights. The film is one of many contemporary works to display an obvious debt to New Hollywood, but of those it is perhaps most clearly linked with the particular strain of vividly localized, materially vibrant work examined in this study. As a western, its concern with the bodily experiences of its characters in their environment places it in the company of *The Wild Bunch* and *Jeremiah Johnson*; its interest in silences and failures of human

communication suggests the influence of Monte Hellman; its periodic shots of gushing rivers and quivering plants immediately bring to mind Terrence Malick. But it can also be read as a subtle admonishment of this period's environmental imagination.

Meek's Cutoff chronicles the efforts of a small group of settlers as they journey across the punishing terrain of eastern Oregon, and many of the internal struggles which emerge are directly traceable to environmental conditions and the search for water. As with the Vietnamized westerns discussed in Chapter Three, there is in *Meek's Cutoff* an evident desire to communicate the material challenges encountered by the characters: long takes detail the effort involved in crossing rivers and valleys; sounds of rickety wagons and laboured breathing are often as audible as dialogue and music; characters are developed and revealed according to their behaviour within a testing environment. However, these broad correspondences may distract from the significant departures of *Meek's Cutoff* from a number of its New Hollywood forebears. This shift takes its most arresting form in the character of Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood), the bombastic guide whose authority gradually subsides through the course of the film. A crude and conceited man, proud of his violent exploits, though bringing with him knowledge, charm and a degree of self-awareness, Meek would not be out of place in a Peckinpah western. His constant reference to an old order (implicitly or explicitly an order of clear race and gender hierarchies) may also recall the nostalgia that pervades much of Peckinpah's work. Crucially, though, and distinctly unlike Peckinpah's films, *Meek's Cutoff* holds its central male at a distance, observing the man-versus-wilderness premise as a kind of pathetic farce. The rigorous and deliberate style of Reichardt's film denies us the sense of environmental immersion which I described in Peckinpah's work – that filmic embodiment of physical toil. But what we witness instead is a precise deconstruction of masculinized environmental adventure.

This could feasibly be described as a political 'stance' adopted by the film as a whole, but it crystallizes with particular clarity and deliberateness in a specific scene, approximately one-third into the film. In it, five characters gather under a basic tent: Stephen Meek, Jimmy (a young boy, played by Tommy Nelson) and the three wives of the travelling party – Milley Gately (Zoe Kazan), Glory White (Shirley Henderson) and Emily Tetherow (Michelle Williams). Emily, with her steely self-assurance and resistance to Meek's authority, anchors the film's point of view. The scene in question moves from a short dialogue between Meek and Jimmy towards a barbed exchange between Meek and Emily, all of which is

closely observed by Milley and Glory (Jimmy's mother). Looking out towards a range of mountains in the distance, Jimmy asks Meek whether they are 'our mountains' – the ones towards which the group is headed. Meek, with some tenderness, explains that they are not, but that perhaps they could be christened 'Jimmy's mountains'; he even suggests informing cartographers of the new name. Despite the basically harmless nature of this banter on its own terms, the context within which it emerges demands that we regard it with some caution or hesitancy. After all, Meek has taken it upon himself to casually conquer a range of mountains, at a distance, in the midst of a disastrous path-finding mission for which he is currently responsible. That he can treat his surroundings with such cocksureness, in the presence of women and children who are suffering from hunger and thirst, is more than a little galling. The staging of the scene, in which two seated women (Glory and Emily) face the two males, encourages us to see this talk of conquering mountains as a kind of display of masculinity (that a third woman, Milley, kneels beside Meek only reinforces this effect). All three women are crocheting. As if to emphasize the gender divide, at the end of Meek's mountain-conqueror performance, and after Jimmy has shyly walked away, Glory delicately asks Meek, 'You never womaned, Mr. Meek?'

Of the three women, Emily is the most visibly scornful of Meek's yarn spinning, and he challenges her directly, asking whether or not she likes him. 'I don't like where we are', replies Emily. Meek goes on to scoff at the notion that the group is lost; 'We're not lost, we're just finding our way'. Under the circumstances, Meek's reassurance sounds as pathetic to us as it does to those in his presence. And there is also a subtle but unmistakable countercultural whimsy in his tone. He brings with him, in other words, an attitude which recurs again and again in New Hollywood male protagonists; one can almost hear Dennis Hopper or Warren Oates deliver the line. As Meek goes on to pronounce his half-baked theories of sexual identity, our scepticism is surely at one with Emily's. The audience and the three women gathered in the tent (whose reactions the camera dwells upon) have seen before them a man with an exaggerated sense of social and spatial entitlement wander in his verbal ramblings between topological conquest and sexual politics. *Meek's Cutoff* is not only a feminist reworking of the western; it utilizes a female perspective as a means of interrogating the genre's environmental blind spots. It seems to take inspiration from important achievements of New Hollywood while simultaneously undoing some of its patriarchal, narcissistic and romanticizing indulgences.

In exploring the ecocritical questions raised by New Hollywood films, it has sometimes proved difficult to come to terms with the solipsism that underpins many of them. Might we say that New Hollywood was a time in which American film lost some of its ambition to explore and interrogate modern men and women with the philosophical tenacity and wit Stanley Cavell so values in his writings on Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s? Cavell characterizes the conversation of such films as *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) and *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937) as

[O]f a sort that leads to acknowledgement; to the reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness; a reconciliation so profound as to require the metamorphosis of death and revival, the achievement of a new perspective on existence; a perspective that presents itself as a place, one removed from the city of confusion and divorce. (Cavell, 1981: 19)

In contrast, there are relatively few searching or stimulating conversations in New Hollywood cinema. *The Parallax View*, *Ride in the Whirlwind* (Monte Hellman, 1966) and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* offer profound explorations of *something*, but not people, at least not ‘people’ in the sense we find in the films of Preston Sturges and Howard Hawks, or even Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock – people whose conversations might plausibly lead to, in Cavell’s terms, ‘a new perspective on existence’. Other critics have lamented this relative banality, but perhaps it can instead be understood as a shift in emphasis, away from people’s thoughts and actions and towards a more horizontally constituted series of materials, events and imaginings. In the richest and most stimulating films of the period, the absence of a complex or nuanced humanism became somehow (ecologically?) creative, and critical. This is not to blithely gloss over some serious shortcomings in the representational politics of New Hollywood, but rather to remember that characters are not the only subject worth exploring.

Meek’s Cutoff seems able to look back towards New Hollywood and extract from it both inspirational and lamentable legacies. It offers an ideal endpoint from which to reflect on that period’s environmental sensibility, and the usefulness of understanding it as a period per se. Reichardt’s film reminds us of the challenging ways in which American cinema of the 1960s and 1970s reconfigured the dynamic relationship between Hollywood and the material environment, but also warns us that such reconfiguration did not equal any kind of comfortable environmentalist

reconciliation between narrative cinema and the world. Not that such a thing could ever exist.

Works Cited

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