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Film: History and Form

Critical Essay

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*Certain Women* is an American film directed by Kelly Reichardt. The film was set in rural Montana, and follows three loosely connected stories of 4 women. It was released in 2016, a pivotal moment for American independent cinema, and it premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. Before, I have a very traditional view on how a feminist movie should be like, or more precisely, what a movie should be like: with a narrative that contains an obvious story line, motivations of the characters' choices and actions, conflicts, climax and solution. *Certain Women* broke this expectation and view: It uses an extremely objective and understated narrative logic to portray the lives of the three women living in a small American town. The film takes a glimpse of their careers, families, and romantic lives, and diverging from the tradition of the "cinema of attraction". Unlike other feminist films that express their message more explicitly, Reichardt carefully ingrained feminism into every frame, making it seemingly invisible yet with subtle precision.

This essay will analyze *Certain Women* through a feminist lens, with an analysis of Laura Mulvey and Linda Williams, to explore how Reichardt's formal minimalism and focus challenge conventional gendered narratives. By considering the film's form, its socio-cultural context, and its reception within the independent film landscape, I argue that *Certain Women* resists the traditional cinematic (male) gaze, but, on the other hand, shapes a narrative where women are no longer symbolic, empty, vessels but fully embodied subjects. The film not only reflects a broader

cultural shift in feminist related discussion during the mid-2010s, but also reintroduces the power of slowness, ambiguity, and stillness as radical cinematic tools.

First of all, let's talk about the feminist spectacle. The way Reichardt filmed and directed *Certain Women* made the audience feel that these women weren't characters in a story, and we weren't just an audience watching a narrative unfold; instead, it felt like she had simply placed a camera in the lives of three real women, and we were merely catching a glimpse of a corner of their everyday lives. There are still quite a few explicit feminist voices in the film: for instance, when Laura is on the phone with her husband and says: "It'd be so lovely to think that if I were a man and I could explain a law, people would listen and say 'Okay...'" In recent years, many feminist films have featured images of independent women, but traditional social symbols (like higher education and respectable careers) often appear to be shiny decorations, just masking deeper social contradictions.

Here, I'd like to focus specifically on analyzing Gina's story. The plot is quite simple: Gina can be summarized as a woman who is professionally successful but unhappy at home. Her daughter dislikes her, and her husband is cheating on her. The part of her life shown in the film revolves around her and her husband trying to build a house in the countryside and looking to buy some stones from an acquaintance's backyard. That's it. This type of character isn't new: she's upper-middle class, a tall, beautiful blonde, successful in her career, and holds herself to high standards. Her first appearance in the film is while she's jogging—she's in great shape, clearly maintaining her body well. She's tasteful and perfectionistic: she wants to build her own house and is picky about the materials. She wants to use stones from old buildings to build a wall: authenticity. And yet, we all know—she's not happy, is she? Her daughter clearly expresses her dislike, talking and laughing only with her father. The father tells their daughter, "You should

be nicer to your mother.” The daughter rolls her eyes and asks, “Why?” The father replies, “Because she works very hard for us.” Not “because she loves us” or “because she’s so good to us”, none of those traditional maternal traits. Instead, it’s “because she works very hard for us,” implying “even if she’s not very likable.”

How should we put it? The world has never liked powerful women. In the logic of this world, such women are usually not considered likable. When Gina and her husband visit Albert to ask about the stones in his yard, there’s a clear awkwardness from the husband: he doesn’t really care about the stones. He probably feels that approaching an elderly man who no longer seems fully mentally clear to buy something is already a form of taking advantage. But as the husband and subordinate in this dynamic, he must go along with his wife. He sits there, essentially just making small, vague conversation.

Gina, on the other hand, is very clear about her goal: she makes polite small talk, brings up the idea of buying the stones, and repeatedly emphasizes “We’re happy to pay.” Maybe Albert doesn’t like Gina very much—he keeps telling stories from his youth. But he still agrees to give them the stones. What I saw in Gina during this process is a woman with a very clear goal who will see it through. She may not be particularly smooth or charming, and yes—as viewers, we might think, seeing the old man repeatedly bring up stories from his youth, that he’s lonely. If Gina had “pretended” to be his friend before bringing up the stones, things might have been easier. But she doesn’t. She’s strong-willed and direct. Once Albert agrees, Gina shows sincere politeness and repeatedly thanks him.

And just then, her husband awkwardly adds, “You can still think about it; you don’t have to sell them to us.” Gina gives him a look. At that moment, her goal had been achieved. She checks her watch and politely begins to take her leave. The character of Gina is meticulous,

polite, and well-mannered—but because of that, she also creates a sense of distance. She came for those stones, and she doesn't really care about how the old man is doing. And Albert, because of his age and illness, has reached a point where he no longer needs to maintain surface-level politeness—he engages with whomever he chooses.

But none of that stopped her from getting the stones.

These stones represent Gina's external success. She always gets what she wants—because she is determined, clear in her goals, and able to overcome discomfort in social situations and negotiate politely. But when it comes to human connection, she's lacking. People don't like her. Compared to the first story, where Laura jokes on the phone, "Maybe if I were a man, he would have trusted me from the start," I believe the second story is even more feminist in nature: it portrays a successful woman who fails in the roles of "good wife," "loving mother," and "likable person." But this isn't a new story, is it?

This narrative very truthfully reflects the dilemma many so-called "independent women" face in today's society. They have respectable jobs and high personal achievement, but that's not enough. They are expected to be compassionate, to build emotional bonds with others, to care for their families, to be likable. This demand for "likability" is ever-present, placing them in the position of being an object to be evaluated. Meanwhile, for men, this is not the case. As long as they are successful, that alone is enough—there will be women who like them, and society will recognize them. But for women, it's different. Women always need to be liked to be socially accepted.

So, back to the original question: Is she truly unhappy? I think Reichardt gives us the answer at the end of this story, and it's also, in my view, the most brilliant feminist moment in the entire film: after Gina has served sausages to her friends and family, she sits alone in the car

smoking. In that moment, she is relaxed, she is at ease—it is the moment where she is truly herself. A space that belongs to her alone, like the open plains of Montana. That, I believe, is the most powerful and silent rebuttal to the objectification of women: I don't recognize your standards, but I will still play the part. Just don't think you can tame me. Only when I am alone do I know who I truly am.

Laura Mulvey points this out in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*: she argues that in classical Hollywood cinema, “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning (Mulvey 7).” The cinematic medium is inherently tied to voyeuristic desire—in other words, film enhances this “instinct” in human nature. Men, either through identification with the characters or through the satisfaction of visual desire, complete a form of conquest and enjoy a false yet gratifying sense of victory. Female images often interrupt the narrative; their function is limited to providing spectacle or advancing the development of male characters. The more a film gets caught up in its storyline, the less likely it is to become a true feminist film.

What makes *Certain Women* special is precisely its rare detachment. Through a fragmented narrative structure, a near-clinical objectivity, restrained emotional arcs, and minimized dramatic conflict, Reichardt quietly prompts viewers to become more self-aware and attentive. You are not watching a story—you are witnessing fragments of a woman's real life. Whenever the viewer briefly reaches a moment of resonance with the characters, the next second we are pulled abruptly back to reality. For example, in the second story, Gina's husband is cheating on her. Will Gina find out? No—she simply goes on doing what she is expected to do.

Reichardt, through her camera language, refuses to give the viewer the comfort of voyeurism or narrative payoff.

The female characters are not visually marked as erotic; instead, their silences and hesitations become their defining traits. These elements demand a different, more patient form of attention. Even in moments filled with potential romantic or emotional revelation—such as the nighttime horseback ride between Beth and Jamie—the camera avoids any overt dramatization or emotional manipulation. The story is simply presented to us, plainly and directly. Reichardt’s style does not allow us to consume the characters; we must sit with them, often in discomfort or ambiguity, breaking what Mulvey has analyzed “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly (Mulvey 7).”

Linda Williams’ *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess* explores how genres like pornography, horror, and melodrama provoke physical reactions that are often gendered and labeled as “excessive.” While *Certain Women*, like melodrama, is interested in emotion, Reichardt subverts the genre by portraying emotional life through suppression rather than outburst. There are no dramatic breakdowns, no confrontational scenes—only weary faces, missed connections, and silent gestures of care or resignation. Laura’s sympathy when she visits her lonely client in prison, Gina smoking at the end, Jamie falling asleep from exhaustion in the car as she returns to the ranch and drives into a vast field—these are the film’s emotional peaks. An obvious contradiction of Williams’ “What may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation (Williams 4).” If Williams’ “body genres” rely on visible excess, *Certain Women* highlights emotional labor and endurance by emphasizing the lack of spectacle. The

result is an anti-melodramatic aesthetic: pain and disappointment are recorded in the smallest details—the shift in a voice, the tension in a pause.

As Sophie Mayer writes in *Another Gaze, Certain Women* “is about women getting tired of being polite.” This film’s feminism is not a traditional critique or lecture, but structural. It reveals how politeness, silence, and accommodation have become survival strategies in a world that quietly and relentlessly erodes female agency. Reichardt’s camera does not save or empower her characters in any grand way. Instead, it honors them through attention—recognizing that refusing to perform, entertain, or be consumed is, in itself, a feminist act.

Reichardt’s distinctive cinematographic style avoids traditional narrative momentum and instead leans toward a quiet, observational storytelling approach that emphasizes mood, setting, and psychological nuance rather than dramatic action. Her interest lies in the ordinary—what she calls “small, lived moments.” This pursuit of subtlety and realism is one of the clearest markers of her directorial signature.

In *Certain Women*, one key decision was Reichardt’s choice to shoot on 16mm film. In an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*, Reichardt explained that this decision was not only aesthetic but also philosophical: “Looking at the footage, the snow just looked like a solid block of white. It was so absolute and hard-lined and with a lack of detail... But the payoff with film is it’s just not as hard and flat and there’s more grain and more texture.” This emphasis on texture and her use of 16mm allowed her to vividly capture the natural landscape of Montana, “making the space tell the story (Reichardt).” The unique environment shapes the unique characters, and presenting the vast yet quiet landscape of Montana in this way better persuades the audience of what kind of story this really is.

Reichardt subverts the logic of the “cinema of attractions,” which builds spectacle to captivate audiences—she takes a completely opposite path, one that could even be described as radically different. There are no special effects, no major conflicts; instead, what she offers is a deep psychological exploration of her characters. *Certain Women* becomes an extremely insightful feminist film—not through loud declarations, but through Reichardt choices and emotional silence. Reichardt does not ask the audience to sympathize with or admire her characters; instead, she asks them to pay attention. In doing so, she offers a kind of cinema not centered on watching women perform, but on witnessing them endure, negotiate, and occasionally, in a world that demands their likability, find moments of solitude and selfhood. It is in these small, vivid, and seemingly unremarkable moments that Reichardt finds her strength as a filmmaker and offers us a quietly subversive feminist perspective: she never preaches, she illuminates through observation.

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