

Certain Women (2016)

“How are you? How are you?” / “I’m just fine. I’m just fine.”

Major Credits

Director: Kelly Reichardt

Screenplay: Kelly Reichardt, based on three short stories by Maile Meloy

Editor: Kelly Reichardt

Cinematography: Christopher Blauvelt

Cast: Laura Dern (Laura), Michelle Williams (Gina), Kristen Stewart (Elizabeth Travis), Lily Gladstone (The Farmer), Jared Harris (Mr. Fuller), Rene Auberjonois (Albert)

Production Background

Kelly Reichardt had previously directed several admired independent films, principally *Old Joy* (2006) and *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), which had starred Michelle Williams. To this point, her films have all been small budget projects that have been distributed principally at film festivals and art house venues. *Certain Women* was her first work to earn more than \$1 million at the box office. Williams, Laura Dern, and Kristen Stewart are all highly respected actors who have transcended the label of “movie stars” (Stewart, in particular, has worked hard to be taken seriously following her early success in the *Twilight* franchise). Their performances here are excellent, yet it is the newcomer, Lily Gladstone, who arguably steals the show.

Reichardt has acquired the reputation of being a “minimalist” filmmaker. Her plots are simple (*Wendy and Lucy*, for example, consists entirely of a young woman searching for her lost dog), the dialogue is extremely spare (long stretches of *Certain Women* could be watched with the sound turned off), music remains largely absent, the meaning opaque.

Cinematic Qualities

1. Long takes: Reflecting her training as a photographer, Reichardt generally prefers sustained shots that emphasize composition within the frame rather than montage sequences. This style is particularly evident in the long shots with blue snow-capped mountains in the background that serve as a geographical link among the three stories. Note too the expressive “double exposure” of the clouds reflected in Albert’s windows as Gina leaves and the beautiful low angle 2-shot of the lawyer riding on the back of the farmer’s horse. Finally, there is the sustained long take of the wrangler driving away from Livingston, a brilliant portrait that will likely remain in the viewer’s memory. These shots are held long enough for the spectator to construct a “meaning” behind them.
2. Editing: Reichardt uses a fundamental tool of classical film editing for dialogue—shot/reverse shot—to keep the characters in separate frames, even in confined spaces such as the front seat of a car, thereby underscoring their personal isolation. This technique is particularly relevant during the drive back from Billings when Laura becomes exasperated with Mr. Fuller. Note how the director alters this pattern (after establishing it in the diner) when the rancher gives the lawyer a ride on her horse.

Questions for Discussion

1. The sole reviewer of *Certain Women* on the Imdb database wrote, “I hated myself for watching this movie! My wife hated me for making her watch this movie! I never felt this about any other movie in my whole life!!! There was absolutely nothing to see, no stories, no nothing! There was no message to deliver! No plot! Nothing!” How would you respond to this criticism?
2. The film was shot in and around Livingston, MT. What effect does the environment have on the characters and the narrative? How does the specific geography of Montana modify your understanding of the traditional Western movie?
3. Someone *must* have described *Certain Women* as a “feminist Western.” What values and concerns do the “certain women” share? How does the film modify, if not subvert, the generic conventions of the Hollywood Western as conceived by John Ford and Howard Hawkes?
4. What rationale supports the *sequence* of the three stories? How would the film be different if the order were different?
5. The narrative concludes with an epilogue in which each of the protagonists is briefly glimpsed. How does this conclusion affect your understanding of the film as a whole?