

Meek's Cutoff is the latest feature film from Kelly Reichardt, the indie director whose patient, organic films have focused on sensitive characters and human emotions (*Old Joy*, *Wendy and Lucy*). In *Meek's Cutoff*, Reichardt makes a foray into period filmmaking. The story takes place in 1845.

Meek's Cutoff was primarily photographed on KODAK VISION2 Expression 500T Color Negative Film 5229 in the high, dry landscapes of eastern Oregon. Reichardt and cinematographer Chris Blauvelt chose a 1.33:1 aspect ratio and followed a digital intermediate post path at Next Element by Deluxe in Los Angeles. The DI was overseen by Senior Colorist Michael Most.

Most is recognized as one of the most experienced and talented post-production professionals in the business. For 30 years, he has helped filmmakers navigate the ever-shifting currents of post technology. He recently spoke about his contributions to *Meek's Cutoff*.



Michael Most and *Meek's Cutoff*

Q Tell us about your experience on *Meek's Cutoff*.

A It was fun to get back to working with film-originated images. I had been doing a lot of television work shot with digital cameras. Considering the many harsh production conditions – wide open areas with little shade, rapidly changing skies and weather conditions, and lots of dust – the choice of 35mm was a wise one.

In grading the picture, I was quickly reminded of why film survives and why it is, in many ways, still the most robust and forgiving production format we have. I had forgotten just how well film handles extreme overexposure; how robust it is with regard to things like shadow detail; and perhaps most impressively, how kind it is to human faces. It's not just about the flesh tones that it is capable of reproducing. It's about having severely different skin tones in the same frame under harsh sunlit conditions, and it's about the softness it applies to the gradations of light playing on those flesh tones. There is a real beauty to those images, and the ease and flexibility with which a colorist can manipulate them (given the right tools) is really quite remarkable.

Q How does that differ from images captured with digital cameras?

A The best digital cameras we have today are light years beyond the first-generation HD cameras. But they still don't quite reach the bar film sets in areas like dynamic range and highlight handling. It's nice to not have to fight the typical high-end clipping that digital cameras pretty much all have.

DI systems are really designed around what film brings to the table, and the way film reacts to light. All the controls in a log-based environment are designed around film response. So if you are going into a film-targeted DI, it's ideal to be starting with film because everything just kind of works – colors just sort of fall into place.

Q How did those attributes apply in the case of *Meek's Cutoff*?

A Much of the day work in the film was shot in a very harsh environment, with extreme contrast. They needed the forgiveness that film gives you in those situations. In the movie, there are areas where parts of the frame are very hot. But there is never clipping, as there would be with a digital camera. And the night work retained a very naturalistic quality, with just enough texture to give you a sense of night without appearing artificially lit. I felt that *Meek's Cutoff* was a project that was shot on film for all the right reasons.

Q You've been quoted as saying we are in a "technological golden age." What do you mean by that?

A We have numerous choices for any given project. We can select the tools that are most appropriate based on the production conditions, the desired image characteristics, and yes, the budget. Based on my recent experience, I'm very glad that film is one of those choices. People tend to take sides. Sometimes that can be self-serving. In our business, there's no reason to take sides. If you really want to look at the world as it is right now, you'll see that we have more great tools than we ever dreamed of. One reason for that is the innovation associated with digital technology. And another reason is that we have film as an option, because it allows certain projects to be made without compromise. The fact that we have these options is something to be celebrated.