

# Winter's Bone

(2010, Debra Granik)

## Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making

### Core Study Areas Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Specialist Study Area AS – Spectatorship AL - Spectatorship & Ideology

### Rationale for study

- A highly evocative independently produced film that offers arresting visual images that shift from the mundane to the mythical. An interesting take on a quest narrative that remains true to its intentions. Much to analyse in terms of representations of communities and gender. The story of Ree, a 17 year old who must track down her meth-addicted father who has skipped bail before the bondsman repossesses the family homestead and timber acres to pay off his debt. Set in the unforgiving landscape of the Orzak mountains in Missouri, USA.

### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- 05.15-11.20. Establishes key ideas and themes. Structures of communities, rules of kinship and the start of Ree's journey. Ree's character and determination are clearly shown.
- 40.30-56.00. Teardrop brings news, sense of threat and highlights the meth problem. Ree's situation appears desperate. Appeals to community but she is rejected. Outside forces gain momentum with the appearance of the bondsman. Tone shifts considerably in this sequence with both the impressionistic

scene at the cattle market, followed by Ree's abduction and brutal beating at the hands of her kin. Teardrop redeems himself as her saviour. Examples of the dominant cinematography, mise-en-scène and shifting aesthetic are in this sequence.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS – Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

- McDonough's camera, not entirely settled, gently shifting the frame and often more overtly peering around the corner, nosing into rooms or over a character's shoulder.
- Use of selective focus allows for all kind of rich details to emerge at the surface even when the camera isn't moving.
- Shot on RED cameras. 95% of filming is on hand held cameras building a scene from single perspectives.

#### Mise-en-Scène

- On location shooting in the Orzaks, landscape dominates. A cool frostbitten authenticity of winter combined with a beautiful bleakness of disintegrating landscapes. Local people cast in supporting roles with costumes sourced from real people. The presence of woodland reminds spectators of the key themes – the relevance of timber to this community as both a commodity and the 'larder' that provides food.
- A generally cool colour palette with flashes of vibrant or more expressionist colour at points of high emotion.
- Real/found locations e.g. the burnt out meth house.

#### Editing

- Events take place over one week. Time is compressed in the first third and often feels repetitive and real. Later scenes mix dream and impressionistic moments in

more heady and overlapping images.

- Long takes provide authenticity.
- Wipes and invisible editing.

### Sound

- Reclaims traditional music to challenge the negative 'hill billy/deliverance' knee jerk reaction to any narrative that dramatizes the lives of impoverished rural communities. The sound track and musical performances are achingly melancholic but affirm and validate the lives of marginal characters.
- Sections of 'empty' soundtrack that reinforce Ree's seemingly repetitive trudge to find someone who will lead her to her father. Limited non diegetic sound to give a realist tone.
- Shifts from quiet talking to loud screams.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

- In part a revisionist assessment of the 'hillbilly' stereotype in rural communities.
- Strong female lead role. Ree is both a maternal figure to her siblings and the key active character who drives the narrative in her quest to find her father.
- Supporting female roles offer a strong representation of women as resourceful, stoic and problem solvers in the community who navigate male power.

### Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual Style, Influences, Auteur, Motifs)

- Highly expressive minimal aesthetic. The cold austere Missouri backcountry is imbued with a strange beauty and fascination for rural traditions shot at times as still images. The mise-en-scène cuts between natural, open, observational images and a heightened sense of the macabre in everyday objects (bottles lined up to shoot, fragmented close ups of a rocking horse)
- Close ups and obtuse angles heighten the mood in a style reminiscent of Sergio Leone's famous westerns. Teardrop's wordless stand-off with the sheriff is filmed through the wing mirror of his truck creating a blend of menace, self-destructiveness and an assertion of an ethic that is unrecognizable to city folk.
- The closing sequence in which Ree must travel on a midnight moonlight quest by boat to retrieve

a body (her father's) from the underworld draws on Greek mythology. The ordeal, and final task Ree must perform is shatteringly brutal but ultimately gives her the means to salvation. The aesthetics are highly symbolic.

- Matter-of-fact but ghoulish and visceral imagery of butchered meat and flayed animals serve to highlight both the harshness of the land and the resourcefulness of the Orzak people. Animals are a strong motif whether for food (deer) or to suggest vulnerability at loss of their habit (squirrels in trees, Ree giving up her horse) or as an ever present reminder of the history and heritage of the lives of mountain dwellers. Vivid and frightening cattle herding and charging at the auction and Ree's fevered dream of ravens are two key scenes that use aesthetics to dramatize key themes in the film.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- The community is blighted by rural poverty, lack of opportunity, low educational outcomes and a sense of separation of mainstream USA infrastructure. Secretive and inward looking with an emphasis on family loyalty and 'kin' based around patriarchal power but dependent upon strong, resilient women. Methamphetamine use and addiction has had devastating consequences on families and individuals. The reality of financial insecurity, violence, domestic abuse and mental illness is ever-present.

### Institutional

- <http://www.indiewire.com/2010/11/toolkit-case-study-how-indie-hit-winters-bone-came-to-be-244485/>
- Based on a novel of the same name by Daniel Woodrell. Produced by Granik and Anne Rosellini through their production company, Anonymous Content. After several attempts to raise finance, the film received half its \$2 million budget from a private equity deal which enabled it to go into production. Premiered at Sundance in 2010 and gained a distribution deal from Fortissimo Films. The film went on to take \$6 million at US box office making it an indie hit. The film brought Jennifer Lawrence to wider attention.

## SPECLIAIST STUDY AREA Spectatorship

### & Ideology - STARTING POINTS

- WB challenges the melodramatic escapism of contemporary Hollywood with its resistance to high-octane special effects and ironic hyperbolic violence.
- A hybrid of genres: building on our understanding of Noir and western genres, but offering up a quest/odyssey narrative steeped in mythology and dark fairy-tale. Full of mystery and suspense and a successful example of a coming-of-age movie.
- Granik takes the traditional masculine depiction of rural life and subverts it by framing everything that unfolds through Ree's piercing gaze. Granik noted that '(WB) is a feminist film about an anti-feminist world'.
- The viewer is positioned as an outsider in this film, out of place and feeling like an intruder. The film is a meditation on alienated relationships whether they are communal, familial or our own detachment from this part of America.