



FILM: **FIRST COW**

FDG RATING: 2.5 ☹️☹️☹️⊖⊖

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Kelly Reichardt: *director*
John Magaro: *actor, Cookie*
Orion Lee: *actor, King Lu*

DATE: February 21, 2021

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **FIRST COW**

It's the 1820s in the rugged northwest, where an apprentice baker from Boston has journeyed to hopefully make his fortune and is now the dejected, bullied, cook for a group of rowdy prospectors making a slow journey west. Rightfully named, Cookie, he is searching the woods for anything edible when he comes across another young man, a Chinese immigrant named King Lu, who is fleeing from a band of vengeful hunters. Lu has similar dreams of striking it rich. The two form a strong friendship as they partner to use each other's skills in a scheme where at night they steal onto a landowner's property to milk his prized cow in order to make "oil cakes" to sell at the market, an exceptionally tasty treat that patrons stand in line to buy, wondering what mysterious ingredient makes them so delicious.

It's important to note that the opening scene is set in contemporary time and shows a woman and her dog walking near a broad river where an oil tanker slowly glides past. The dog sniffs something first, then the woman sets to clawing the dirt away, revealing two skeletons lying next to each other.

So the film is about the loyal bond of friendship as well as the birth of capitalistic instincts. But the pace is achingly slow. As one resident critic put it, "First Cow is a 30-minute story of two gamblers, who won't leave the table, stretched to two hours.... the opening scene with the tanker slowly entering from the left should have been a warning." It took 50 minutes before the appearance of the cow which only slightly changed the tempo. Published critics praised the film with explanations such as, "A simultaneously gentle and unsparing dissection of the formative flaws of capitalism, and thus of the 'American dream'; ...the echoes of the past reverberating forth from the pristine whiteness of bone. Two skeletons lie in the earth, curled together as if still seeking warmth. There's a story there, alright." And, ... "a frontier story which captures the harsh realities and simple pleasures of a life built painstakingly from rock, wood, and soil; a heist movie; an argument for the power of baked goods. It is somehow both brutal and pastoral, peaceful and laced through with the inevitability of disaster and death. But above all else, it is a story of friendship, treated here as a haven and basic human need, as essential as water or bread." Our hint to that theme is the opening quote from William Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" that appears on the screen: The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship."

Although most of us had trouble staying fully engaged, another resident reviewer gave the film our highest score explaining, "When the two main characters discuss the enterprise of selling the cakes, it strikes me that Cookie is the more cautious one, and his friend is more willing to take risks. When Cookie says "Seems dangerous" and King Lu responds "So is anything worth doing", it seems that this alliance has just the right mix of support, enterprise, struggle, and hope. They push and support each other. I especially enjoyed the ending. The setting and cinematography was top notch, as well as the dialect for the period. I loved that a story like this has not been told. Especially during the rough and tumble Gold Rush period, where we are usually entertained with gunslingers and saloons. This was a sensitive perspective on two people who help each other and form a lifelong bond."

We all agreed that the film definitely captured the miserable ruggedness of the period. One discussion participant described the cinematography as atmospheric, a seemingly original technical style of cinematography. Another observation was that it is rare to see Oregon at that time so from a historic perspective, it was very interesting. Also, the diversity was notable including the Chinese immigrant and a Scottish man along with the indigenous native Indians interacting with the white frontiersmen. Cookie and Lu were likeable characters who we cared about especially as each forgoes any opportunity to deceive or abandon the other.

An agonizing slow slice of historic life, (the film director has made other films notable for exceptionally slow tempo), First Cow barely managed to stand on it's own for our group of discussion participants, but was pulled up by the bootstraps with a lone high score of 5 resulting in a weak, milky 2.5. (On the flip side, one published critic said it was a western fable of unpasteurized poetry.)



See you at the movies!
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