

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

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Is it the old west in the modern west, nineteenth-century gun culture with the safety curtain of distance ripped aside? Is it Ingmar Bergman meets the western? Whatever the answer, this film raises those irritating questions: which is better, novel or film? If film, why did they leave all that stuff out? If novel, why does it take a film of it to waken people to the name of Cormac McCarthy more than his novels ever did?

I believe that essentially this story is about a society in which religion is present only as an afterthought, an aftereffect, an aftervision, like a pattern perceived on the retina, not something discernible in physical reality, and this afterthought carries faint overtones of regret. Of this idea the novel's style is suggestive rather than definite and probably deliberately ambiguous, but the film's hold on this theme is still more tenuous: it is there, but as an aftervision of McCarthy's original aftervision, and so diminished that as a result the film lacks the novel's imaginative dimension.

However, let me first praise the film, not bury it. And let me praise something which is now so unusual: the almost complete absence of music. I noticed it emerge offscreen from the background as Chigurh and the owner of a desert gas station toss a coin, momentarily because the station owner's life is staked on it. It is onscreen as Moss wakes in Mexico to the sound of a Mexican brass quartet. There might have been music when Moss is at the Desert Sands Hotel Motel in El Paso, but I couldn't be sure.

Secondly, the film gives rein to the Coen Brothers' penchant for outrageous violence. *Blood Simple*, the title of their first film, is apt to this one too: keeping score of the dead bodies becomes impossible, but we see corpses throughout the film, and the sanguinary results of firing guns. We see too what happens when you fire an abattoir stun gun at someone: the result is clean and swift, but it still uncorks the blood inside a man. There is no more *grand guignol* sequence than the very opening of the film. Briefly, even the murderer, the impassive Chigurh, is goggle-eyed with the effort involved in garrotting. And in the last quarter of the film, there are at least two murders not even shown as taking place, so we have to deduce them from the sequences in which they occur. At the end when Bell's hunch leads him to think Chigurh might still be at the

motel where he shot Moss, Chigurh is reduced to a ghostly presence, hiding in the shadows, his possible (not certain) reflection visible in the tube left by the shot-out bolt.

Film violence horrifies and enthralls us. We flinch and cannot leave. *No Country for Old Men* teaches us a brutal lesson about the wild west, which we fondly thought of as history, as painless, as cavalier – wrong but romantic – for by locating the same behaviour in the present (West Texas in 1980), the violence becomes wrong and repulsive. The film is populated with stock figures from the western: the sheriff (Bell), the cowhand (Moss), the bad man (Chigurh), the bounty hunter (Carson Wells), the innocent woman (Carla Jean), the man at the swing station (the gas station owner) etc., but put them in the present day and they become fact not legend.

The story, both in book and film, manages to be specific in its characters and in the spaces they move through. You feel that if you went to El Paso, you could see the Desert Sands Hotel Motel and put your fingers in the bullet holes in the plywood. It manages too to be specific about history: the Vietnam war hovers in the background, the question is asked whether the old-time sheriffs carried guns, the eruption of unrepenting evil is recounted that leads to the shooting of Mac in 1879. Yet it describes something timeless as well about human good and evil that transcends all time and place. In dismantling the romance of the west, McCarthy brutally writes his story so that the sheriff (Bell) fails in his duty to save the cowhand (Moss) who has got into trouble.

You can see why the Coens were attracted to the characters, with the details drawn in the way they talk, and in the way they stand and move, both suggesting something offbeat or distinctive about them: Moss's body is a little long, his legs a little shorter than they might be, so his gait singles him out. Bell's face is so lined that you feel he's stood in the desert being weathered by sun, wind and rain. Chigurh's 1980 hairstyle remains immaculate throughout, although we never see him combing it. They enlisted too their favourite cameraman, Roger Deakins, who has worked on all their films since *Barton Fink* in 1991, and his work here is arresting in itself, fitting desert and townscape into a letterbox format. And the theme of cowboy boots, an idea picked up from the book, becomes a signature thread for the Coens: Texans may be obsessed with boots, but it's marvellous that they are. Moss enters the clothing store wearing only a hospital gown and Larry Mann boots, to which the shopkeeper's reaction is: 'How are those Larries holding

up?’ More sinisterly, Chigurh’s first victim leaves a mess of bootmarks on the floor caused by his scrabbling legs. And Moss’s fix from afar on the Mexican in the shade of a desert tree is of his silhouetted boots sticking up like a pair of donkey ears, which, as he watches, do not move, which means the Mexican’s dead.

So, this is the Coens’ Texan film (even though some of it was shot in New Mexico). After Chicago (*Miller’s Crossing*), Los Angeles (*Big Lebowski*), Minnesota (*Fargo*), Mississippi (*Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*), the Coen tour of the USA, maybe conducted as much for the benefit of Americans as for foreigners like myself, comes to Texas.

These virtues are all developed from Cormac McCarthy’s book, and the fidelity to it is a measure of the Coens’ respect. Yet the film illustrates a truism: the cinema tampers with great fiction at its peril. Here are some quite random thoughts on this topic, which in reality is a long and opinated evening parlour game: the USSR made a great film of Tolstoy’s ‘War and Peace’, but it flags towards the end and cannot match it in its entirety. With *The Fugitive* John Ford made a fascinating film out of Graham Greene’s ‘The Power and the Glory’, but the blatant betrayal of a central idea (it is the priest living in sin with the woman, not the police officer, who has fathered her child) flaws the film irreparably. On the other hand, Howard Hawks’s wager with Hemingway that he could make a good film out of Hemingway’s worst novel allows ‘To Have and Have Not’ to be transformed into a luminous film. Then, good films can often be made from good short stories because they give the film-makers creative freedom: Elmore Leonard’s ‘3:10 to Yuma’ is excellent but expanded into a feature it makes an excellent film too. To summarize, to depart from the original great novel prompts murmurs of disapproval, even cries of ‘foul!’, but to stick faithfully to the original can lead to a stultifying reverence for it; even so the viewer still searches for what is missing, and the discovery of what is missing creates disenchantment. However, one story in which honours are equal is Bresson’s adaptation of Bernanos’ ‘Diary of a Country Priest’ (of which more below) which proves it is possible to get it right. In the same way, is the Coen Brothers’ film worthy of McCarthy’s book? The book is a serious work of literature: we can recognize it as revealing of its time and place, and I can envisage subsequent centuries turning to it

for understanding late twentieth-century America, and because its aesthetic pleasures will be recognized for some time to come. But this seriousness has just eluded the Coens.

There is an irony here, in that I believe McCarthy's writing has been stimulated by watching films. *The Searchers*, *Major Dundee* and other films lead to 'Blood Meridian' published in 1985, his blood-stained account of the US-Indian wars of the 1840s in the Mexican border, not so much as setting the film record straight as expanding it with the subtler clarity that writing can give. There is too a teasing reference to the cinema in 'No Country for Old Men' (p. 40): Sheriff Bell refers to the 'Bonnie and Clyde car' 'shot just full of holes'. That comes, whether in Bell's or McCarthy's imagination, from the 1967 film. I wonder also if one of the sources for the conception of Chigurh is the *Terminator* series. The book too is structured on cross-cutting, cinema's most singular contribution to story-telling, not just in following the three main characters through different locations in West Texas up to their convergence in El Paso, but in the recto-verso way the thirteen sections each start with reflections on life from Sheriff Bell, and then plunge us back into an onrushing narrative. By giving Bell this role as commentator removed above the action like God (while he is far from omnipotent he does retain omniscience, seeing into Chigurh's and Moss's war even when he isn't present), McCarthy prepares us for the way the climax of the story is not the shoot-out between Chigurh and Moss, nor the confrontation between a Godlike Bell and Chigurh, hot from the 'annex on hell', but in . . . Bell's retirement. At first reading of the novel, final catharsis is replaced by seemingly errant speculation, and at first viewing of the film, by banality. In the film, with its gripping focus on violent action, its two-hour format inhibiting the development of character and thought, the effect is deflating. It reminded me again of Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (of which yet more below), for fidelity to the novel in that film shifts the dramatic focus from the village of Ambricourt to the priest's last days in Lille, and breaks the desirable unity of place in doing so. The film of *No Country for Old Men* is similarly 'dis-articulated' near the end in moving from pulsating thriller into the coda at the end about Bell's retirement.

But the novel has the edge because McCarthy is seeking to do so much more than write a chase movie. The violent events are interpreted in the context of the human predicament of how to account for the presence of evil, and defend oneself against it,

physically and mentally. This story set in the southern USA might have been about religious nuttury (end times, rapture and all), but it is as much about the absence of religion. Towards the end, Bell muses that he had hoped to find God as he got older but hadn't. Very close to the end (p. 304), his wife Loretta, his moral centre and comfort (and who is largely marginalized in the film), is reading the Book of Revelation. 'Any time I got to talking about how things are,' says Bell, 'she'll find something in the bible.' Bell says something quizzical about Revelation (the nuttiest book in the NT), and Loretta parries it without McCarthy allowing us to mock her. It is as if he is nostalgic for the possibilities of religious belief, and for the common values religion creates, as for a country before it was occupied by alien forces. All of value that remains is a sense of marital fidelity (Moss declining to go to the brothel because he's married – p.85), of decency (Bell's campaigning for the position of sheriff was 'hard' because he had to be, but he 'tried to be fair' – p.90), of manners (Bell removes his hat on his visit to Carla Jean in Odessa – p.125; he opens the car door for his wife – p.68), and of respect for religion ('no cussing' – p.67; no 'making light of the dead' – p.44).

All? Actually, I think there is a deeper narrative still. Moss's immersion in the deal gone wrong comes when he wakes in the night and is driven – whether by compassion or guilt – to take some water to the dying Mexican dope-dealer in the van in the desert, a breaking of his cover which puts him in the dope-dealers' spotlight. The motivation is irrational but comprehensible. At many places in the book, McCarthy teasingly refers to 'luck', sometimes as if it were grace or fate, at others as if it were a random event in human lives. Moss finds the case of money but tells himself (p.23), 'You can't treat it like luck,' as if he was meant to find it, but later (p.108) in the hotel at Eagle Pass, the thought oppresses him that 'he was going to have to quit running on luck,' as if it was only good fortune that had allowed him to escape so far.

This thread leads into the idea of convergence, which the film resolutely and superlatively grips hold of too. Here, I think one can go beyond 'Bergman meets the western' and try out 'Bernanos/Bresson meets the western'. There are two routes into this. One is in likening the battle between Bell and lawlessness with the battle between the priest and his corrupted parishioners in *Diary of a Country Priest*. In Bernanos, that corruption is erased by the concept of salvation, but in McCarthy's novel demonic forces

unleashed by the drugs trade are not defeated by Bell's moral decency. So, right and wrong need to be 'revalued' in terms of good and evil: right versus evil is not sufficient. Secondly, right at the beginning of both novel and film, Bell's voiceover talks of the 'soul at hazard' in the real world, echoing the idea in Bresson of how free will might be exercised in the face of ultimate risk (an idea most memorably explored in *A Man Escaped*).

All this is distilled into the narrative idea of Chigurh tossing a coin and asking his victim to call it. From initial and understandable bafflement at what is being called for, the gas station owner comes to understand that what is at stake is his life. When at the end of the film Chigurh confronts Carla Jean with the coin trick as her only salvation (a successful call would release him from the promise he gave to Moss to kill her), at first she refuses to opt for life/death by mere chance. She tells Chigurh, 'You don't have to do this,' which is not sufficient to dissuade him, and only prompts the rejoinder, 'They all say that.' Chigurh then persuades her to call it on the grounds that God would not want her to refuse this possibility of salvation. She loses. But Chigurh then argues that the paths of the coin, of him and of her were destined to converge at this point and end in this way. The soul may be at hazard of life or death but at the same time destiny rules how death will come.

We seem to be somewhere on a Bressonian map here, but when you try to locate it precisely, you discover the landscape is subtly different. McCarthy is exploring ideas not of salvation or redemption occurring in death – there is no sense of the afterlife which you get in Bresson – but of the 'defeat' of God in the modern world. However, there is a more important and more definite link between the film of *No Country for Old Men* and Bresson's corpus of films. It is to do with style. First of all, doors are important to both. *Une Femme Douce* (to take an example) has Bresson using doors to mark steps in the narrative, especially by a shot of a hand on a door handle, and to make explicit the act of free will being exercised, while undercutting that by suggesting that going through an entrance is an automatic act, as if a person is subject to some guiding destiny. In adopting an idea like this, *No Country for Old Men* renders it more blatant, more dramatic, so that Chigurh's relentless journey of massacre is marked by the stun gun's swift, unstoppable

removal of the bolt on a locked door, as if human mechanisms are puny against this irresistible terminating demon.

Secondly, Bresson's mastery of 'and . . . and . . . and . . .' narrative (which is echoed in Biblical narrative – try the Book of Genesis) in which each shot advances the story without digression, a style brought to a zenith in *L'Argent*, is superbly echoed in the Coens' film. Indeed it is strongly in McCarthy's narrative. Witness for example p.34: 'He wrung the water out of his shirt and put it on again and buttoned it and pulled on the boots and buckled his belt. He picked up the pistol and took the clip out of it and ejected the round from the chamber and then shook the gun and blew through the barrel and reassembled it.' But the film uses the possibility of visual narrative in which one shot is worth dozens of words of description so that the spectator is given the opportunity to absorb more information more quickly than a reader would, to keep the story pounding along. For example, Chigurh is in the motel room trying to work out where Moss would have hidden the case of money. The Coens don't worry about the colour of the bedstead, or any ambient shots. One from below of Chigurh's head and the airduct high up the wall shows Chigurh making the connection and the spectator realizing he has made the connection. When this is extended through the chase sequences, this concentration in the spectator of trying to work out where the action is going, of feeling emotional sympathy with Moss, and of experiencing alarm at the unstoppable Chigurh, is something that not even the novel, for all its narrative punch, is able to match.

That brings us neatly back to a judgement on film and book, for McCarthy stays one jump ahead of the film in the way he uses his pendulum technique, arresting his ruthless action with Bell's musings. This gives the story a dimension which he is a good enough writer to use to lift his book from the West Texas desert onto the cosmic plane of a battle between good and evil, between a less than omnipotent God and a more than upstart Lucifer.

I am grateful to Stephen Adamson for the idea of Bergman meeting the western, and to my son Thomas for a better understanding of the 'and . . . and . . .' narrative. Page references are to the UK Picador edition of 2007.