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# "The wicked flee when none pursueth": A Formalist Critique of Three Crime Films by Joel and Ethan Coen

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Professor Schlund-Vials

Honors Thesis

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### **Preface**

Choosing a topic for a long paper like this can be—and was—a daunting task. The possibilities shot up out of the ground from before me like Milton's Pandemonium from the soil of hell. Of course, this assignment ultimately turned out to be much less intimidating and filled with demons than that, but at the time, it felt as though it would be. When you're an English major like I am, your choices are simultaneously extremely numerous and severely restricted, mostly by my inability to write convincingly or sufficiently about most topics. However, after much deliberation and agonizing, I realized that something I am good at is writing about film.

If I ever discuss this thesis with anyone else who shares my assignment, they always exclaim about how difficult it must be to have to write about just three movies over the course of sixty-plus pages. And before I actually began this process, I agreed with them. I had been used to writing only page-long mini-reviews in a blog of films I had recently seen. My reader base was understandably small and not particularly inclined to giving me feedback, so I had no idea whether anything I was spewing onto the Internet was of any value. Were my observations sound? Was my voice appropriate? Above all else: did I spell everything correctly?

Of course one would have incredible difficulty aimlessly composing a long essay about three films without a definite blueprint to follow. But once I found my rhythm, and realized that I

could structure my paper around a wonderful introductory textbook to film analysis, my task became much smoother. I used Louis Giannetti's *Understanding Movies, 12th Edition* as my inspiration; specifically, his eleven different chapters, which were based around what the author regarded as the eleven primary aspects of movies to analyze. To say that this textbook, which I bought for a German Film course, was helpful would be a grave understatement. I owe much of my peace of mind in writing this paper to Giannetti, because his book showed me that film analysis is not only a legitimate topic for serious critical discussion, but also that it is possible for anyone with enough drive to do it.

The next question I would expect that someone would have for me would be: why film instead of literature? I believe that my education as an English major has given me the tools to use critical, logical thought to see aspects of all kinds of situations and subjects—including entertainment, art, and everyday life—that others cannot. Being a very visual person, film is the most logical extension of these abilities, even though most of my schooling has been in the analysis of literature. Instead of looking at static words on a page, I prefer to use the medium of film as my topic for such an assignment. After all, if I was going to spend an abundance of time on only a few select pieces of media, they might as well be ones that I loved.

Another reason I chose film over literature is because of the inherent challenge in such a task. I have spent the past four-plus years of my education performing close readings on poems, novels, short stories, and plays. So the only true difficulty in doing the same thing for this thesis would lie in the volume of my output—nothing else. Had I performed a long-form analysis of a book, I would have felt that I had sold myself short, that I hadn't tested every aspect of my skills as an analyst and writer. As a college student, my honors thesis is a sort of last hurrah for me, so I thought that I might as well attempt something new—at least on my own terms.

Before I discuss anything else, however, I think it may be good to talk about my process leading up to my choice of film. All my thinking began when I was reading Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In my head, I likened its central plot device—a man's relentless search—to that of a video game I was playing at the same, *Silent Hill 2*. I originally approached Dr. Cathy Schlund-Vials, my thesis advisor, with the idea that I would write a paper in which I compare Melville's novel to the video game. Needless to say, my harebrained idea did not materialize into an actual paper, which is good, because I honestly had no ideas beyond the following: this thing and this other thing are kind of similar.

From there, I thought that I could be quite adventurous and attempt to write on a topic concerning the video game. The attraction of being one of the few college students—perhaps the first ever at UConn—to use a video game as a subject was quite strong, and for much of the time I dwelled on this idea. Cathy and I originally thought that I might look at *Silent Hill 2* alongside two other horror-themed video games and analyze how the developers scare the player in different ways. Over the preceding summer when I began actually writing in my thesis, I was convinced that I was going to analyze *Silent Hill 2* in terms of film analysis, psychoanalysis, and media theory. Ultimately, I was simply in over my head with my proposed topic, and abandoned the realm of video games for something a bit more familiar to me: film.

When I was desperate and thinking that there was no way out of the pit I'd dug myself into, Cathy talked me down from the ledge and simply asked me what *I* would like to write about, not what I thought I *should* write about. Naturally, my mind immediately gravitated towards film, and Cathy ended up informing me that I could do just that.

My next step was, obviously, to choose a more specific topic than simply "film." I thought hard about who my favorite filmmakers were that I would like to study (because I knew

that talking about just one movie wouldn't cut it for me). At first I gravitated towards Christopher Nolan, who, between his Batman adaptations and mind-bending thrillers, is a great fit for me. However, discussing his oeuvre would get me into the realm of genre—specifically, comic book adaptation—and that was the sort of area that I would like to leave untapped. As a massive fan of Batman and comic books, I did not want to subject something as sacred as those to critical scrutiny, at the risk of ruining them for myself as entertainment. But Nolan's detached, cold style made me think of a directing duo whose work I also admire: the Coen brothers.

The films of the Coens may yield well to critical analysis *because* of their emotional distance. For me, it is far easier to analyze something to which I have no irrational ties or nostalgia (hence the reason why I avoided studying the films of Walt Disney, another area that I also seriously considered). I had also seen every film by the Coen brothers, which made my selection process a bit more difficult, but gave me more options. I chose *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *True Grit* because I felt that, their glaring differences notwithstanding, they are deeply connected to one another. That is, the Coens could not have made *No Country for Old Men* without having directed *Fargo* first, and the same for *True Grit*. Finally, given the Coens' unique style and trademark consistency, it would be more enjoyable to analyze three films that all have obvious hallmarks of their creative process. I realized that no other director could have made these three films quite like the Coens have, and that fact cemented my decision for me.

My final task in the pre-writing process was to choose in what way I was going to analyze these films. At this point, my education and "training," so to speak, influenced my choice the most. In my English courses, my favorite assignment was always close readings. I enjoyed that a work of literature could be dissected convincingly based completely on its own structure and composition. No outside knowledge was needed, and no potentially irrelevant

theories come into play in this analytical process. Perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of a close reading, to me, was the fact that a single, outstanding word could change the meaning of an entire poem or short story. But since I had taken mostly only English classes, I was not sure whether this is possible or acceptable to do with a film. Fortunately, Cathy allayed my suspicions, and, in fact, gave me a name for it: a formalist critique.

The Coen brothers are an especially good example of directors who put together each piece of their film with a specific meaning in mind. Every shot that they take is constructed in a very particular way—supposedly, at the directors' relentless behest. Like Stanley Kubrick, they will spend hours lingering on a single shot, often at the expense of their exasperated actors and crew. So when I combined my desire to perform a close reading on a film with these directors, my task became very clear before me. In a way that is similar to Richard Wagner, the Coens seek to control every aspect of their filmmaking: they direct, write the screenplays, and edit their own films. They also work frequently with the same actors and crew members, which lends their work a consistency that coincided well with my desire to analyze three films by them. I had my work cut out for me at this point, yet I knew exactly what to do.

Having gone through all the steps of this process—and coming out on the other side of it unscathed—I am extremely excited about the time I have spent on this paper. I feel that although it is intended to be an objective, scholarly work, it is still an expression of three of my favorite aspects of education: critical thought, film, and writing. I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to work on such a project, especially given the painlessness of the actual writing process. Judging from the Coen brothers' films, they do not seem to be the sort of people to readily reveal their opinions; I just hope that if they ever read this, they would approve.

## Introduction

The Coen filmmaking team, comprised of American brothers Joel and Ethan, has been working for nearly thirty years. Like William Shakespeare, they have successfully created both serious dramas and outrageous comedies. Their ability to meld genres and styles in the course of a single film enables them to stand out among the multitude of American directors. In the same amount of time, few other directors have produced films that are consistently as critically well received as those of the Coens. Their films all bear a similar deadpan style that has become their trademark, making their work almost instantly recognizable.

In terms of awards, the Cannes film festival has nominated their movies numerous times, bestowing the prestigious and coveted Palme d'Or upon them once for *Barton Fink*, in a unanimous vote. They have also been given the Academy Award for Best Director for *No Country for Old Men*, as well as two Oscars for screenwriting (*Fargo* and *No Country for Old Men*) and an Oscar for Best Picture (*No Country for Old Men*) for independently producing the film along with Scott Rudin.

Given the variety of genres that the directors dabble in, it is consequently difficult to holistically evaluate their body of work. What is clear is that the directors possess a massive wealth of knowledge about and affection for the many different styles of film. Michael Dunne describes the "cinematic style of the Coens" as "innovative," and that, due to their "deep immersion in film history," their style "interacts with subject matter conventionally associated with more traditional stylistic practices."<sup>1</sup> They have made multiple films in the aesthetic of film noir, some of which are homages, such as *Miller's Crossing* or *The Man Who Wasn't There*, while the absurdist comedy *Big Lebowski* is a parodic send-up of stories by noirist Raymond

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Dunne. "Barton Fink, Intertextuality, and the (Almost) Unbearable Richness of Viewing." *Literature Film Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (October 2000): 303.



Chandler. More recently, the Coens have also adapted well-known stories and other films, including their ambitious reworking of Homer's *Odyssey* into the Depression-era romp, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, as well as their adaptation of the novel *No Country for Old Men*. The Coens have even produced their own interpretations of classic screwball comedies with *Raising Arizona* and *Intolerable Cruelty*. Their most recent film, *True Grit*, though an adaptation of the novel of the same name, fits squarely into the Western genre established by John Ford and Howard Hawks.

The Coens are prolific, with fifteen films over the course of twenty-eight years, averaging about one every two years. Considering the breadth of their work, it is almost impossible to give a worthwhile survey of all their movies considering my constraints of time and space. Therefore, I will focus on three films: *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *True Grit*, which I will briefly synopsise.

Taking place in snowy Minnesota and North Dakota, *Fargo* depicts the botched attempt of car salesman Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) to have his wife kidnapped by two bumbling crooks (Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare) so he can split the ransom with his unsuspecting and rich father-in-law. After a series of murders, pregnant police chief Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) investigates and attempts to bring the men to justice and end the senseless killing.

*No Country for Old Men* concerns three men: working-class Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin), serial killer Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), and aging sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones). While hunting, Moss finds a drug deal-gone wrong and a briefcase with \$2 million, which he takes for himself. He must then flee from Chigurh, who cuts a bloody swath through

West Texas in pursuit of him, with Bell always a step behind, trying to understand and end the madness created by Chigurh.

Set in the Old West, *True Grit* is about a precocious young woman named Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) who is trying to avenge the death of her father at the hands of outlaw Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin). She enlists the alcoholic and aging U.S. Marshall Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) for his help. The pompous Texas Ranger LaBoeuf (Matt Damon) accompanies them, seeking to bring Chaney into jail to be hanged, which conflicts with Mattie's desire to kill the man herself.

These films possess the Coens' trademark black humor and penchant for matter-of-fact depictions of violence. Although they are certainly distinct from one another in terms of time, tone, and characterization, I believe that there are enough commonalities between the three to warrant looking at them alongside one another. My goal is to give an objective, cinematic reading of each film via technique, and to discuss how the films intersect in key ways. The overarching similarity between these films is that they are all set in desolate, barren locations that, despite the presence of relatively clear-cut heroes (Marge Gunderson, Ed Tom Bell, and Mattie Ross), ultimately enforce the idea that evil can easily overcome the forces of good.

There are eleven different factors that I will use to assess these films. The first deal chiefly with the visual aspect of film: Cinematography, Mise en Scène, and the directors' use of Movement. The next, Editing, encompasses a wide range of filmmaking techniques, and is often considered the most important part of the creation of movies. Next is Sound, in terms of both sound effects and music. Then I discuss the films in terms of their Acting, which also encompasses casting and the critical reception of the performances. I then move on to Drama, Story, and Writing, three aspects of filmmaking that are also related to live theater. Drama

specifically deals with aspects like the role of the director, settings and decor, and the importance of costume and makeup. Story deals with narratology and how the films fit into their particular genres, whereas Writing is concerned with the actual spoken words, in addition to point of view and the significance of adaptation. Finally, I discuss Ideology and Critique. The former is about the directors' concern (or lack thereof) with politics and ideas beyond just the scope of the film's story, while Critique focuses on how the films fit into American culture as a whole.

### **The Coen Brothers and the Cinematography of Roger Deakins**

Roger Deakins provides the cinematography for *Fargo*, and his work on this film—as with other efforts—shows his emphasis on the importance of the landscape to the story. In this case, Deakins frequently employs long shots of the barren fields of snow that make up the area beside the highways of the American Midwest. Most of the color in the film is either desaturated or simply nonexistent, as most of the clothing worn by the actors is brown, tan, or navy blue. Marco Abel writes that since the "geographical setting [is] dominated by the gray/white shots of the vast open plains of Minnesota," it makes sense that the events of the film "[occur] at slow speed," which is enhanced by Deakins' cinematographical emphasis on the natural setting.<sup>2</sup> However, there are several key scenes that show a startling contrast between colorlessness and vibrant color, thus heightening the drama of those particular situations. Deakins also makes expressive use of lighting in the style of *film noir* in early scenes.

During scenes set outside, Deakins uses mostly long shots, even when characters are in the frame. For example, in an early scene as Carl and Gaear travel from Fargo to Minneapolis, there is an extreme long shot of their car riding on the road. The car is shunted to the bottom of the frame and looks incredibly small against the overwhelming sky above it. It is a dark speck

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<sup>2</sup> Marco Abel. "Fargo: The Violent Production of the Masochistic Contract as a Cinematic Concept." *Critical Studies In Mass Communication* 16, no. 3 (September 1999): 308.

being dwarfed by the massive empty gray space above it. In the same way that nature abhors a vacuum, the emphasis on emptiness is distracting, and our attention cannot help but notice the difference in size here. Carl and Gaear are about to commit some awful deeds, but the Coens seem to think that no matter how terrible they may be, they are simply two men in the wide world: their actions are ultimately meaningless in the grand scheme of things.

Even when the scene is heavily focused on the characters, Deakins keeps the camera at an impersonal distance, giving equal importance to the actors and the background. When Carl and Gaear watch Jean as she helplessly and blindly stumbles around in the woods next to the lakeside hideout, Deakins uses deep focus, keeping both the characters and the thickly clustered trees in the background sharply in view. Deep focus "permits all distance planes to remain clearly in focus, from close-up ranges to infinity".<sup>3</sup> Keeping the trees visible to the audience as Carl and Gaear cruelly mistreat their victim seems to give a sense of culpability to the natural environment, as though the criminals are somehow motivated to behave this way by their surroundings.

Given the overwhelming colorlessness of the location, it is that much more noticeable when actual color makes it into any of the shots. Even Jean's pink pajamas do not look as silly because their color seems to have been drained out of them. But after Wade shoots Carl in the mouth, his face and hands are stained heavily with vibrant red blood. Late in the film, Carl pulls to the side of the road to look at the money he has taken from Wade, and rifles through it. He leaves blood on the paper bills, and when he buries it, red stains the snow. In addition to indicating his excruciating pain, the blood expresses how he, along with his accomplices Gaear

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Giannetti. *Understanding Movies, 12th Edition*. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2009), 522.

and Jerry, are falling apart at the seams. Up until this point, the film had a rather staid and muted look to it, but is no longer able to keep the violence in check.

Another association of the color red with violence occurs during the scene of the first murders. After Gaear chases down the potential witnesses to his crime of killing the traffic police officer, he intimidates with a handgun the driver of the car, who wears a bright red jacket and winter hat. Even before Gaear guns the man down, the audience is aware of the danger he is in by the color of the jacket. We can't help but notice the difference between the red of this clothing and the lack of color anywhere else in the movie. The Coens intend for the color of this jacket to remain in our memories, because the man's corpse is featured in one of the film's posters. Much in the same way that red is here associated with the precipitation of senseless violence, Carl's blood provides a visual coda that implies that the killings will soon end.

Much in the same way that movies of the *film noir* genre use shadows expressively, Deakins employs low lighting in the first major scene to indicate the dirty dealings of the criminals and Jerry. In a long shot that also uses deep focus, the criminals are seen in the back of a bar, lit slightly from above by a dim lamp. The rest of the room is cast in shadow; none of the faces of any of the other actors are visible. Once Jerry sits down with Carl and Gaear, the criminals eyes are difficult to see because of the heavy shadows they cover them, courtesy of the direct lighting from above. It is clear that there is about to be a shady deal going on here. In contrast, Jerry's face is completely visible, implying that although he is a fool, he is not deprived in the same way the other two men are.

A final way Deakins employs symbolic lighting foreshadows the increasing disaster that is going to be brought about by the criminals. After kidnapping Jean from her home in Minneapolis, Carl and Gaear drive back to Fargo through the town of Brainerd, the so-called

"Home of Paul Bunyan." In reference to the mythology of the famous woodsman, there is a massive statue of Paul Bunyan with the words "Welcome to Brainerd" inscribed at the bottom. The scene takes place at night, so spotlights are required to light up the statue. Deakins begins the scene with a shot of the statue's face, which is menacingly lit from the bottom, much in the same way that tellers of ghost stories use flashlights to further scare their listeners. Deakins then pulls the camera backwards to reveal that Paul Bunyan is also holding an axe. The implication is that an execution is about to take place, which is precisely what occurs when Gaear murders three witnesses.

Deakins also worked on *No Country for Old Men*. One of the most noticeable aspects of Deakins' cinematography is its starkly beautiful depiction of the Texan landscape. The opening image of the film is an extreme long shot of the sun rising over the horizon line, where, off in the distance, the top of a plateau can be seen. A succession of increasingly brighter shots follow, showing the dry plants blowing around in the wind, and the hills that rise up around the plains. For a full two minutes, these shots continue. Brown is dominant throughout, which is the color of death and decay. There are no other colors in these images other than brown; the impression Deakins conveys with this is a sense of lifelessness and despair. The environment is massive, desolate, and unforgiving. It is a visual metaphor for the personality of the main antagonist, and the first human being that appears onscreen: Chigurh.

Through Deakins' cinematography, the Coens present Chigurh with almost a sense of wonderment, as if to convey the incomprehensibility of either his behavior or his moral code. The initial shots of Chigurh show him with his face out of focus or hidden in darkness. Our first clear look at him is terrifyingly memorable. As he strangles the officer who arrests him with his handcuffs, the two men lay struggling with each other on their backs. The camera is positioned in

a birds-eye view above them, and it slowly zooms into Chigurh's face, which is contorted into an ugly sneer from the effort of killing the officer. As the camera zooms in closer to Chigurh, it sways back and forth and rotates slightly, as if to convey the man's violent madness.

The Coens also film shots in exactly the same way in order to metaphorically connect Chigurh, Moss, and Bell together. For Chigurh, the shot begins with the car of the man whom he pulls over. Then Chigurh walks into the frame from the right side, with his cattle gun entering into view first; only the gun and his legs are visible. The fact that Chigurh comes in from the right and moves to the left is important—we are used to reading left to right, so when Chigurh moves in the opposite direction, it expresses his evil nature. The camera then swings around Chigurh's left side, and stops on his quarry. Using this shot, the Coens establish Chigurh's main purpose in the story: to kill.

Shortly after we are introduced to Moss, the Coens present his role in the story with the same kind of shot. This time, in order to indicate both his opposition to Chigurh and his alignment with goodness, Moss enters the frame from the left side. And although his hunting rifle is visible in the frame, it is holstered, instead of Chigurh's cattle gun, which he has already activated and is wielding. The camera follows Moss to his destination: the failed drug deal. Moss' goal in this film is to survive with the money, which the Coen brothers symbolize by showing the aftermath of the deal.

A little bit later in the film, the Coens bring Bell into the story using this particular shot in the same way. He and his deputy sheriff, Wendell, come across the remains of a burning car, which Chigurh presumably torched the previous night in order to destroy the evidence of two additional murders. Just like with Moss, the shot initially centers on the burning car, and then Bell eventually enters into the left side of the frame, moving to the right. Again, this symbolizes

his opposition to Chigurh, as well as his alignment with Moss. The fact that the shot focuses on the burning car also indicates that Bell's role in the film will be to pursue Chigurh and attempt to comprehend his motives. Despite that these three men never meet each other face-to-face, the Coens use this same shot to inextricably connect their fates.

For *True Grit*, Deakins again returned as the director of photography. Rather than using camera movement in expressive ways, Deakins prefers to use (lack of) color and light to convey meaning. Often the camera serves the purpose of merely presenting the events onscreen as they would have happened from Mattie's point of view. In fact, there are very few instances in which the camera leaves Mattie's perspective (she is always present in the scene, if not every single shot). Visually, the film is bleak, like the landscape of the setting. This conveys the danger of Mattie's mission, as well as the violence that it entails.

The opening shot of the film is of Mattie's father lying dead in front of the saloon in which he was killed. It is in the middle of the night, and snow softly and soundlessly falls around the dead body. The only source of light is from inside of the saloon, and it spills outside in a spread that is only large enough to encompass the corpse. Deakins makes the shot both fade in from black and also very slowly into focus. There is a sense of uneasiness here, as though to emphasize the unnaturalness of Ross' death. The camera zooms very deliberately towards Ross' body until the shot lap dissolves into Chaney's silhouette riding off on horseback. This opening shot establishes the importance of darkness to the film, as well as the air of death that hangs over it.

Most of the film is set in the wilderness of the Old West, and as such, scenes at night are almost overwhelmingly dark due to the lack of light. Given the time period in which it is set, it also makes sense that darkness envelops everything even in nighttime scenes that are filmed in



town. The irony of the opening shot is that despite the fact that Ross was killed in town, the darkness of the night still threatens to take over the pithy light that is generated by humans in the form of candles or lamps. Darkness, in this film, is associated with barbarity and conflict, and so it makes sense that Ross' violent murder takes place in a very dark place.

Likewise, during the day, light is especially intense. Although the film is set during the winter, the sun still shines brightly when no clouds are around, and the characters are forced to squint. The sunlight is all encompassing, and lays everything bare. As opposed to the high-contrast lighting of film noir, there are few shadows during the day in *True Grit*. There is often no middle ground between light and dark; either everything is obscured by blackness or the scene is suffused with light. For example, in an early scene, Mattie watches the hangings of three convicted criminals. The scene takes place at what seems to be high noon: the sun hangs high in the air, and everything is made visible by its light. The scene takes place from Mattie's point of view. There are several shots that are literally from where Mattie is standing in relation to the gallows. The presence of the harsh light here implies not only the division between good and evil (i.e. Mattie and the convicted) but also the authenticity and harshness of Mattie's first onscreen encounter with death.

About three quarters of the way through the film, Cogburn, LaBoeuf, and Mattie happen upon the entrance to an old mine. The trio is frantically searching for their target but seem to have little luck. Cogburn's behavior at this point is a microcosm for his personality, and the way the scene is shot further enforces this. The camera is located just at the entrance to the mine, which is appropriately dark. Outside, it is a bright day, and so when Cogburn steps into the frame, he seems to materialize almost out of thin air. The narrow doorway of the mine acts as a frame within the frame, and therefore Cogburn is completely isolated. He is very drunk, as usual,

yet determined as ever to find Chaney and Ned's gang. He futilely shouts into the mine, and almost immediately afterwards draws his revolver and fires blindly inside. It is clear that there is nothing to find in the mine. Deakins includes this sequence of double framing to indicate Cogburn's single-minded pursuit, as well as to identify him as being truly alone in this group. He stands out due to his vices and flaws, yet he seems heroic when framed in this way by the camera.

This shot is also particularly important because it is a clear reference to an aforementioned Western, Ford's *The Searchers*. This film ends with John Wayne as Ethan Evans standing outside the house of his family, which is completely dark on the outside, but Wayne can be seen surrounded by light, framed by the doorway. Deakins' shot of Cogburn in the doorway of the mine is a triple reference: to Ford's shot in *The Searchers*, to the fact that Wayne played Cogburn in the earlier film version, and finally in the comparison it draws between Cogburn and Ethan Evans, both of whom are deeply flawed and on similar journeys. This is an example of intertextuality, and it reaffirms the Coens' conscious attempt to create a Western film in the classical mode.

### **Clutter vs. the Void: Coen Mise en Scène**

Often equally important to interpreting a film is its *mise en scène*, which essentially refers to the placement of objects and characters in the frame of the camera lens. In *Fargo*, one of the most prominent examples is evident in scenes that take place in Jerry's office at Gustafson Motors. Since all these scenes take place during the day, bright light often fills the room. However, the light is cold and colorless, giving a stark white sheen to everything (and everyone) that is onscreen. Jerry's desk is situated in front of a window, with his back to it. When Jerry sits at his desk, the blinds of the window are placed behind him, all of which are backlit by a harsh

light. The vertical lines created by the shape of the blinds that frame Jerry's body give a sense of his imprisonment in the situation he has created for himself.

Other parts of Jerry's office symbolically indicate the meaning of the particular scene's action. When Marge visits Jerry and asks him about the missing car from his lost (as Marge correctly believes it is the vehicle operated by the criminals) Jerry's is sitting at his desk, in front of the imprisoning vertical lines. The Coens employs shot-reaction shot continuity for the conversation between Jerry and Marge. When the camera cuts to Marge, however, she is in the right side of the frame. The left and middle parts of the frame are occupied by miniature statues of Paul Bunyan. The statues are a visual reminder of the fact that Marge is a police officer from the town of Brainerd. Much in the same way that the statue earlier implied execution, Marge is, in a way, executing Jerry, and he feels the almost painful effects of her questioning.

The Coens continue the motif of Jerry's imprisonment in another scene as well. When Jerry goes to Wade and his partner, Stan Grossman (Larry Brandenburg), about a lucrative deal, only to find that it would not provide Jerry nearly as much money as he thought (to pay off the criminals), he sits again in front of a window. This time, rather than the vertical lines of the window blinds mimicking prison bars, two panes of the window frame his head. This horrible discovery for Jerry makes him feel as though the walls are closing in around him, and visually, they are.

The character of Marge is not introduced until the second act of the film, about thirty-three minutes into the ninety-eight minute running time. Although she lives in a small house (cramped by her unemployed husband's many painted statues of mallard ducks), she seems contented with her life, and excited about the baby on the way. Even when she is forced to wake up early in the morning in response to the police call, she wakes up without complaining and her

husband generously makes her breakfast, despite the fact that he has no reason to be awake. The coziness and pleasantness of their home is contrasted heavily with both the outside world and the preceding scenes. When Marge actually gets up from the breakfast table to leave, she passes through a doorway and out of her house. The camera is situated such that the doorway divides the frame in half, with her well-lit kitchen and husband on the left, and the still dark, bluish outside on the right. The *mise en scène* here suggests that Marge must pass through a sort of portal from her comfortable domestic life to that of her dangerous occupation. Due to this contrast, the stakes of Marge's involvement with this bloody case feel even higher.

The closing shot of the film is of Marge and her husband, Norm, sitting in bed before they fall asleep together. They are centered in the frame, and their conversation is about Norm's mild success at getting one of his painted ducks to be used as Minnesota's 3¢ stamp. The shot is symmetrically composed, lending the ending a sense of harmony and closure. It is ironic that the Coens end the film this way, because the other major character—Jerry—is not allowed this sense of resolution. The last we see of him is when he is apprehended by the police; we do not know his jail sentence, what became of his marriage to Jean, or the consequences of his culpability in the murder of Wade. The directors seem to be making the statement that Marge is the only character who has earned peace. She represents absolute good, and is therefore rewarded.

In order to analyze the *mise en scène* of *No Country for Old Men*, I will take a look at a particular shot in, occurring at about the 51-minute mark, in terms of Louis Giannetti's 15 elements of *mise en scène*. Chigurh has broken and entered into a hotel room, where he thinks the briefcase is located. Using his cattle gun to break the lock, he crashes through the door, easily dispatching two armed criminals, and a third, unarmed man who cowers behind a shower

curtain in the bathroom. In the wake of the mayhem, he nonchalantly sits down on a bed. The components of the shot are as such:

1. *Dominant*: This is where our eye is first attracted. The overturned lamp in the bottom right-hand corner of the frame provides the most intense light in the shot.
2. *Lighting key*: A mix of high and low key. On the left side of the frame, in the bathroom, there is high key lighting, since all of the objects in the room are equally perceptible. In the rest of the frame, there is low-key lighting, as Chigurh is bathed in shadow, with only the left side of his face being lit by the bright lamp.
3. *Shot and camera proxemics*: The main subject of the camera is Chigurh, and it is at about the distance of a medium shot—although his full body is in frame, this is only because he is sitting down. The camera is at a social distance of more or less seven feet.
4. *Angle*: Low, suggesting Chigurh's power and dangerousness.
5. *Color values*: Chigurh's outfit is very dark, made even more so by the shadows created by the high contrast lighting. Given the realistic nature of the film, the blood on the walls and floor is visible, but not particularly. However, the orange comforter of the bed glows menacingly beneath Chigurh, like a flaming throne.
6. *Lens/filter/stock*: There is nothing special about the lens being used, nor is there a perceivable filter. The standard slow stock of most films is used.
7. *Subsidiary contrasts*: After looking at the lamp, one perceives Chigurh's half-illuminated face, and the dead body on the left side of the frame in the bathroom.
8. *Density*: Not too much information is packed into the image. Chigurh still has his finger on the trigger of his gun, and the corpse on the left side of the frame implies that he is the killer.

9. *Composition*: There are three general areas in the frame: left, center, and right. This division into an odd number implies tension and instability, which is exacerbated by the two different keys of lighting in the shot.
10. *Form*: The form of this shot is closed, which means that the elements in the image are carefully arranged and balanced. The fact that the camera lingers on this shot for a few seconds also implies that the audience is meant to pause and take in the devastation of the image.
11. *Framing*: The framing is loose, implying that Chigurh has the power to do whatever he wants. The dead man in the left side of the frame, in contrast, is/was powerless.
12. *Depth*: There are only two notable planes in this shot. In the midground is Chigurh and the overturned lamp, with the dead man in the background. Even without having seen the previous minute of footage, someone could easily tell that Chigurh is responsible for the death of the man in the background.
13. *Character placement*: Chigurh dominates the center of the frame, filling it from top to bottom. The dead man is shoved into the lower left corner of the frame—he is insignificant.
14. *Staging positions*: Chigurh is facing the camera in a full frontal position. However, his face is menacingly only half-lit, which implies that in spite of his symbolic openness to the camera, he is truly unknowable, especially in light of the violence he has just committed.
15. *Character proxemics*: Chigurh and the dead man are at a public distance from each other, at least twenty feet away. This shows that the corpse is a mere afterthought to Chigurh; killing means nothing to him.

One of the ways the Coen brothers manipulate the onscreen world of *True Grit* through *mise en scène* is by ironically contrasting Mattie's size with those of other characters. For example, in an early scene, she must deal with the custodian of her father's property in order to receive the compensation she believes is owed to her. This old man does not take Mattie seriously due to her age and gender, but it becomes clear that she is unwilling to back down from his attempts to brush her off. After she argues him into a corner, so to speak, there is a shot of the man with the back of Mattie's head close to the camera. She dominates the right side of the frame, and the old man looks sheepishly off to the left. The positioning of the characters onscreen creates the illusion that Mattie is much larger than her interlocutor—and in a way, she is. The man seems very small in comparison to her also because the various miscellany and furnishings in the room occupy roughly the same amount of space in the frame as he. The Coens want to convey to the viewer that Mattie is someone who ought to be taken seriously.

In the first scene in which Cogburn is onscreen (Mattie first speaks to him through the door of an outhouse), the room is flooded with light filtering through the windows. The camera is held at a long-shot distance where Mattie is standing, such that the windows are located behind Cogburn. From Mattie's position, it seems almost as though a sort of heavenly light backs up Cogburn, implying that he is the best choice for her in her mission. The irony is that the events of this scene are based around the trial of Cogburn for unnecessarily shooting and killing several men. However, in Mattie's case, it is a good thing that Cogburn is so prone to violence: it is exactly what she needs from the marshal.

The manner in which the Coens introduce LaBoeuf is also significant. As Mattie returns to the boarding house after Cogburn rejects her initial offer, she sees LaBoeuf sitting on the front porch with his feet up on the railing. She passes by him, and it cuts to a shot of LaBoeuf lighting

a match for his pipe. The light illuminates his face and he stares directly at the camera (a temporary substitute for Mattie's point of view). He is sitting in front of a windowpane, which provides a frame behind his head. This introduction to LaBoeuf highlights his lofty view of himself: he stares intently at Mattie, dramatically making his face and eyes visible by striking a match, with his boots with the massive spurs on display. He wants to make an impression on the young woman, and he does so with flourish. The Coens double frame his head in this shot in order to make his first appearance all that more memorable to the audience.

When Cogburn and LaBoeuf leave town without Mattie to find Ned and Chaney, they stop and watch from a distance as she struggles to wade across the river to reach them. Although LaBoeuf is unimpressed (and subsequently spanks her and hits her with a switch), Cogburn is taken by Mattie's persistence. The Coens indicate this visually by focusing the camera primarily on Cogburn's reaction as he watches her cross the river. It steadily zooms in closer to his face, sharpening in focus on Cogburn and slowly putting LaBoeuf more and more out of focus. Before this point, Cogburn treats Mattie like a child, undermining her desire to avenge her father. It is precisely at this point that Cogburn begins to take Mattie seriously. Thus, it makes sense when Cogburn pulls his revolver on LaBoeuf in response to his shameful mistreatment of her—he respects Mattie too much to allow that to happen.

When Cogburn does draw his weapon and point it at LaBoeuf, the Coens use an extreme wide-angle lens in order to exaggerate the size of his gun. While the gun is not small by any stretch of the imagination, in this shot it seems to be about as large as Cogburn himself. He points it slightly to the left of the camera at LaBoeuf, the angle of which makes it seem even larger. In spite of what we have seen from Cogburn—his drunkenness, indifference towards



Mattie—the stories are true about his dangerous capabilities. He looks very intimidating in this shot, to the point that even the aggressive LaBoeuf backs down.

Mattie finally witnesses the brutality for which Cogburn is known when he kills one of Ned's gang members in the cabin shelter. Cogburn interrogates an injured young man who obviously knows the whereabouts of Ned and his gang, but the other man does not want him to speak, and stabs him to death. In retaliation, Cogburn immediately draws his revolver and shoots a bloody hole through the murderous gang member's face. Throughout all this, Mattie stands by and watches. Cogburn's only response to killing the other man is "Goddammit." The Coens remind the audience of Mattie's presence when Cogburn attempts to get information out of the dying young man by including her in the right side of the frame. The implication is that it is important to realize that Cogburn makes no attempt to varnish or censor his behavior in front of her. He is on this mission because of her, but she is only faintly on his mind, as indicated by the fact that she is blurry and out of focus in the shot. Cogburn is single-minded in his pursuit of Ned and Chaney, and has no regard for the psychological impact of his violence on Mattie's young mind.

### **Slowness as Insignificance: The Coens and Movement**

A product of Deakins' oft-used long shots in *Fargo* is that movement—of characters, vehicles, or any other object onscreen—seems much slower than it truly is. (Accordingly, if the camera is close to its object, small movements seem much larger.) The opening shot depicts Jerry's vehicle coming towards the camera through dense fog, with a car attached to the back. Since the camera is very far away from the car—and the car is moving directly towards the camera—the shot seems to last an extremely long time, as if Jerry's car is moving at a crawl. As

a result of this lack of urgency, there is a sense of inevitability: Jerry is moving inexorably towards his fate and cannot be stopped, his slowness notwithstanding.

Jerry is made to seem even slower, and thus more insignificant, after his unsuccessful meeting with Wade and Stanley about the lot deal. Once the conversation ends between the three characters, there is a cut to a bird's-eye view of the snowbound parking lot where Jerry's car is located. The lot is dotted with several plots of vegetation, each of which is dark and square shaped. At first, however, it is difficult to tell what the camera is showing; given the absolute whiteness of the snow, and the randomly scattered black squares, the shot seems to be almost abstract in its design. It is only when Jerry walks into the frame from the bottom that the content of the shot is made obvious. The entire shot lasts for roughly about ten seconds as Jerry makes his way from the bottom to the upper right corner of the frame to his car. He appears to be so small as to be insect-like. The Coens give here a visual representation of both Jerry's and his father-in-law's low opinion of him.

One of the Coens' signatures as a directing pair is to portray emotionally harrowing events in a cold, distant manner, often giving them a darkly comical feel. The scene in which Jean blindly stumbles around in the snow after being kidnapped is almost funny, even though the poor woman is in about as much anguish as she has been throughout the film. In the same way that Carl laughs at Jean, the scene seems silly because the camera is pulled back from her. Taken out of context, the scene could almost be considered slapstick, given that the comedy comes from something as physical and simple as falling down. Her movements seem less severe given the camera's distance, thus making it easier for the audience to find them funny. (Imagine how violent *The Three Stooges* would seem if all the episodes were shot in close-up.) Had the Coens zoomed the camera up to Jean's covered face, the scene would come across much more desperate

than it does; we would likely be able to hear her labored breathing and her gasps for help would be all the more pitiful. At the cost of appearing cruel, the Coens maintain their distance from their subject to achieve a completely different effect.

Despite being a thriller, most of *No Country for Old Men* is rather static: "thrills" tend to come from the dread of not knowing what Chigurh will do next. However, there are a few instances in which the film jumps from complete stasis to total kinetics. In the scene during which Moss investigates the abandoned drug deal, he is interrupted by the arrival of other criminals in a rugged all-terrain vehicle. They begin to shoot at him, having no other choice, he runs for his life.

The way that the Coens film this particular chase scene emphasizes Moss' desperation. In contrast to the other scenes, the Coens edit it much more rapidly, changing angles often in order to imply Moss' confusion. None of these angles give an indication as to where Moss is headed, though. When the camera is located in front of Moss, and he runs towards it, it feels as though he is not moving at all. When the camera is right behind Moss, the scene is so darkly lit that neither Moss nor the viewer can see where he is going, thus cutting off any impression of speed. At one point the camera changes to an extreme long shot of Moss running from the truck towards it. The shot lingers for several seconds, which in another context may not feel very long, but given that Moss is running at top speed, the moment feels incredibly prolonged.

After the criminals lose track of Moss in a river, they sic their pit bull on him. Had the Coens kept the camera close to Moss, there would have been a greater sense of speed. But the camera continually remains in a long shot, making Moss' movement through the water feel painfully slow. The only truly kinetic shot in the whole scene occurs when the dog leaps at Moss. The camera is positioned at a quarter turn towards the dog, so when it jumps, it moves from the

right side of the frame to the left. This lateral movement takes only a few seconds, as opposed to when Moss moves in-depth of the shot, which feels prolonged.

The following scene is predominately more static—it depicts a tense conversation between Chigurh and a gas station owner—but there are a few shots that use movement metaphorically. Given that the content of the scene is dialogue-based, there are mostly just shots of Chigurh and the old man. But during the scene, Chigurh eats from a small bag of peanuts. At one point during the conversation, which gravely perturbs the old man, Chigurh crumples up the plastic bag and places it on the counter. The Coens then zoom into a close-up shot of the bag as it ever so slowly uncoils. Chigurh has mangled the bag beyond recognition, and the movement of its unfolding is almost painful to watch. No other sound occupies the scene but the sound of the crumpled plastic shifting around. The next shot is of the old man staring fearfully down at the bag. The Coens include a close-up of this bag because it is a metaphor for the way Chigurh is slowly constricting around the old man, who feels about as vulnerable as the insignificant piece of plastic.

The conversation then shifts enigmatically to Chigurh asking the old man, "What's the most you ever lost on a coin toss?" The confused man then looks up, at which point Chigurh pulls out a quarter, flips it, and then slams it on the counter next to the crumpled peanut bag. The coin is not visible beneath Chigurh's fingers, and the shot rapidly cuts from the coin in the air to Chigurh's hand crushing it on the wood. The movement of the shots is rapid and decisive, implying that this moment is what will determine the old man's fate. The fact that Chigurh asks him this question seems to cement in the old man's mind that they are discussing whether Chigurh will kill him. As opposed to shooting the scene in their typical long shot, the Coens include this close-up of Chigurh's hand pounding the coin on the table, in which the movement is

far more dramatic, since the hand has far less space to cover in the frame. It is in stark contrast to the slowly unfolding plastic bag, and it interrupts the languid stasis of the preceding shots. This man's life is in grave peril, and it is at this *exact* moment that he realizes it.

In *True Grit*, when Cogburn and Mattie watch from afar Ned's gang confronting LaBoeuf, the Coens create tension by juxtaposing two very different kinds of movement. The men ride in on horseback to the cabin shelter pretty quickly, but due to the extreme distance at which the character's sit and watch, their movement seems very slow. In contrast, the camera cuts back and forth to a close-up of Mattie's distressed face. Her eyes indicate her fear and apprehension by shifting between LaBoeuf and the gang. In such a close shot, the flitting of her eyes from side to side appears to be much more extreme and rapid than the galloping of the horses. In a rare instance for the film, the audience is granted access to Mattie's emotions; for the most part, even though the film is told from her perspective, we have an imperfect sense of Mattie's personal take on what she is being exposed to. The severe movements of her eyes in contrast to the sluggish running of the horses reinforces the distress she is going through, both in reaction to Cogburn's unhesitating act of murder, and the potential threats faced by LaBoeuf.

One of the few examples of dynamic cinematography in the film occurs during the climax. Although the beginning of this scene takes place from Mattie's perspective, hundreds of yards away, Deakins brings the camera down to Cogburn's level. Much like in conversations, Deakins uses shot-reaction shot whenever two characters fire at each other. For example, there is a shot of one of Ned's cronies. Cogburn then shoots at him, and the shot that follows is of the crony falling from his horse. The camera also moves at the same pace as the riders, giving a sense of speed and tension to the scene. However, the scene also frequently cuts back to where Mattie is watching from afar. By including the ground-level shots of Cogburn and the other

riders fighting, Deakins makes the scene exciting, without letting the audience lose awareness of the violence's impact on Mattie. When the camera is down at Cogburn's level, there is immediacy to the scene, and the characters' deaths have significant impact. However, from Mattie's point of view, she can only really see people falling off of horses and small puffs of gun smoke; the violence feels less devastating from here. The camera's proximity in relation to its subject determines how significant movement appears to the viewer. Since Mattie is a mere witness to most of the action in the film—and a distant one, at that—she is somewhat spared of its intensity, as is the viewer, depending on the position of the camera.

As is common with Western films, the characters travel in an expansive outdoor location, with little vegetation to obscure them. During a montage in which Cogburn, LaBoeuf, and Mattie travel further into Comanche territory, there is an extreme long shot of the group. Within the frame, they are tucked to the right side, and are completely dwarfed by the environment. Although they are moving at a steady pace, the distance between the camera and the characters once again makes them seem almost as though they are walking in place. This sort of shot is common in Westerns, as it shows just how insignificant the people are in comparison to their surroundings. In spite of the fact that the film is centered on their story, the Coens remind the viewer that ultimately their goal is very small and isolated when thought of in the grand scheme of things. It is almost as though the directors want to undermine the story they are telling by portraying the characters as diminutive. Had the camera been moving along with them, and at a much closer proximity, and then the three may seem heroic or even triumphant. Instead, they appear as mere blots on an enormous canvas, as it were.

**Roderick Jaynes: The Third Coen Brother**

In order to qualify for more awards, the Coen brothers edit most of their own films under the pseudonym "Roderick Jaynes," *Fargo* included. Editing can be one of the most crucial ways to convey meaning in a film, although compared to their other trademarks and techniques, the Coens' editing tends to be more reserved and functional. However, they do make frequent use of the lap dissolve—defined by Giannetti as, "The slow fading out of one shot and the gradual fading in of its successor, with a superimposition of images, usually at the midpoint" (523). When the Coens employ this method in *Fargo*, they often use it to associate Jerry with another object or character.

Early in the film the Coens transition between a shot of Jerry in his office at work to one of the giant Paul Bunyan statue using a lap dissolve. The end of the scene with Jerry depicts his shame at having lied to a customer about not adding a (useless) sealant named TruCoat to a car he sold, costing the man an extra \$400. The shot then dissolves into the next one, making it look as though the Paul Bunyan statue is perched on Jerry's shoulder. As mentioned earlier, the statue represents execution (both literal and metaphorical), and the superimposition of the images of it and Jerry foreshadows how his penchant for lies ultimately leads to his downfall.

Immediately after this subsequent scene ends (depicting Carl's frustration for Gaear's refusal to hold a conversation with him), the shot dissolves into the next, which shows Jerry at his office desk on the phone with an auditor calling about missing funds. The camera is located behind the blinds of Jerry's office window, continuing the motif of prison. Carl's profile is superimposed over the image of Jerry, thus not only linking the two characters' fates together, but also that they feel imprisoned, except for different reasons.

Another technique the Coens use to visually link disparate characters is that of the match cut, defined as "a cut between two shots [that] match graphically" (Duckworth). As Carl

struggles to get the old television to work at the lakeside hideout, he repeatedly bashes the set as the camera zooms in closer until the TV screen fills the frame. Finally, seemingly without cutting away, the TV picture comes in completely clearly, only for the camera to zoom out and the setting has suddenly changed to Marge's bedroom, where she and Norm peacefully sleep. Once again, the Coens contrast the turmoil of the outside world with the domestic bliss of the Gunderson household. Carl's violent reaction to the malfunctioning television foreshadows the sort of man he is, thus showing the audience how unstable and dangerous of a threat he is to Marge.

Marge and her husband are then contrasted with Stanley, Jerry, and Wade using a match cut in a scene soon afterwards. Before Marge sets out for work that day, she and her husband go to a buffet restaurant (or as they idiomatically refer to it, a "fricassee") where they eat together. The scene ends with them in a medium shot (meaning that they are shown from the waist up), chewing their foods, when it suddenly cuts to a close-up of Stanley's old, pockmarked face as he munches on his own dinner. Whereas the scene with Marge and her husband is pleasantly filled with the ambient noise of the restaurant, the following one is so quiet as to be unbearably tense; the three men are deciding how to approach Jean's kidnapping. In it, Wade and Jerry argue about whether to involve the police—Jerry obviously doesn't want to because it would blow his cover. The match cut is ironic because contacting the proper authorities would most likely put Wade in touch with Marge herself, and given her excellent police work, everything would have been solved with ease. Alternatively, as Steven Carter argues, the "motif" of eating is there "to lay bare the latent inhumanity of everyone, cops and criminals alike, in the film's entropic



universe."<sup>4</sup> Rather than to contrast the eaters as I believe the match cut is meant to do, Carter wants to convince us that the Coens want to show the similarities between the characters, regardless of their moral stature.

The story of the cinematic and literary versions of *No Country for Old Men* is relatively easy to understand: a killer pursues an ordinary man while a police officer attempts to catch up. For a story with a clear-cut hero and villain, one would expect to see them clash face-to-face, with either of them triumphing over the other. But in the film, this one scene is missing.

The last time we see Moss alive, he is flirting with a woman who is sunning herself by the pool of a motel. That scene then fades to black, and then jauntily jumps to Bell driving to the scene of a crime just as it is ending. There are many sounds of gunshots, and as Bell draws closer to the motel, a truck drives rapidly away as men frantically pile into the bed. Bell gets out of the car, draws his sidearm, and cautiously walks towards the motel, where he finds Moss' dead body.

The fact the Coens withhold this "payoff" scene is what distinguishes this film from typical thrillers. The gaping hole in the editing is meant to imply that, in the scope of this story, showing Moss' death is not important, and neither is the fate of the drug money. A typical Hollywood thriller would likely show a climactic showdown between Moss and Chigurh, with a slow-motion shot of Moss dramatically dying as his foe bests him. The movie would probably then end at this point, with a brief epilogue showing how Moss' wife, Carla Jean, copes with the death of her husband. But the Coens instead cut this scene out, and allow Chigurh to continue on his rampage. We are given no closure for Moss because in his situation, there is no closure—he is involved in a dangerous chase that he ultimately cannot escape.

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Carter. "'Flare to White': *Fargo* and the Postmodern Turn." *Literature Film Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (October 1999): 238.

What is important to the Coens is that Chigurh, this story's embodiment of evil, is indestructible. Whereas Moss is a good man who cares about his wife, Chigurh outlasts him. By not allowing the audience to feel a sense of resolution for Moss' character, the Coens show that evil will triumph over good. In this particular case, the Coens use editing not as a tool to promote continuity and an easily understood plot, but rather to complicate things even further. Although their sleight of editing promotes confusion and frustration in the viewer, in the end, leaving out this scene creates an entirely different meaning for the film.

Towards the end of the film, the Coens employ one of their main tools of editing: the lap dissolve. Chigurh succeeds in recovering the money, returning it, and then killing Moss' wife. He survives a subsequent car accident, and escapes being arrested by the police. The final shot of that scene is of Chigurh walking away from the camera in an extreme long shot. There is then a lap dissolve, and the following shot is a close-up of Bell sitting at his kitchen table, looking to the left side of the frame at approximately the spot where Chigurh stands in the first shot. This lap dissolve implies that Bell is thinking about Chigurh, and how the murderer ultimately eludes him. In this scene, we find out he is retired. By linking Bell and Chigurh together in this way, the Coens are implying that Bell blames himself for Carla Jean's death, and the fact that Chigurh is still free to terrorize the world.

As always, the Coen brothers edited *True Grit* together under the collective pseudonym "Roderick Jaynes." In this film, the Coens' editing is functional, and used merely to maintain continuity. The cuts are usually unobtrusive and do not call attention to themselves. During scenes of dialogue, they use the standard "shot-reverse shot" technique, and during action scenes, the shots are brief and numerous. In comparison to their other work, the Coens' editing conforms to the same model as that of Hollywood films. Absent are their conspicuously long takes, and

there is almost never any sort of parallel cutting, since the film's point of view stays in Mattie's perspective nearly the whole time. What is noticeable about the editing is the Coens' use of montage and the frequent lap dissolves they employ during these sequences.

The first time the Coens use the lap dissolve is in the transition between Mattie's first negotiations with Cogburn for his help in finding Chaney. That scene ends with the marshal walking away from Mattie, with the camera positioned behind her head. The shot that follows is of LaBoeuf sitting on the front porch of the boarding house where Mattie is staying. He is positioned in the right side of the frame, looking off to the right. If one pauses the film during the middle of this lap dissolve, it creates the image that Mattie is looking at both Cogburn and LaBoeuf, neither of whom are looking at her. The Coens use this imposition of images to suggest the task that is laid out before Mattie: she must convince two men who are otherwise indifferent to her plight that she is worth taking seriously. But the fact that the three people are united in this layering of the shots also implies that they will eventually join together.

The Coens also use sound to enhance the sense of continuity between scenes. When Mattie finally convinces Cogburn to join up with her, the scene ends and lap dissolves into a shot of the town the next morning. Carter Burwell's score punctuates the transition with a hopeful tune that conveys the optimism Mattie feels at setting out on her journey. In this situation, the lap dissolve does not create a meaningful imposition of images. Rather, it smoothes the movement from the first sequence to the next. If the Coens used a simple, abrupt cut between the two shots, this part of the movie would lose some of its sense of harmony and flow. The lap dissolve softens the unavoidably stilted nature of film editing, as does the musical transition.

The scene that follows immediately is a montage of Mattie preparing to set out on her journey. The various shots included convey the conflicting aspects of her personality: although

she has taken on the massive burden of avenging her father, she is only fourteen years old, and physically does not seem to be up to the task. Burwell's score triumphantly announces the beginning of Mattie's heroic pursuit, and there is a voiceover of Mattie's letter to her mother, in which she assures that she will be safe and does not fear her task. This aspect of sound is played over shots of Mattie removing a large men's coat from a closet and then rolling up the sleeves, as it does not come anywhere close to fitting her. She then dons a flat-brimmed hat that is far too big on her (she looks out from under the brim in the mirror at herself). Mattie solves this problem by lining the inside with a rolled-up newspaper. The next shot is rather jarring, as it depicts Mattie placing her father's loaded revolver in a cloth bag, which she then fills with apples. Mattie then tacks up her horse and rides out of the stables. In spite of the rousing music, the scene is subtly disturbing, as no fourteen-year-old—either male or female—ought to be making the preparations that Mattie is. By presenting them in a montage with the accompanying score and Mattie's brave words, the Coens convey her steadfast confidence.

The only truly standout use of editing in *True Grit* occurs after Cogburn saves LaBoeuf from death at the hands of the Pepper gang near the cabin shelter. That scene ends by fading to a black screen with only falling light snow visible. The dialogue from the following scene then becomes audible, but the people in it do not become visible until a couple of seconds later, the shot of which lap dissolves in. The Coens also overlay soft piano with the shot of the falling snow, which continues into the next scene: a tender moment between Mattie and her horse that is undermined by a shot of the dead bodies of the men Cogburn just killed. The transition is lyrical due to the sweet music, and also allows for a brief moment of respite between the loud, action-packed previous scene and the dialogue-heavy ones that come afterward. The reason for including such a transition is to maintain a steady pace throughout the film, and to ensure that

viewers have time to register the incredible violence that occurs. It is a way of further aligning the viewer with Mattie, whose brief moment alone with her beloved horse is rudely cut short by the reminder of the grim nature of her goal.

### **Silence is Golden: The Coens' Use of Dead Air**

Carter Burwell is a frequent collaborator of the Coen brothers, and has, in fact, composed scores for all of the directors' films to date, including *Fargo*. The main theme of the film, appropriately titled "Fargo, North Dakota," is included in the opening shot. It begins with slow strings and eventually expands into a more grandiose aesthetic. The minor key, along with the timpani and concluding gong, give the piece a sense of grandiosity, as though the film were a mournful, high tragedy. Although in some ways it is, the Coens' omnipresent sense of irony undermines this feeling considerably. I believe that Burwell made this first song so lavish in order to give a wrong impression of the tone of the film, so it's all the more surprising when the characters behave so ineptly. But when the violence in the movie continues to mount, the gravity of the story begins to steal back in. Burwell's theme serves as reminder that, in spite of the Coen's flippant treatment of the content, death and especially murder serious matters.

One of the most important uses of sound in the film occurs at the movie's climax, when Marge finds the lakeside hideout. She at first prepares to enter through the front door, but then hears the incessant sound of a nearby machine. As Marge sneaks into the backyard of the house, she finds Gaear using a wood chipper to obliterate Carl's dead body (whom he has presumably killed). Training her sidearm on Gaear, Marge attempts to get his attention and to order him to put his hands in the air. But due to the deafening roar of the wood chipper, Gaear cannot hear her, so she has to continue to shout at him. Perhaps in order to undercut the revulsion of the gore-

spewing wood chipper, the Coens insert this brief obstacle to the scene's progression that would be unfunny in any other situation.

A distinctive aspect of *No Country for Old Men* is its almost total lack of music. The Coen brothers brought on frequent collaborator Carter Burwell to compose the score, but either Burwell did not write much, or in post-production it was decided to leave out most of the music. In any case, the frequently static cinematography and *mise en scène* of *No Country for Old Men* is bolstered by the silence that often accompanies it. Instead, the Coens employ ambient aural cues to mark transitions—and to startle the audience.

Early in the film, as Chigurh strangles to death the officer who initially arrests him, the two men struggle together on the floor. During this sequence, the sound of a train can be heard. The sounds are of the locomotive riding on the tracks, and its brakes screeching, almost as though the filmmakers recorded the sound of a subway passing by in a metro station. After Chigurh finally severs the carotid artery of the officer, the sounds of the passing train begin to subside. It is not immediately apparent, but the scene takes place in a police station that is apparently near some train tracks (the sound of a conductor's voice can be faintly heard). The Coens pair up the horrific visual of Chigurh's face and the officer's violent death with the passing train in order to emphasize the killer's ruthlessness. The train, although it is never seen, is a metaphor for Chigurh that overshadows the relentless onslaught of death he causes throughout the rest of the film.

One of the few instances in which the Coens use music occurs during the scene in which Chigurh intimidates the gas station owner. Throughout the initial part of their dialogue, there is no music, just the whistling of the wind outside. But after Chigurh flips the coin and begins to explain its significance to the old man ("This coin has traveled twenty-two years just to get

here"), a low tone begins to sound. When this noise begins, the Coens also slightly begin to zoom the camera in towards Chigurh's face, indicating the importance of this moment to the old man's life. The feeling of the scene is incredibly tense, especially given how unabashedly violent Chigurh has been up to this point. Given his record of strangling, shooting, and maiming people to death in previous scenes, it is even more terrifying to watch Chigurh toy with the man in this way. So when the old man's call about the coin turns out to be right, the music ceases, and the audience feels as relieved as the potential victim. This rare inclusion of music increases the scene's tension, as well as the catharsis at the end.

In spite of this film's doomsday dark tone, there is one instance of trademark Coen irony that uses diegetic music—i.e. "sound that the characters can hear" (208). In order to hide from Chigurh, Moss crosses the border between Mexico and Texas and wakes up the next morning to the sound of a mariachi band loudly playing. In the previous scene, he and Chigurh severely injure each other with their guns, but Moss seems the worse for wear: he is bleeding in several places and can barely support himself. So when he wakes up and pulls his coat off, the mariachi band immediately stops playing and they look at him confusedly and worriedly. The song they are playing is very upbeat and bright sounding, which is ironic considering that Moss has hit his absolute bottom at this point in the story. The scene is grimly funny, and the silly music lightens the mood after the intense gunfight that precedes it.

As a violent Western, it is appropriate that guns play a large role in the aural landscape of *True Grit*. Ironically, however, the first gunshot is not fired until over 45 minutes into the film. Cogburn and Mattie come upon the corpse of a hanged man that a crow is pecking at, which Cogburn chases away by firing his revolver into the air. The sound of the blast is jarringly loud, and it acts as a brutal reminder of the violent men the duo pursues. Up until this point, Cogburn

and Mattie had not encountered any significant sign of the Pepper gang's passing, except for a California gold piece that may or may not belong to Mattie's father. The sight of the corpse perturbs their otherwise pleasant and uneventful journey, and Cogburn's gunshot punctuates this disruption.

Another noticeable aspect of sound in the film is also one of the Coens' trademarks: people with distinctive American accents and language. Both Mattie's diction and accent are refined without sounding overly sophisticated. Her vocabulary is much larger than expected of a fourteen year old, and she avoids using contractions, lending her speech an almost formal quality. In contrast Cogburn's voice is incomprehensible, usually marred either by drunkenness or his omnipresent cigarettes. His grammar is often incorrect ("We is out here waitin' for you, Quincy") and he employs regionalisms, like when he says, "fixin' to" as opposed to "going to." The way Cogburn speaks is so incoherent and garbled that in my first viewing of the film, I honestly had no idea what the man was saying for most of the time. And whereas Hailee Steinfeld's speech as Mattie is similar to that of Kim Darby, the actress who played the character in the original film, Jeff Bridges' growl is starkly different from the voice of John Wayne, who always projects his voice clearly, even when trying to sound inebriated.

Burwell's score reflects Mattie's perpetually optimistic worldview. Although she is precocious and self-aware, she has a naively positive attitude towards her goal of capturing and killing Chaney, which is reflected in the ironically gentle musical score. Had the film focused on the point of view of Cogburn or LaBoeuf, the score would likely have been more pessimistic and downbeat, for they comprehend the dangers of their task far more than Mattie. Therefore, when Mattie watches Cogburn charge the Pepper gang by himself, the music is climactic and like a fanfare—she is utterly sure of Cogburn's victory, in spite of the odds. Similarly, during the



montage travel scenes, the score sounds quietly grandiose, as though to indicate the enjoyment that Mattie is likely deriving from her quest, as opposed to being discouraged by either the weather or their trail to Chaney, both of which have gone cold.

### **An Embarrassment of Riches: The Acclaimed Performances of Coen Actors**

At the 1997 Academy Awards, *Fargo* was nominated for seven Oscars, including Best Actor in a Supporting Role for William H. Macy, and Best Actress in a Leading Role for Frances McDormand, who won. Both of these actors speak using an impeccable Midwestern accent, but play completely different characters. Macy's voice, which is regularly deep and more or less normal, is much higher-pitched, which is accentuated by the inherently friendly-sounding accent of his character. Being a car salesman, Jerry is often required to convince his customers to purchase something that they do not actually want. Likewise, his speech patterns are affected by the way he talks at his job, and so he speaks in clichés and sometimes has trouble articulating his thoughts when truisms do not suffice. The impression that Macy gives of his character as that the man is irrepressibly small, in many different ways: his posture, his mannerisms, and his voice all contribute to this.

Macy's eyes are large and expressive, naturally turning downward at the corners, making his face well suited to his role. Given the trouble that in which Jerry continually finds himself, he often is seen staring at his feet in shame or pleading futilely for something that he has no chance at receiving. His face is capable of expressing either unabashed excitement (which, in this film, is rare) or deep disappointment. In a bid to "maintain control over others," Jerry works as a "deceptive" salesman, in order to overcome his weak constitution.<sup>5</sup> The publicity photo of Macy as Jerry embodies the actor's performance: Macy's hand is held to his mouth as if he is nervously

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Coughlin. "Acting for Real: Performing Characters in Miller's Crossing and Fargo." *Journal Of Popular Culture* 41, no. 2 (April 2008): 224-244.

biting his fingernails, and he stares off in to the distance outside of the frame with a tremendously worried expression. If one word were to encapsulate the personality Macy lends to the character, it would be "mousy."

The best scene to illustrate Jerry's meekness depicts him debating with Wade on how to deal with the ransom for Jean. In spite of the fact that Jean's safety solely resides in Jerry's ability to keep everyone else out of the kidnapping deal, he immediately quails when his father-in-law talks over him. At first Jerry attempts to speak up, but his incessant stuttering and whiny voice undermine his earnestness, and Wade shouts at him, "Look, Jerry, you're not selling me a damn car!" (Presnell, who plays Wade, has a booming vocal range, and is well cast as a complete foil to his son-in-law). In a final attempt, Jerry gives a pleading look to Stanley, who blithely says, "It's the way we prefer to handle it, Jerry." This echoes the earlier scene in which Jerry is denied the money he wants for the parking lot deal he put together. Much in the same way that Jerry is incapable of successfully conducting business, he cannot out-argue Wade, even if it means the lives of the old man and Jean.

McDormand, who plays Marge, won the Academy Award most likely because she makes her character believable, which is a daunting task. As one of the only few decent people in the movie, Marge is utterly paradoxical: she witnesses copious amounts of bloodshed and horrors, yet somehow manages to preserve not only her upbeat spirit, but also a loving relationship with her husband. The Minnesotan accent that McDormand uses for Marge is as equally authentic as Macy's, but instead of working against her, her voice belies her sincerity and gravity. Her appearance and the way she carries herself are completely at odds with one another. As George Toles writes, Marge "sees things that are beyond us and that our perspective on our own situation

is less adequate than we had supposed."<sup>6</sup> She is incredibly gifted intellectually, yet somehow manages to blend in with the "dumb-as-a-brick, automaton cheeriness... of the various cashiers, clerks, and perhaps most notably, prostitute witnesses in the area around Brainerd."<sup>7</sup>

One of the scenes depicts Marge interrogating Shep Proudfoot, the hulking, ex-con mechanic who vouches for Gaear and provides the link between him and Jerry. Marge asks him whether he was somehow connected to the murders, which Shep stonily denies. Although Margie is almost an entire foot shorter than the burly man, she does not relent, instead using subtle threats to get Shep to offer her some information. But instead of adding a darker tinge to her voice, McDormand increases the sweetness with which she says, "I know you don't want to be an accessory to [homicide]. So do you think you remember the name of the folks who called ya?", ending the sentence with a perky smile. The scene ends here, but Shep presumably gives her information. In the hands of a lesser actress, this role could have easily devolved into caricature (as in the case of Jennifer Jason Leigh in the previous Coen brothers outing, *The Hudsucker Proxy*) but McDormand deftly toes that line.

The only situation in which Marge's cheeriness seems to crack occurs late in the film. After Marge has apprehended Gaear, she looks back at him in the rearview mirror of the police car, asking him why he committed the crimes and murders he did. She says to him, "There's more to life than a little bit of money, y'know. Don'tcha know that?" As opposed to her formerly bright expression in most other scenes of the film, McDormand's face is profoundly perturbed. Much in the same way that Carl could not understand why his accomplice refused to speak to him, Marge cannot comprehend why Gaear would do what he has done. Without dropping the

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<sup>6</sup> George Toles. "Obvious Mysteries in *Fargo*." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 38 (January 01, 1999), EBSCOhost (accessed February 18, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

sensibility she gives Marge in earlier scenes (i.e. that of optimism), McDormand conveys Marge's and, by extension, the audience's disbelief at Gaear's lack of remorse. There is a sense that McDormand conveys that Marge thought she had seen everything in her work as a police officer, but that Gaear was somehow worse than anything that had come before. McDormand's regret as she trails off, saying, "Well..." is palpable.

Many of the awards and nominations of *No Country for Old Men* went to Javier Bardem, who "brilliantly" plays Chigurh (166). The Spanish actor is quite popular in home country, but prior to this film had not attained much critical acclaim in the United States. Part of his success in the role can be attributed to his lack of recognition in America; since moviegoers do not recognize the man playing Chigurh, the character is every bit more terrifying because of it. To watch Bardem as Chigurh is to visualize a nightmare—an unknowable stranger committing inconceivable acts of violence.

But in addition to the horrifying deaths Chigurh causes is the aura Bardem exudes as Chigurh, which can be seen in the all-important coin scene. It does not take long for the gas station owner to realize that there is something off about Chigurh. As an audience, we have seen him kill several people with no remorse, but he has not spoken much before this point. Instead of acts of physical violence, Chigurh almost dismantles the man in front of him using only his words. Bardem's voice is deep, gravelly, and has a vague accent, unlike the rest of the film's characters, who all sound distinctly Southern American. When the old man reveals that he "married into" the business of owning the gas station, Bardem has Chigurh nearly choke on the peanuts he is eating and glare at him; it feels like it is at this point that Chigurh decides he may kill the man. Bardem is responsible for making the scene feel as dangerous as it is, because taken

out of context, the coin flipping game he plays seems almost like a practical joke. But we know that, based on his mannerisms and vocal cues, the gas station owner just barely escapes alive.

In complete contrast to Bardem is Tommy Lee Jones, who plays Bell. At 61 years old, Jones is about the same age as his character in the film. In addition, Jones also hails from San Saba, Texas, a town that is located near Sanderson, which is where part of the film takes place. Jones is also a nationally recognized and prolific actor, playing many iconic roles in films for both adults and children, including *Men in Black* and *The Fugitive*, for which he won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor (as Bardem did for *No Country for Old Men*). Given his authoritative and heavy Texan accent, Jones is also almost exclusively cast as an American, especially a law enforcer of some type.

Although the character Jones plays in this film fits exactly the above description, he imbues Bell with a tiredness that is absent from his other roles. Normally, Jones plays a veteran who is surprisingly capable and spry, but Bell is a man who has been beaten down by the world he attempts to protect. As Agent K in *Men in Black*, he unhesitatingly draws his gun on a man and promptly shoots it off (it then grows back because the man is actually an alien). But in *No Country for Old Men*, he refuses even to wear his sidearm on his belt, preferring to "hide behind" his much younger partner. It is clear that Bell loves his job, but that he abhors the violence it entails. Sure enough, the case that bests him and causes him to retire is the one that involves the most senseless and incomprehensible killing he ever witnesses. Jones' garbled, laconic lines perfectly fit the character, as his vocal performance evinces not only his weariness but also his wisdom; his delivery of the man vs. steer metaphor (that is ultimately lost on the dimwitted Carla

Jean) is both spot-on and disarmingly insightful. As said by one of the directors, Joel, Jones is a "really, really great actor" who has just the "kind of subtlety" that the role requires.<sup>8</sup>

Although mostly veteran actors like Jeff Bridges, Matt Damon, Josh Brolin, and Barry Pepper populate the cast of *True Grit*, this film was the first feature to star Hailee Steinfeld. Out of all these actors, only Damon is famous for playing a consistent character type (his role as Jason Bourne in the *Bourne* films has led to him being sought out for action roles). Brolin began his career in the mid-1980s in *The Goonies*, and played in smaller roles until the Coens' own *No Country for Old Men*, in which he landed one of the three leading parts. Pepper is a character actor who began his trend of appearing in war films with *Saving Private Ryan* as a stalwart soldier. The role of Ned Pepper is unusual for him, as he often plays a quietly heroic individual, in contrast to the maniacal gang leader in this film. Only this year has he broken into lead acting with his role as Senator Robert Kennedy in the mini-series "The Kennedys," for which he won an Emmy award.

Bridges worked with the Coen brothers one other time on their unusual comedy *The Big Lebowski*, in which he played a very different character from Cogburn, Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski. Due to this role, and his easygoing demeanor, Bridges is frequently cast as either a layabout or a spiritual hippie character, as in *Tron: Legacy*, *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, and his Oscar-winning role as the alcoholic Bad Blake in *Crazy Heart*. Although Cogburn certainly suffers from alcoholism in *True Grit*, Bridges plays him with an occasional intensity that is unseen in his other characters. Cogburn is not just unafraid, but eager to resort to violence, as he is quick to draw his revolver to solve his issues. Bridges' Cogburn is not the endearingly irritable booze hound as played by John Wayne, but rather an unstable but ultimately well-meaning

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<sup>8</sup> Emanuel Levy. "No Country for Old Men: Joel and Ethan Coen." *Emanuel Levy*. 2007.

lawman with a solid sense of justice. His harsh exterior and incoherent speech belie his firm morals and capability for heroism, as he single-handedly rescues Mattie on multiple occasions. Bridges plays against type for the most part here, and was recognized with an Academy award nomination for his work.

Part of the reason Steinfeld is so convincing as Mattie is because she looks and dresses the part. There was cuteness to the way Kim Darby played the character in the original film that is absent here. When Mattie tries to alleviate tension between Cogburn and LaBoeuf, Steinfeld does not attempt to use cuteness or any endearing qualities to convince the men. She genuinely believes that telling ghost stories is the remedy for the situation, without any sort of guile. Most young actors in Hollywood are either strikingly good-looking for their age, or play their characters with an overabundance of attitude or cynicism, but Steinfeld lacks either of these traits. She wears unflattering, oversized clothing, and her hair is constantly in two long, plain braids. Steinfeld has the stubborn earnestness one would expect from a young woman at her age, but prefers to use articulation and her strong will instead of the typical devices employed by child actors. Instead of seeming adorable like the Darby character, Steinfeld's Mattie comes across as reliable—and certainly the sort of person who could survive in her harsh world. Steinfeld was awarded by many critics groups for her performance, and also earned a nomination by the Academy.

### **Pure Cinema: The Coens' Distinctly Filmic Theatricality**

Some film directors made their initial mark in live theater, like Orson Welles or Mike Nichols. The dynamics of performance in front of an actual audience influence their movies heavily, especially those of Welles. However, the work of the Coen brothers could never be accused of being "stagy"—or hemmed in and unintentionally claustrophobic—because of their

commitment to the cinematic arts: they dominate the creative process of their movies, taking on the responsibility of directing, writing, and editing nearly every one they make.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of the theater that translate directing into filmmaking. For example, whether a film is shot on location or in a studio, a set is almost always required. In *Fargo*, in order to convey the illicitness of the deal struck between Jerry and the criminals at the bar, art director Thomas P. Wilkins fills the room with run-down furniture and insufficient lighting, giving off a sense of decay, which symbolizes the immorality of the individuals who spend their time there.

Likewise, costume design and makeup play just as important a part in both characterization and conveying a film's meaning. When Marge meets her old friend from school—and distant admirer—Mike Yanagita, she dresses in a flowery blouse and wears a small golden necklace, with her hair tastefully styled. Although it is clear that she made an effort to look presentable for this unexpected meeting, her attire is conservative, presumably in order to convey that she does not intend for this get-together to turn romantic (Mike, desperate for her affection, does not realize this). Her appearance also greatly contrasts with her usual, staid police outfit. The scene between Marge and Mike indicates to the audience that, in spite of her male-dominated occupation, Marge is indeed desirably feminine, but that does not stop her from being either a devoted wife or excellent detective.

In film, hair and makeup tend to take a backseat to characterization, since the directors can use the close-up in order to capture the truth of a moment. Most of the time, unusual hairstyles or heavy makeup are reserved for genre films like horror, science fiction, and fantasy. But, in *No Country for Old Men*, a major source of the unease felt by looking at Chigurh is because of his hair. The "bowl" haircut that Bardem wore for the film transcends being merely



unfashionable; it makes his character all the more off-putting. On a less intimidating person, Chigurh's outlandish hair would seem ironic, and might even undermine him. But the fact that he is so thoroughly evil and unredeemable makes it such that there is no trace of humor in the way he looks. It feels almost as though for Chigurh to have a normal hairstyle would somehow make him less dangerous. If you think about the other major villains of recent cinema, they all have unusual hairstyles (e.g. Heath Ledger's Joker, Mo'Nique's Mary in *Precious*, and Daniel Day-Lewis' Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood*).

As with the other films I discuss by the Coen brothers, *Fargo* and *True Grit*, the setting of *No Country for Old Men* is important to capture the feel of the story, specifically the bleakly beautiful landscape. I noted earlier how the film begins with establishing shots of the landscape and nothing else, but equally important is the fact that the indoor settings are distinctly evocative of both the location and time period. Film critic Dave White notes that the film is "as true to West Texas in 1980 as a movie can be (I know; I lived in that area then)."<sup>9</sup> The production designer Jess Gonchor fills the sets with appropriately tacky props. For example, Moss' trailer is appropriately cluttered with various objects that make sense considering the people who dwell there: an empty beer bottle sits forgotten on an air conditioner; the empty-headed Carla Jean has left out a week's worth of laundry on the couch; even the television is old and beat up, with a knob to turn it on and off. During the scene in which Chigurh walks around the trailer, the Coens film him only in close-ups to give the sense of claustrophobia and tightness that such a small dwelling would give. The look and feel of the trailer perfectly captures the working-class life Moss leads.

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<sup>9</sup> Dave White. "No Country for Old Men." *movies.com*. 2007.

Stories that take place in the Old West are told in the media of the novel and film for precisely one reason: the primacy of landscape. Although it is possible to create a Western for the stage—Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* comes to mind—the emphasis in such shows is, as always, on the script and the characters. *True Grit* certainly pays attention to its writing and characterization, but the Coens also give plenty of weight to the environment in which the action takes place. The events of the film are just as much defined by the characters' motivations as they are by what the surroundings have to offer. And in spite of Ethan Coens' limited experience in writing for the stage, *True Grit* is completely filmic in its execution.

This film is richly detailed in terms of the aspects of the movie that would also be present in a stage version—the art direction, costumes, and makeup. The Oscar-nominated production designer and set decorator Jess Gonchor and Nancy Haigh, respectively, fill the indoor scenes with period details that add to the immersion of this nineteenth century world. For example, when Mattie is negotiating with the swindling custodian in his office, on his desk are various materials particular to the setting, both time and place: an old oil lamp, two different ink wells, and even an empty tumbler, which implies the man's taste for alcohol, and therefore his unreliability. The Coens are known for their tendency to control all aspects of a film's production, including having an overriding influence on its art direction. Subtle details like the drink glass both contribute to the movie's authenticity and add meaning to a story or character's development.

A great example of the importance of costume design can be seen in LaBoeuf's outfit. He wears a combination of contradictory styles, which embodies his tendency to shift loyalties on a dime. Both his coat and pants are made out of what appears to be the buffalo skin frequently donned by Native Americans at the time. Considering LaBoeuf's allegiance to the Texas

Rangers, his choice in outerwear is rather puzzling. But directly beneath his coat, pinned to his scarf, is his badge, which he proudly reveals to an unimpressed Mattie. The most ostentatious aspect of LaBoeuf's apparel is his ornate boots with large studs and massive spurs that jingle as he walks. There are not one, but two close-ups of these boots early on in the film. The gold plated bullets he wears around his waist as a bandolier further contribute to LaBoeuf's self-consciously showy attitude. In spite of his pride in both his abilities and his occupation, LaBoeuf clearly has something to prove.

### **Good vs. Evil: Coen Storytelling**

Unlike other films by the Coen brothers, *Fargo* moves in chronological order, and is quite easy to follow. While their other movies have a tendency to use either flashbacks or nonlinear narrative, the story is presented in a clear, logical manner, almost never deviating from the main plot thread (i.e. Marge finding the criminals and stopping their onslaught). It follows a typical three-act structure, in the sense that a conflict is presented, the conflict worsens, and then the conflict is solved.

This not to say that the story is unsophisticated. In the first act, the action switches frequently back and forth between Carl's and Gaear's kidnapping of Jean and Jerry's financial troubles, as well as his attempts to cover up his culpability. Despite Marge's pivotal role in the film, she does not appear onscreen until the very beginning of the second act. The Coens may have elected to hold off on introducing Marge until this point in order to heighten the sense that Jerry's mistakes are liable to continue and that things will only get much worse.

It is this escalation of misfortune that makes the film complex. It would have been disastrous enough had the kidnapping gone wrong in merely a single way, but instead the mishaps keep piling up. The first mistake was Jerry's inability to stop the criminals from stealing

Jean. Then Gaear murders three people, and then Wade gets involved and Carl shoots him as well. The Coens sustain the audience's interest because once we comprehend the extent of the characters' incompetency, we look forward to seeing how else the characters will sabotage their own plans.

Despite the fact that, in *No Country for Old Men*, Bell is onscreen less than Moss or Chigurh, he is its narrator and protagonist. His reactions to the violence he witnesses while in pursuit of Chigurh are appropriate and mirror those of the audience. The film begins and ends with his voice: his story about a remorseless fifteen-year-old boy who murders his girlfriend sets the mood of the rest of the film, and foreshadows the numerous murders that Chigurh commits. Without Bell's character, the story would have no emotional or intellectual core. Chigurh is utterly inscrutable, and we receive almost no insight as to his moral code or his sense of justice. In terms of Moss, although we see him attempting to save his wife and himself, he never speaks what is on his mind or how being hunted affects him psychologically. Like Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Bell is a non-participatory narrator who gives the events of the film a philosophical context, without which the story would seem like mere escapism, albeit very grim and pessimistic.

The philosophical argument of the film becomes apparent when Bell, in his first monologue, says,

The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure. It's not that I'm afraid of it. I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job. But, I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand. A man would have to put his soul at hazard. He'd have to say, "O.K., I'll be part of this world."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Joel and Ethan Coen, *No Country for Old Men*.

He indicates the incomprehensibility and extent of Chigurh's evil when he claims that it's "hard to even take [his crime's] measure." Bell seems to be in awe of the serial killer, in the Biblical sense of the word; he does not admire Chigurh for his actions, but he admits to being incapable of understanding his motivations. In the same way that the Christian concept of God is unknowable and unquestionable, Bell cannot comprehend Chigurh. Bell's characterization of Chigurh's unknowability reminds me of Herman Melville's description of the white whale (via his own narrator, Ishmael) as being likewise incomprehensible. Bells' narration comes originally—almost verbatim—from the McCarthy novel, and so the parallel to Melville makes sense, given that McCarthy is frequently compared to the *Moby-Dick* author in terms of the Biblical scope of their writing.

The most notable aspect of *True Grit*—more specifically, the Coens' interpretation of the novel—is that it is told almost entirely from Mattie's perspective. Although Cogburn and LaBoeuf contribute the most to the action of the film, what defines this film is that the audience sees nothing except through the lens of Mattie's perspective. Thus, due to Mattie's own feelings about LaBoeuf, we feel conflicting sentiments towards him, and almost unalloyed admiration for Cogburn, in spite of his plentiful flaws.

LaBoeuf fails to make a good first impression on Mattie. He surprises her by watching her as she wakes up in her bedroom, and then proceeds to threaten to dismantle her search for Chaney. Shortly afterward, he humiliates her in front of Cogburn by spanking her and whipping her with a switch. Needless to say, Mattie does not have much reason to like the Texas Ranger. It is not until the end of the film that Mattie develops some respect for the man, when he succeeds in saving her from Chaney and Cogburn from Ned. The audience knows no more about LaBoeuf than Mattie does, so his purportedly good reputation as a Texas Ranger is just as groundless to us

as it is to Mattie; we can judge LaBoeuf only by the actions that Mattie witnesses. It takes LaBoeuf a long time to prove to Mattie that he is worthy, and so by that point, his bravery is not nearly as impactful as it could have been. In terms of the narrative arc of the film, LaBoeuf exists primarily to serve as a foil to Cogburn, whose violent efficiency far outweighs his perpetual drunkenness, and he proves a much more valuable companion.

Morally speaking, Cogburn is neutral at best: he freely admits to shooting many men with little provocation, and sees nothing wrong with using lies and coercion to reach his goals. In contrast, LaBoeuf is almost immaculate in terms of the morality of his decisions: he seems to live by the code of any American lawman—to serve and protect. But since we are presented these men in light of Mattie's own goals, Cogburn ultimately emerges as the hero among the two. There are far more low-angle shots of Cogburn, perhaps to emphasize the admiration Mattie holds for him. And as far as we can tell, he is far more skillful with firearms than LaBoeuf, whose only accomplishment is to pull off a long-range sniper shot with minimal duress. Since the movie is called *True Grit*, and that is precisely what Mattie seeks in a bounty hunter for Chaney, it is no surprise that Cogburn seems to us like a more impressive man than LaBoeuf. Had the film been about anything other than violent revenge, LaBoeuf would likely come across as a better individual. But in the end, both the particular narrator and type of story determine our more positive view of Cogburn.

### **Writers First, Directors Second**

Both of the Coens collaborate on every screenplay for the film's they direct, regardless of whether the story is original, like that of *Fargo*, or an adaptation. A recurring motif throughout their work is that of specific regional accents in the United States; consequently, all their films, except for their contribution to *Paris Je T'aime*, are set in America. Since *Fargo* is set in

Minnesota and North Dakota, nearly all of the characters but Carl speak with a Midwestern accent. It has been noted that the Coens include "[w]ry humor, attention to place and dialogue, and a willingness to have a good time [in] their movies."<sup>11</sup> Characters repeat certain words constantly, like "yah" and "don'tcha know" that give the impression that the Coens are lightly mocking those who say them. Given that the directors grew up in the region where the film is set, it is unsurprising that they might poke fun at the people.

Another common feature of the work of the Coens is that of talkativeness. This film is dialogue-heavy, although much of the speaking tends to come from only a handful of characters. Jerry and Carl are the most vocal, but in significantly different ways: Jerry stutters constantly and never seems to be able to finish a sentence without being interrupted by a more imposing individual; Carl is quite articulate, if a bit vulgar, but his companion, Gaear, seldom speaks to him at all. The irony of all the talking that goes on in this film is that almost nothing is successfully communicated between the characters. Whether it is Jerry lying to his family, or the criminals' shoot-first, ask-questions-later attitude, the copious amount of speaking is ultimately empty and leads to nowhere.

In spite of the movie's constant cursing and browbeating (usually delivered by Carl), the Coens evince a knack for conveying believable family dynamics through dialogue. In the first scene that depicts Marge and Norm, they are awoken by a police call and she prepares to leave. Norm stops her, saying: "I'll fix you some eggs."

"No, it's OK, hon, I gotta run."

"You gotta eat your breakfast, Margie. I'll fix you some eggs."

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<sup>11</sup> "Screenplays." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 290-291.

The scene is sweetly domestic in its tone: Marge feels sorry for inconveniencing her husband, but he is too concerned about her to care about himself. At this point in the film, we have not witnessed a single kind act; all of the characters in the preceding scenes are either self-centered or deceitful. This first scene establishes the tone of the relationship between this particular couple, setting them in direct opposition to Jerry and Jean's strained marriage.

Like their other direct literary adaptation, *True Grit*, the Coens follow the source novel for *No Country for Old Men* very closely, even down to the dialogue (their other adaptation from a work of literature is *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which is a reworking of Homer's *Odyssey* set in the Depression-era South). Unlike other novels by McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* moves at a rapid pace, and the author spends much less time describing details than he does in advancing the plot. In this sense, the novel is cinematic, and is well suited to being translated to a visual medium.

Both the film and the novel have an omnipresent, but not omniscient, point of view. That is, we see different events from different perspectives, but the only character whose mind we have access to is Bell. The omnipresent point of view enables us to experience the various aspects of the story: we alternately witness Bell's dismay, Chigurh's thrill, and Moss' fear. However, for each scene, the point of view almost always stays with a single character. For example, when Chigurh and Moss have their shootout in Del Rio, the entire scene is from the point of view of Moss. At a given moment, we do not know where Chigurh is in relation to him, and so the tension is all the greater—we feel hunted just as much as Moss does.

In a scene towards the end of the film, however, the Coens deviate from this pattern very briefly. After the crime scene at the motel where Moss dies clears, Bell returns there later at night. He notices that the lock on the door to the motel room has been shot through in the same



way as the lock on Moss' door, indicating that Chigurh is there. Sure enough, after a close-up of the broken lock, a shot follows of Chigurh's face half hidden in shadow, as he looks intently at the lock hole, through which light moodily filters. Although his face is difficult to see, the expression in his eyes looks almost fearful. The rest of the scene is from Bell's point of view, and he enters the room only to find that no one is there. However, he notices that the lock on the window of the bathroom is closed, which means that Chigurh may actually be hiding elsewhere in the room. Realizing this, Bell chooses not to extend his search. The shot of Chigurh is important because it makes the scene much tenser, and imbues it with much more meaning than if the Coens had not given a brief glimpse of his point of view. Without this shot, the scene would have simply told us that Chigurh had escaped. Instead, we know that Bell has chosen to save himself rather than risk his life to save others. And the fact that the Coens break from a single point of view in this one scene makes it all the more noticeable.

As always, the Coen brothers pen the Oscar-nominated screenplay to this adaptation of Portis' *True Grit*. Unlike the 1969 version (which was mostly a vehicle for fading star, John Wayne) this one follows the subject matter of the novel very closely. It is a faithful adaptation of the book that preserves its dark edginess, which is also characteristic of the films of the Coen brothers, while also maintaining the highbrow diction and narration. While most of the memorable dialogue is given to Wayne in the earlier adaptation, the Coens restore Mattie's status as protagonist, and therefore she is given many more things to say in the film than Darby was.

Since Wayne was an icon of Western films back in the late 1960s, and Bridges is known mostly for his work as an offbeat character actor, it makes sense that the Coens would not attempt to put too much emphasis on Cogburn's speech in the film. In fact, most of the things he says are so difficult to understand that he may as well have said nothing at all. The spirited and

independent Mattie, however, is far easier to understand and to empathize with (as in the novel), so she is given preeminence in dialogue-heavy scenes. She speaks wittily and confidently in the presence of her elders, refusing to balk at the provocation of any man, be it LaBoeuf, the unkind custodian, or even Cogburn himself. This seeming emphasis on female independence may make *True Grit* an easy target for pigeonholing it as feminist in its ideological leanings.

### **"The heck do ya mean?": The Coens' Inscrutable Ideology**

Margaret M. Toscano offers a brief overview of the differing opinions in regards to the Coens' politics, or lack thereof:

A small number of film critics and historians, lead by James Mottram and Erica Rowell, both who have performed extensive research of the Coens' work, argue that there are indeed social meanings in the Coens' films. On the other hand, while praising the brothers for their quirky and innovative style, mainstream media critics agreed that, while there might be social and class based critiques emerging from the Coens' work in *O Brother*, previous films lacked any noticeable social engagement.<sup>12</sup>

I agree with the "mainstream media critics": the films of the Coen brothers are apolitical. They are generally concerned with the follies of humans and how they are often their own worst enemies. Their allegiance to either criminals or law enforcement tends to change from movie to movie; in this case, Marge, as a policewoman, is depicted in an overwhelmingly positive manner. But this is less of a function of her occupation and more of her individual character. In other films, criminals are the protagonists and heroes, as in the case of *O Brother*, *Where Art Thou?* and *Miller's Crossing*.

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret M. Toscano. "Homer Meets the Coen Brothers: Memory as Artistic Pastiche in *O Brother*, *Where Art Thou?*." *Film & History* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 49-62.

As a result, it is difficult to classify *Fargo* as being either ideologically conservative or liberal. Both the evil and innocent are punished in the end—in spite of his gruff character and rudeness to Jerry, Wade does not deserve to be killed. Similarly, as far as we know, Jean is faithful and dutiful both as a mother and wife, and therefore, undeserving of her treatment. Though good does eventually triumph in the end, it is difficult to tell how great of a victory it is, considering the carnage that has led to this denouement.

The few ideological observations that can be made here are the emphasis on the power of not only the individual, but also a woman. Marge quickly figures out the exact movements and circumstances of the initial triple murder all on her own while her partner ineffectually watches from afar. She also is able to apprehend Gaear without backup, and does so fearlessly. And though there are few women in the movie other than her—Jean and the two prostitutes—she is the only competent one. When Jean is kidnapped, she sabotages her own attempts to escape, and the criminals do not have to do anything other than intimidate her. Likewise, the prostitutes have little information to offer Marge, other than that Carl is "kinda funny lookin'." Ultimately, Marge alone makes clear-headed decisions, and this is how she is able to be successful in the end.

As with other films by the Coen brothers, *No Country for Old Men* is bereft of political commentary. The usual concern of the directors is death, and how to confront it. In their comedies, they often treat death as a mere occurrence, as just another aspect of the plot. But in this film, death reigns supreme in the form of Chigurh, and is one of the main subjects of the story. The film's tone is utterly deadpan and unsentimental; we witness much violence but do not receive any emotional payoff for it. As Brian J. Snee points out, "we are not made to care about [the Coens'] characters. Instead, we are invited to watch them with a detached interest, curious

but not concerned or connected."<sup>13</sup>

When the Coens do depict the death of a major character, it is implied rather than shown, as in tragic theater. We are not allowed the catharsis of seeing the villain, the major death-dealer, suffer for his actions, and instead we watch as he gets away with his crimes. The conclusion to which Bell—and, by extension, the Coens—comes is that evil is inescapable, inevitable, and indestructible; the best way to cope with it is to avoid it at all costs. Hence, Bell's retirement and forfeiting of the Chigurh case. To call this film pessimistic is a major understatement.

Like *Fargo*, the main character of *True Grit* is a woman, alone in a world dominated by men. But also like this previous movie of the Coens, there is no actual indication that the directors intended for their movie to be interpreted in terms of feminism. Both Marge and Mattie have a clear-eyed insight into the motivations and mental inner-workings of the men they seek that is unrelated to "female intuition," or anything like that. Neither character utilize sex or their looks to help further their goals—Marge is pursued by a man who has nothing to do with her case, and Mattie is insulted by LaBoeuf for being "unattractive." The genders of these characters merely serve to distinguish them from the rest of the people who populate the film; the only other woman in *Fargo* is Jean Lundegaard, and no other female character is of any importance in *True Grit*.

Perhaps the only ideological claim that can be made about this film—or any of the films of the Coen brothers—is that there is a fatalistic tone to everything. In spite of the danger and unpredictable nature of the characters' journey, all that ultimately transpires is predicted. Mattie succeeds in avenging her father, LaBoeuf completes his mission, and Cogburn assists Mattie as he promised he would. Most of the climactic battle scenes tend to take place in extreme long

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<sup>13</sup> Brian J. Snee. "Soft-Boiled Cinema: Joel and Ethan Coens' Neo-Classical Neo-Noirs." *Literature Film Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (July 2009): 212-223.

shot, giving a sense of objectivity and Godlike perspective to them. The characters' personalities also tend to dictate their fates: Chaney is stupid and makes rash decisions, so his attempts to kill Mattie lead to his death. Ned, in spite of his relative reasonableness, cannot resist the impulse to insult Cogburn, who previously wounded him, and he subsequently dies. Overall, the Coens' approach to the subject matter is just as emotionless and matter-of-fact as Mattie's attitude toward her quest: "People do not give it credence that a young girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood. But it did happen."

### **From Critical Acclaim to Mainstream Success**

*Fargo* was critically acclaimed when it was released, and for good reason: it is darkly funny, well acted, and masterfully paced. Its surfeit of dialogue feels appropriate, and never excessive. Even the initially silly-sounding accents eventually feel natural and authentic. Above all, it feels intensely personal and idiosyncratic; no other directors but the Coen brothers could have crafted the story in the same way. The Coens exercised thorough control over the entire production, and the result is that it is tightly constructed and meticulously detailed.

Although the Coens had been working for twelve years before the debut of *Fargo*, this was the first of their films to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture. It also received nominations in five other categories as well, winning for Best Actress in a Leading Role and Best Original Screenplay. So to speak, it put the Coens on the map, and they were subsequently given larger funds with which to work; their subsequent film, *The Big Lebowski*, had over twice the size of *Fargo*'s \$7 million budget. The Coens earned this increased freedom: *Fargo* grossed over \$60 million at the box office.

In an enthusiastic review, film critic Roger Ebert writes, "To watch [*Fargo*] is to experience steadily mounting delight, as you realize the filmmakers have taken enormous risks,

gotten away with them and made a movie that is completely original" (Citation). Ebert's very high opinion of the film is almost universally shared, and the film cemented its reputation by being inducted into the National Film Registry in 2006—the soonest it could have possibly done so. The Coens are frequently cited as among the greatest living directors; *Fargo* is often cited as their *magnum opus*.

There are two main theories about film: realism and formalism. Most films can be classified into either category. Realist movies are just what they sound like: realistic. Filmmaking techniques and flourish tend to take a backseat to portraying a true-to-life portrait of whatever story the film is concerned with. Formalist, however, are a bit more difficult to define. Giannetti claims that formalism is a "style of filmmaking in which aesthetic forms take precedence over subject matter as content."<sup>14</sup> In terms of *No Country for Old Men*, however, I believe this part of the definition is especially pertinent: "Emphasis is on the essential, symbolic characteristics of objects and people, not necessarily on their superficial appearance."<sup>15</sup> Although the story of the film is realistic, the character of Chigurh is symbolic: he is the reincarnation of death. Most films do not fit readily into a single category, but rather straddle the two. *No Country for Old Men* exemplifies this principle.

Although there are certainly some shots in the film that are darkly beautiful, like the one I analyzed earlier, the overall aesthetic is a mix of realism and formalism. Both of the Coen brothers are notorious perfectionists, and spend much time putting shots together in meticulous fashion. In this sense, they are formalists, because the composition of a shot is important to them. A realist filmmaker would be more concerned with capturing a moment rather than creating one. But in terms of the subject matter, the Coens are certainly realists. As I mentioned before, their

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<sup>14</sup> Giannetti, 524.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

treatment of death is unsentimental in the extreme, as in the case of real life; when a person dies in reality, there is no dramatic music or close-up to depict it. In addition, everything that happens in the story is plausible. Even Chigurh, who is a mostly symbolic character, is quite mortal: he suffers from gunshot wounds, broken limbs, and nearly dies in several scenes.

Another theory of film is that of the auteur, formulated by critic and director François Truffaut, in which it is claimed that the director is the foremost artistic influence on a film. The Coen brothers certainly fit into this theory, as their work tends to be suffused with their trademarks, despite the variety of subject matter they have worked on. As always, the tone of their film is deadpan, and ironic humor and black comedy sneak into the film when they are least expected. For example, immediately after a scene in which Chigurh violently murders a man, Carla Jean and her mother ride in a taxi together. The old woman is comically annoyed at being uprooted, and she has an outrageous accent that makes her complaints sound all the sillier, despite that one of them is that she has "got the cancer."<sup>16</sup> Margaret McCarthy argues that the "Coen brothers use noir's gravitas to offset their own irreverent humor."<sup>17</sup> Violence and folksy humor are the precise combination for which the Coens are famous, and *No Country for Old Men* is no exception.

Perhaps the most notable ways the Coen fulfill the auteur theory is through their use of many of the same crewmembers from previous films. Deakins and Burwell once again return for cinematography and music, respectively. More behind the scenes are casting director Ellen Chenoweth, production designer Jess Gonchor, set decorator Nancy Haigh, and costume designer Mary Zophres. However, the only returning actor to work with them is Stephen Root, who plays

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<sup>16</sup> Joel and Ethan Coen, *No Country for Old Men*.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret McCarthy. "They were Threatening Castration, Man: Germans in *The Big Lebowski*." *Journal Of Popular Culture* 43, no. 5 (October 2010): 1048-1064.

a very small part in which Chigurh obliterates him. Like a cinematic repertory, the Coens work often with the same people, which helps to achieve a consistency in their work.

Critical response to *No Country for Old Men* was overwhelmingly positive, and it went on to win four Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay. Roger Ebert, an avid fan of the Coens, writes that it is "as good a film [they] have ever made, and they made *Fargo*."<sup>18</sup> Much critical acclaim went to Bardem for his performance, as he was hailed as being one of the best movie villains in recent years. Likewise, Josh Brolin as Moss received critical attention, as it had been a very long time since he had acted in anything significant (he went on to portray former President George W. Bush in *W.* and to garner an Oscar nomination for *Milk*).

Given their distinct style, the Coens do have their detractors, and they tended to dislike this film as well. New Yorker film critic Anthony Lane claims the film "strays beyond cool to the verge of the passionless" and that the Coens are merely "challenging [their viewers] to match their sang-froid."<sup>19</sup> Lane's criticism certainly has its grounds—you could never accuse them of being emotional. But he, like other detractors of the movie, seek emotional resonance in film, which the Coens never provide. *No Country for Old Men* is widely regarded as a modern masterpiece, with emphasis on "modern"; whereas many of the classics of old were unabashedly sentimental (i.e. the oeuvre of Frank Capra), the Coens and their peers show that a great film does not need to wear its heart on its sleeve.

As I mention several times before, *True Grit* was nominated for ten Academy Awards, ultimately winning none of them. There are several reasons, most of which could apply to any of the other losing films of the year as well. The Coens, who were collectively nominated for Best

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<sup>18</sup> Roger Ebert. "No Country for Old Men." *Chicago Sun-Times*. November 8, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Lane. "Hunting Grounds." *The New Yorker*. November 12, 2007.



Director, did not win perhaps because they did so three years previous for *No Country for Old Men*. Likewise, that film also won Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Picture, for which their latest work was also nominated.

In terms of the acting categories, Bridges and Steinfeld were each given recognition for their work without winning. The 61-year-old Bridges had won the previous year for his role in *Crazy Heart*, and only twice in Academy history has a man won Best Actor in consecutive years (Spencer Tracy and Tom Hanks, coincidentally, at the same ages of 37 and 38). The 13-year-old Steinfeld was nominated for her first-ever film appearance, and although it is not uncommon to win for such an achievement, actresses as young as she do not often receive awards (only Anna Paquin and Tatum O'Neal have done so, at 13 and 10, each for their first time onscreen).

Critically, *True Grit* received almost universal acclaim, scoring a 96% positive rating on the reviews-aggregating website, Rotten Tomatoes. Many writers express surprise that the usually ironic and genre-mixing Coen brothers would deign to make such a purely Western film, but then temper their statements by mentioning how well made and acted it is. Robert C. Sickles claims that all the other films by the Coens "can be neatly divided into two genres: romantic comedies or crime films," with *Fargo* and *No Country for Old Men* falling into the latter category.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps part of *True Grit's* critical acclaim is that, for the very first time, the Coens demonstrated their ability to work in a genre successfully that is utterly unfamiliar to them.

In characteristic contrast, the acerbic Rex Reed from *The New York Observer* calls Bridges' performance "appalling" and the Coens "pretentious filmmakers," slamming the film for being "violent, boring, and [an] unnecessary re-shoeing of an old mare that ain't what she used to

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<sup>20</sup> Robert C Sickels. "We're in a tight spot!": The Coen Brothers' Screwed Romantic Comedies." *Journal Of Popular Film & Television* 36, no. 3 (Fall2008 2008): 114-122.

be."<sup>21</sup> More gently, the *Boston Globe's* Wesley Morris decries the directors for "playing it straight" when they are better off at a "sharp angle."<sup>22</sup> Whereas Reed is no fan of the Coens in any form, Morris seems to prefer their usual style, and this departure from it displeases him.

In terms of box office performance, *True Grit* became the Coens' highest grossing film of all time shortly after its release, surpassing *No Country for Old Men*. Its budget was an unsurprisingly slim \$38 million, and ultimately it made \$250 million in worldwide revenue.<sup>23</sup> Part of the reason for this is the film's wider appeal, given its straight-up approach to the Western genre. It also featured the recently awarded Bridges in a lead role, as well as a PG-13 rating, one of the few in the Coens' repertoire. Projections for the film's financial performance were low given the Coens' usual niche appeal, but their first foray into mainstream territory provided not only critical appreciation, but also that of the average moviegoer. While the Coens have never been restrained in their subject matter (thanks to their independent finances), the success of this film likely will enable them to choose whatever project they feel without any limits.

## Conclusion

The variety of the Coens' cinematic output is perhaps their greatest legacy. They have drawn upon countless influences, including the work of such diverse directors as Martin Scorsese, John Ford, John Huston, and Preston Sturges, to create films that are startling in the originality and the frankness of their execution. Their trademark deadpan humor and violence melds surprisingly well with the established genres of film noir, the screwball comedy, and the farce to create a body of work for which it is difficult to find a parallel in the realm of American cinema.

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<sup>21</sup> Rex Reed. "Year-End Roundup: What to See (and Skip) Before the Ball Drops." *New York Observer*. December 15, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley Morris. "True Grit." *Boston Globe* December 22, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Bob Tourtellotte. "True Grit wrangles top spot at box offices." *Reuters*. January 9, 2011.

Another distinction of the Coens is that they are among the few established duos in American filmmaking that has received the caliber of critical renown that they have. Their predecessors are Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, who directed *West Side Story*, as well as Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, the men who envisioned *The Red Shoes* and *Black Narcissus*. Most other current filmmaking duos are looked down upon by critics, such as the action directors Lana and Andy Wachowski, who, after making the original *Matrix*, have lost the reputation that their science-fiction phenomenon initially granted them. Likewise, the Farrelly brothers, famous for gross-out comedies like *Dumb and Dumber* and *There's Something About Mary* have slipped into critical disdain. In contrast, the Coens have only gained more popularity as their careers have matured, coming from initial obscurity with their independent hits to worldwide acclaim and recognition for their most recent films.

The Coens are also responsible for launching the careers of several actors. Under their direction, two actors have won Academy Awards for their performances—Frances McDormand and Javier Bardem—leading to their success in later work. (McDormand is also the wife of Joel Coen, and was in her first performance in their first film, *Blood Simple*.) George Clooney, a frequent collaborator with the Coens, also demonstrated his comedic abilities in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which won him a Golden Globe and enabled him to expand the breadth of his work, which was initially restricted to dramatic roles due to his role on *E.R.* In addition, Jeff Bridges' leading role in the Coen brothers' comedy *The Big Lebowski* is arguably his most recognizable performance to date.

At 57 and 54 years of age, respectively, Joel and Ethan Coen have many years of filmmaking ahead of them, and it seems that neither of these two visionaries have any intentions of slowing down their output. Their currently upcoming projects are two films co-written by

them, *Gambit*, directed by Michael Hoffman, and *Suburbicon*, which Clooney will be directing. But even if they ended their careers right now, their impact on American filmmaking has been cemented by their existing artistic triumphs.

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