

Whither the Coen Brothers?

O Brother, Where Art Thou?, directed by Joel Coen, written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen

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Joel and Ethan Coen have collaborated on eight films since 1984, the former writing and the latter directing. By no stretch of the imagination could any of the films be considered entirely or even largely successful. Nearly every work has been marred by bursts of mean-spiritedness and cynicism, an inappropriate jokiness, that tend to undercut and detract from the more truthful or compelling moments. Yet virtually every one of the films has had a feature or the hint of a feature that suggested that the Coens might be on to something, or might at least be capable of being on to something.

Raising Arizona (1987), their second feature—following the overheated gothic *film noir*, *Blood Simple* (1984)—was often genuinely funny and *Miller's Crossing* (1990) an interesting reworking of Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*. *Barton Fink* (1991), with its cartoon leftist writer in Hollywood during the 1930s, coming into contact with the “real America,” in the form of a psychopathic salesman, represented a low point. *Fargo* (1996), despite its caricatures and its bloody subject matter, had a certain humanity to it, principally due to the performance of Frances McDormand.

The Coens' latest film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, is not a great leap forward, but still ... one can see something, far away on the horizon perhaps, that might represent an insight or an attempt to gain one.

The film is threaded with conceits. The title to begin with, a reference to Preston Sturges' remarkable *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), in which a director of Hollywood comedies suddenly decides to make a “serious” film with the proposed title of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Then there is the straight-faced assertion in the credits that the film is “based upon” Homer's *The Odyssey*. (*Sullivan's Travels* was itself a reference to another classic, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift.) Of course, that the film is itself the creation of two brothers gives the title another twist. Our leg is being pulled in various directions at once.

In a quasi-mythical Mississippi of the 1930s, Ulysses

Everett McGill (George Clooney) escapes from a prison farm with two companions, Pete (John Turturro) and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson). Ulysses' tortuous effort to make his way home to his wife Penny (Holly Hunter) and his batch of daughters—a journey he dupes his two fellow escapees into undertaking by promises of a hidden fortune—forms the substance of the film. Along the way the three encounter a modern Cyclops (a vicious one-eyed Bible salesman), a trio of Sirens (seductresses washing clothes—and singing of course—by a stream) and a corrupt politician whose given name is Menelaus (nicknamed Pappy), in addition to a blues man who claims to have sold his soul to the devil (*à la* blues legend Robert Johnson), the manic depressive gangster Baby Face Nelson, a terrifying lawman hot in pursuit and a gathering of Ku Klux Klansmen. They also, unbeknownst to themselves, become hit recording artists, a fact that helps save their bacon in the long run.

Our heroes undergo setbacks and minor triumphs, disasters and near-disasters, even scrapes with death—one thing after another. Through it all they manage, more or less, to sustain their essential naiveté, goofiness and optimism. Everything is larger than life and not intended to be particularly convincing. Clooney's character, a self-styled “pater familias” and, in his own mind, the only one of the three capable of “abstract thought,” sticks in the memory as a pretty likable and attractive character.

I think the most pleasant surprise, however, is the relative absence of malice in the film. I feared the worst, as the denouement approached and all the possibilities of the townsfolk turning into some monstrous mob of “rednecks” loomed. It doesn't work out that way. Indeed the Coens go out of their way to provide a rather softhearted (and somewhat contrived and simplistic) ending, with the Klan chief ridden out of town on a rail. Popular culture saves the day! In it, somehow, America proves to be at its best.

Any film that treats the Depression, chain-gangs, farm foreclosures, the Klan, lynchings, corrupt politicians,

hypocritical Bible salesmen, etc., etc., is worth looking into. If only in the vaguest sense, there must be a sensibility in operation that has at least done preliminary work.

Equally, any film that pays tribute to such extraordinary music must also bear examination. The Coens, with famed producer T Bone Burnett in charge, have included gospel, country and bluegrass tunes, some of them in original versions, some newly recorded. Among those asked to participate in the making of the soundtrack included Ralph Stanley, Gillian Welch, John Hartford, Alison Krauss, Emmylou Harris, the Fairfield Four and Norman Blake.

Something is up here. The Coens are trying to figure out, it would seem, what makes America tick, why, at almost the same instant, it can be so backward and so sublime, so reactionary and so democratic, so mad and so sane.

Unfortunately, they haven't gotten terribly far with their deliberations. As soon as one expresses support for the appealing elements in the films, all its weaknesses come leaping out at one. There is still far too much contempt expressed for the filmmakers' own creations—Turturro's moronic Pete is insufferable for most of the film, and Nelson's Delmar is not all that much better. The Coens pick and choose, indicating their own dramatic unclarity as well as their susceptibility to the pressure of liberal public opinion. Only Southern whites are permitted to be idiotic, the blacks are more or less saintly or iconic. And there is no internal coherence to the caricaturing. Ulysses, Pete and Delmar ham it up outrageously when they record and later perform their version of "Man of Constant Sorrow." Other groups, singing country or gospel, are treated respectfully. Since characterization has no logic, much of the more extreme behavior loses its edge; it simply seems arbitrary, quirky.

The truth is, I suspect, that the director and writer themselves don't know what to make of an area that has produced so much beauty and so much horror. By juxtaposing the two qualities, by playing and juggling with them, they hope something will come out of it. Occasionally it does, but not often and not consistently enough. To the love of the music, to a feeling for the region's crazy quilt character, to intuition about the social and emotional possibilities that lie beneath the surface, needs to be added, I think, a deeper understanding of all the historical experiences, especially since the Civil War, that produced the explosive and complex set of social contradictions making up the South.

Homer's Odysseus (Ulysses in Latin) was up against the fate ordained for him by the gods on Mount Olympus. What's the thread linking the obstacles in Ulysses Everett McGill's path? There really isn't one, except insofar as they each represent one of the Coens' gags. The various

confrontations form a series of disconnected set pieces. Because of that they lose strength, even become tedious, repetitive. At times the obstacles take on a social dimension: the fiendish lawman/pursuer, the Bible salesman, the Klansmen. At other times, they have no particular content. The Sirens' sequence, although pretty, seems entirely gratuitous. One feels the brothers simply filling up space and killing time.

The real difficulty, I suspect, and it's bound up with the current state of artistic affairs, is that the Coens still feel the need to keep at a distance a coherent social critique. That would be unfashionable. After all, one serious look at the South in the 1930s, under conditions where such an ideological prejudice was not at work, would surely convince anyone as bright as these filmmakers that the central problem was the existing social order in all its dimensions: banks, sheriffs, racists, politicians and so forth. It certainly would have been possible to have retained the chaos and yet have infused it with more of an organized sense of the world and more of a protest. The narrative—which one is continually hoping will cohere and fully come to life, and never does—would have been something more than merely *potentially* delightful. As it is, the film is made up of fragments, some convincing, but too many that are irritating.

In praising the film, critic A.O. Scott in the *New York Times* points out the presence in early twentieth century American folk music of "the longing for another world." The reviewer notes intriguingly that "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," the song that is heard over the threesome's initial escape from the prison farm, "expresses a weary, heartfelt longing for a life free of toil and injustice. 'O Brother, Where Art Thou?' similarly offers a fairy-tale view of an America in which the real brutalities of poverty and racism are magically dissolved by the power of song."

This may in part be wishful thinking. It doesn't seem to me the film has that consistently visionary quality, it too often loses track of itself, gets derailed, finds itself at dead ends, and even when it does aspire to that quality, too often *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* falls back on somewhat facile means of resolving the characters' dilemmas. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to see what the director and writer might produce if they decided once and for all not to take the line of least resistance.



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