

The banality of evil: No Country for Old Men

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The latest effort by the Coen brothers is a vacuous and disappointing film. The work of these filmmakers has up to this point been uneven, featuring a widely, and rightly recognized cinematic talent paired to a definite tendency toward detachment and cynicism. Out of this contradiction has come a number of flawed, and in some cases interesting works. *No Country For Old Men*, however, is irredeemable, marking a regrettable downturn in the career of the filmmakers.

The film is an adaptation of a 2005 novel by Cormac McCarthy. The story follows the travails of a bag full of hundred-dollar bills, which throughout the film displays as much depth and genuine feeling as most of the humans who seek to claim it by any means necessary. Alternatively, one could say that the story follows Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), an implacable and more or less unstoppable villain, whose weapon of choice is as peculiar as his haircut. In the former case, the film summons up unpleasant memories of *Pulp Fiction*, while in the latter one is reminded of the annoyingly inexorable *Terminator*. In any case, this is not good company.

The stage is set by the very first scene. The camera pans slowly across a desert landscape, while a voiceover provided by the local sheriff (Tommy Lee Jones) explains how a teenage boy raped and killed a 14-year old girl, not out of passion, but as the culmination of a long period of planning. He always knew he would kill, and would do it again, given the opportunity. The electric chair, however, prevented him from doing so. The tone of the sheriff's voice is of consternation and dismay, not with this particular killer, but with the human race.

This hardly subtle beginning is thereafter consistently reinforced by the unforgiving Texan landscape and by several other narrations on the part of various characters telling stories of crime and human depravity. Meanwhile, a whirlwind of crime and human depravity swirls around the bag full of cash, and is represented in vivid detail.

The film displays in concentrated form many of the Coen brothers' recurring conceits and weaknesses. One is not surprised to find the familiar presence of a handful of

intelligent and articulate characters, engaging local yahoos, and moronic subordinates with airs of paternal sufficiency.

We recall for instance George Clooney's Ulysses and his "capacity for abstract thought" dealing with Pete and Delmar in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* In that case, the overall tone of the film made some of those exchanges innocent and charming. In the new film, the bleakness and nastiness of the proceedings colors similar offerings in a very different way. The audience often laughs in response to this. They ought to ask themselves who is being mocked here.

We find, most importantly, a pervasive cynicism and a near complete unwillingness to represent and deal with a genuine human feeling. It should be noted that virtually the only selfless act in the film, carrying a bottle of water to a dying man, is severely punished.

Commentary on animals plays a definite function along the same lines. Twice in the film people come upon the scene of a bloody massacre and their first reaction is to remark on the fact that a dog has been shot. Later, a character relates a story about the torture of elderly people in their homes. The criminals perpetrated this brutality in order to pass time while collecting the victims' social security checks. Neighbors were finally alerted to this when one of the victims ran out of the house wearing a dog collar. The fact that the criminals had been digging graves in the backyard and burying human corpses, remarks the sheriff in dismay, did not solicit the neighbors' attention. The dog collar did.

This is all meant to elicit a familiar trope: people are heartless, but they love their pets. The latter observation is produced exactly as evidence to reinforce the former.

Some of the violence in the film isn't just truculent, but trite as well. Have we not already seen countless times a stoic, tough character perform surgery on his own limbs armed only with first aid essentials? The extreme close-up employed here suggests a by now futile effort to shock and remain on the cutting edge of gory visuals. But in the age of the many *CSI* television shows this sort of operation has diminishing returns, and by now matters would hardly change were we to witness it at the molecular level.

Critics have been virtually unanimous in praising this film.

Technique, proficiency, and boldness are routinely cited as its merits. The same could of course be said of Jack the Ripper. The brutality of actual life, in America and beyond, is stylized and drained of its human qualities. The nobility of suffering and of the hope for redemption—at bottom, these are profoundly human, not theological constructs—are clinically excised. Some just enjoy the ride for what it is. Others inform us that this is a useful and proper artistic approach: reproducing, and in fact enhancing actual brutality as to induce a sense of dislocation and discomfort in the viewer. But this final product is not so much alienating—a jarring artistic experience that can be genuine and constructive—as it is alien.

The notable exception to the chorus of praise is Andrew Sarris, writing for the *New York Observer*. Sarris chastises *No Country for Old Men* for its unrepentant nihilism, manifested in the fact that hardly anyone escapes unharmed and evil triumphs (more or less) in the end.

Leaving aside the philosophical imprecision—nihilism denies morality altogether—Sarris is certainly correct that the problem of evil looms large here. His instincts and willingness to go against the current in reviewing this film are, moreover, commendable. But Sarris’ criticism perhaps misses the point. This film could not be rescued by a touch of humanity or by defusing the relentlessly evil qualities of the villain. In fact, the end of the film seems to introduce a small correction along these lines, but by this time it is too late, as the last twist is arbitrary and leaves the overall impression unchanged.

The problem, rather, is that while evil is very much the subject of *No Country for Old Men*, it remains in this film a banal construct.

Chigurh is the embodiment of evil. The filmmakers make this abundantly clear with a number of visual signals, including the figure of a ram prominently displayed in one of the cars he is driving. Chigurh seems offended by life itself, and shoots at birds while driving by for no reason other than snuffing it out of this world. Most directly, we know this from the remarks made by terrified characters commenting on the events.

One of them complains that it is money that corrupts and depraves, leading to the sort of carnage he has witnessed. The sheriff nods in agreement, but he knows, and the audience with him, that it’s not that. Evil is something more primal—an existential rot lodged at the heart of the human condition, and Chigurh represents it. Another character states explicitly that money is not what motivates Chigurh: “You might say he has principles.”

Evil exists, therefore, and here and there in the film one could even detect familiar political overtones. Considering Chigurh’s ruthlessness and efficiency, an exasperated

character asks, “Who would do such a thing? How do you defend against it?” This is an all-too-familiar refrain in the post-9/11 period of paranoia and suicidal terrorism. Other moments seem to point in the opposite direction, politically, as in the case of a reflection by another character lamenting that “this country is hard on people ... Got the devil in it yet folks never seem to hold it to account.”

But these are accidental diversions, since the Coen brothers seem to insist instead on evil as transcendental, detached from the concreteness of human life, from any specific historical conjuncture or political climate. Chigurh’s principles, it turns out, “transcend money or drugs, or anything like that.”

Fargo is a limited and to this day wildly overrated film, with its own share of cynicism. But “evil” in that film flowed from the stumbling of more or less recognizably human characters into poor decisions, miscommunications, petty ambitions and more. In *No Country for Old Men*, evil becomes instead a theological construct, and a cartoonish one at that. It is thus disconnected from human life and made banal.

It may be possible to construct a valuable film based on theological evil. Charles Laughton’s *Night of the Hunter*, for example, demonstrates this. But *No Country for Old Men* cannot be mentioned in the same sentence, showing no respect for the audience and overriding misanthropy.

The Coen brothers are talented artists and are now relatively free to choose their own subjects and approach. Like others, in a time of pessimism and reaction in intellectual circles, they are not simply obeying orders from their superiors. They contribute actively, in their own way (and in this case, judging from the reaction of the audience in the theater, quite powerfully), to a definite climate of cynicism, and this needs to be pointed out.

Commenting on their earlier work *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, we noted: “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.” Judging by *No Country for Old Men*, this attempt has come to a halt. We hope it will resume soon.



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