# *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*: Only a fool "expects better" from humanity

**David Walsh**
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*The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* is a new film written, directed and produced by Joel and Ethan Coen.

The brothers, born in 1954 and 1957, respectively, in a Minneapolis suburb, are best known for *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Fargo* (1996), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), *Burn After Reading* (2008), *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) and *Hail, Caesar!* (2016).

The Coens' latest film is made up of six stories set in a mythical "Old West." The thread connecting the various episodes is a generally nasty attitude toward humanity, and American humanity in particular.

*Buster Scruggs* is prominently peopled by individuals who take a largely unthinking, almost naïve and childlike delight in violent mayhem. Killing, or acquiescence in the face of killing, is second nature even to most of the more polished characters, who tend to veil the various brutalities with ornate declamations. A healthy portion of the other figures are simply animalistic thugs. Meanwhile, a facetious, heavy-handed irony prevails.

Whether or not this is the filmmakers' misguided, oblique response to the election of Donald Trump is unclear—and may be unclear to the Coens themselves.

In the opening sequence, with the same title as the film, a distastefully cheerful cowboy, Buster Scruggs (Tim Blake Nelson), all dressed in white, sings and shoots his way through various parts of the West. Early on, the Coens seem to be preemptively addressing their own critics when they have Scruggs complain directly to the camera about his nickname, "The Misanthrope," which appears on a wanted poster:

"I got other handles, nicknames, appellations, and cognomens, but this one here I don't consider to be even halfway earned. 'Misanthrope'? I don't hate my fellow man, even when he's tiresome and surly and tries to cheat at poker. I figure that's just human material, and him that finds in it cause for anger and dismay is just a fool for expecting better." In other words, those who have a low opinion of humanity are simply facing facts.

In the course of a relatively brief episode, Scruggs draws his gun and kills a group of outlaws in a bar, later dispatches a menacing individual in a saloon by making the latter fire his gun into his own face three times, shoots off the fingers of another combatant before finishing him off and finally succumbs in a gunfight in the main street to a young stranger dressed in black. "Can't be top dog forever," observes Scruggs, prior to ascending to heaven.

In "Near Algodones," James Franco plays a cowboy and would-be bank robber who initially escapes a hanging when Comanche warriors slaughter a lawman and his posse. The Franco character then teams up with a drover herding cattle. Unfortunately, the livestock turn out to be stolen and the cowboy is again sentenced to be hanged, this time for something he didn't do. On the gallows, he spies a young woman in the crowd. "There's a pretty girl," he suggests unconcernedly, then the trapdoor opens and he drops.

The final moments of this episode faintly bring to mind (and are perhaps meant to) the silent French film, *La Rivière du hibou* (1962, Robert Enrico), which was broadcast as part of the American science fiction television series, *The Twilight Zone*, in 1964. The haunting 27-minute film is based on the famed 1891 short story by American writer Ambrose Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." In the film and story, during the Civil War (Bierce fought in that conflict), a Confederate saboteur is set to be hung from a bridge by Union forces. He miraculously escapes and makes his way home through an endless forest. Just as he reaches the outstretched arms of his wife, the man's head snaps back and he falls to his death at the end of a rope … from the bridge that he never left except in his imagination. The Bierce-Enrico work is done with artistry and insight, while "Near Algodones" is largely an extended and pointless gimmick.

The most cynical and disagreeable episode in the Coen brothers' film, "Meal Ticket," comes next. An impresario (Liam Neeson) accompanies and manages Harrison (Harry Melling), the "Artist," an armless and legless performer on a tour of small towns on the American frontier. The Neeson character quietly informs spectators, "Found him in the streets of London, England … Motherless and penniless."

Harrison recites eloquently from some of the most meaningful pieces in the English language: "Ozymandias," the 1818 poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, the Book of Genesis in the King James version of the Bible, sonnets 29 and 30 by William Shakespeare, Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address and Prospero's farewell to magic ("Our revels now are ended …") in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

At first, substantial crowds gather. However, the pair visit increasingly remote and desolate towns. The audiences dwindle to almost nothing. One evening, the impresario notices a rival performance that is significantly outdrawing his own: a chicken who can peck out the answers to arithmetical problems posed by

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audience members. His owner explains: “He’s self-taught, ladies and gentlemen. He has no formal education. One at a time, ladies and gentlemen. Test that chicken's brain.”

The impresario promptly purchases the creature. On the next leg of his journey by wagon with Harrison, the Neeson character conspicuously practices tossing a large stone from a high bridge. Later, we see the impresario, with the chicken behind him, driving the wagon alone. A title reads, “The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.” The message hardly needs to be explained to the reader. One should bank on the fact that Americans, given the choice, will always choose one freak show or another.

In “All Gold Canyon,” based on a story by Jack London, a grizzled prospector (Tom Waits) hunts for precious metal in an idyllic, virginal valley, where previously only the wildlife held sway. When, after considerable labor, he finds a large vein of gold that he names “Mr. Pocket,” a thief cold-bloodedly shoots him in the back. The prospector feigns unconsciousness, then takes his revenge on his attacker.

In “The Girl Who Got Rattled,” one of the longest sequences, a young woman, Alice Longabaugh (Zoe Kazan), and her brother Gilbert (Jefferson Mays), an inept businessman, join a wagon train heading west to Oregon. En route, Gilbert dies of cholera. Alice’s hired hand is giving her difficulties. One of the wagon train’s guides, Billy Knapp (Bill Heck) proposes marriage. Unhappily, Alice becomes isolated from the group one day and finds herself, along with the other leader of the wagon train, Mr. Arthur (Grainger Hines), in the middle of a fight with a group of Indians. When things look bad, Alice takes a desperate step.

The final episode, “Mortal Remains,” takes place in a stagecoach traveling to Fort Morgan (Colorado). The five occupants—two bounty hunters, a Frenchman, a trapper and a devout Christian lady—pass the time by debating human nature, religion and love. The trapper (Chelcie Ross) argues that “people are like ferrets, or a beaver. All pretty much alike,” while Mrs. Betjeman (Tyne Daly), married to a retired lecturer “on moral and spiritual hygiene,” retorts that the human race falls into two categories, “utterly distinct. … Upright and sinning.”

The bounty hunters (Jonjo O’Neill and Brendan Gleeson), who track down and kill wanted men for a price, are a sinister, bloodthirsty pair. With relish, the one (O’Neill) explains that while he distracts a victim with “a little story, a little conversation,” his partner “does the thumping.” In any case, by the end of the episode, it appears that all the stagecoach passengers are making the “passage” to “the other side,” whether they are prepared for it or not.

The Coen brothers have talent and know how to make things generally interesting. Franco, Waits, Rubinek and some of the others manage to maintain their dignity in the overall unpleasantness.

On the whole, however, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* leaves a sour taste in one’s mouth.

There are recognizably human moments here, for example, in the courting scene between Billy Knapp and Alice Longabaugh, but they are all too few and far between.

In so far as general themes are concerned, the Coens’ new film suggests that instability, precariousness and unpredictability, if not sheer accident, govern human affairs. When Alice observes that all of her brother’s beliefs, including political ones, “were quite fixed,” Knapp replies solemnly, “Uncertainty … That is appropriate for matters of this world. Only regarding the next are we vouchsafed certainty. … Down the ages, from our remote past, what certainties survive? And yet we hurry to fashion new ones.” Again, the tone is characteristically mocking, but one feels the filmmakers’ intellectual and moral presence.

Moreover, people are mysteries to each other. The stagecoach passenger René (Saul Rubinek) asserts, “I cannot know you, not to this degree. We must each play our own hand. … You misunderstand, *mon vieux*. We can know each other, *oui*, to a certain level, but to know entire, impossible. … Life is life … Life is change.”

This is fairly banal. In any case, *Buster Scruggs* is most forceful and energetic when it is sneering at the American population, which it presents as principally made up of charming, self-deluded or merely brutish psychopaths.

This is not satire, for the most part, aimed at those who rule, manipulate and exploit Americans, but at those who are ruled, manipulated and exploited in America. Instead of seeing brutality as flowing, in the final analysis, from the harshness of the social relations, the middle class impressionist, distant from the history and experience of the working class, reconstructs the violence artistically “from the bottom up,” so to speak.

Commenting on one of the Coen brothers’ more intriguing films, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, in 2000, the WSWS commented: “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.

“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.”

They may well have gone backward since then.

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