

No Country for Old Men

(2007, Joel and Ethan Coen, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Spectatorship

Rationale for study

A pulse-pounding ‘Western Gothic thriller’, which also explores how we make meaning in a changing world.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

Coin toss (00:19:47 - 00:25:13)

Bell reading news; border crossing; clothes store (1:26:13 - 1:29:06)

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Boots are a key motif throughout the film: there’s a whole scene where Moss goes to buy some new boots, and Chigurh (crucially for one plot reveal - see Spectatorship) doesn’t like getting blood on his.
- In one particular scene in the foreground, slightly out of focus, are the dead drug dealer’s boots. Here the boots seem symbolic of the old order, worn away by the exigencies of trying to live in such an unforgiving landscape and in the modern world. In the background, the desert stretches and these wide-angle long shots are repeated throughout the film: human characters dwarfed and insignificant-seeming to stress the harshness of the environment (an element

familiar in many Westerns). Caught between human threat (symbolised by the corpse) and this punishing landscape is Moss, wearing the costume of a traditional Western hero.

Sequence 1

- Apart from the establishing shot, a high angle shot of the gas station with the horizon stretching ahead (a traditional shot from the ‘modern Western’), nearly all the shots are MCU and CU of the two men as they talk. Two exceptions are the CU of Chigurh’s candy wrapper where the camera lingers as it unfolds; and the coin, which cuts away before we’ve barely had a chance to see the outcome of the toss - reflecting how quickly the shopkeeper wants this encounter finished.

Sequence 2

- In the first of these three short scenes, Bell sits reading the paper and listening to the latest news about the case from his deputy. The MS shows he is relaxed. However, by the end the sense is that this could be interpreted as resignation from the evil world that surrounds him. The MLS of Bell, the border guard and the clothing store owner all frame these rooted characters as firmly established in their environments: the traditional diner (also where Bell meets Carla Jean), the border crossing and the store selling jeans and boots. As such, they seem solid and dependable, unruffled by the crazy new circumstances the modern world is throwing at them.

Mise-en-Scène

Costume

- Nearly all the characters wear area-specific costume - denims, checked shirts with ‘yoked’ pockets, stetsons - that root them to their location, and also establish them as traditional Western characters: the Cowboy, the Sheriff, the Bounty-Hunter. By contrast, Chigurh’s costume is very dark blue (not quite the black of the traditional Western villain) with straight lines. This and his almost comical haircut establish him as a character who has no place or time - he also stands out against the brown

and beige colour scheme of the film's locations.

Sequence 1

- The loops of wire hanging behind the shopkeeper symbolise the danger in this conversation. They represent visually every action Chigurh's takes verbally: set a trap, a noose that will tighten around his victim given a chance. The coin is a recurring symbol of destiny or fate, the only set of rules that Chigurh seems to follow. He always asks his possible victim to call heads or tails *after* he has tossed the coin, reducing the feeling that they have any real agency - death is coming, regardless of the outcome of this encounter.

Sequence 2

- The costumes of the characters are linked to their jobs and suggest they are dependable, trustworthy people following rules. Moss has slipped out of this world. His cowboy-style attire from earlier in the film has been torn and shredded by gunfire (symbolising his loss of control), and now he wears a hospital gown that connotes vulnerability. In the clothing store we see he is nonetheless still wearing his boots, showing there is a core element within him that remains undefeated.

Editing

Sequence 1

- Other than the establishing shot and the CU of the wrapper and coin, every shot is structured around shot-reverse-shot as we see the deadly conversation bounce back and forth between Chigurh and the shopkeeper. Whenever the dialogue takes a particularly threatening turn, the shots move closer to each man's face. This draws us closer to the exchange - provoking a feeling of intense discomfort given the danger we can feel.

Sequence 2

- The juxtaposition of these three scenes show Bell's disbelief at the evils of the modern world ("Who are these people?"), but they also assert that there are still those who believe in traditional values: the honour of fighting for your country, the honesty of good quality boots. The fact the border guard and shopkeeper help Moss suggests these values can be restored, even if Bell has all but given up on them.

Sound

Sequence 1

- This is the only scene with any non-diegetic sound and the only music that appears in the

film other than in the end credits. This adds even more intensity to the scene. The dialogue between the two men creates almost unbearable tension. Chigurh's words menacingly blend ambiguity ("Is that what you are asking me? If there's something wrong with anything?") with outright threat ("What's the most you've ever lost on a coin toss?"). The shopkeepers are innocent and reasonable throughout: "Just passin' the time. If you won't accept that, I don't know what else to do for you." Though he is obviously terrified, his words don't betray his fear and this makes the scene even more tense because it is so understated.

- Chigurh's words also link to the theme of destiny: "This coin has travelled from 1958... it's been travelling 22 years to get here." His lines also suggest that he is inhuman, a personification of fate, who lacks any agency of his own: "Call it. I can't call it for you."

Sequence 2

- The dialogue between Bell and his deputy tells two stories: the development in the search for Moss/Chigurh, and the horrific report from the news. Both allow Bell to show his despair at the modern world. They also link to the idea that the traditions of the West are being eroded by the amorality of the contemporary world: "They tortured them first. Who knows why... Maybe the TV was broken." The grudging respect of the border guard and the unruffled acceptance of the clothing store owner reflect a more hopeful attitude, that not all the old 'codes' of the West have been destroyed.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

Age

- The film's title is almost embodied by Bell. He has been ground down by the evils he has witnessed, indicated in his opening monologue. In this, his final case before retirement, there is a sense that he is trying to find meaning or some kind of closure. But when he goes to visit Ellis, his grandad's old deputy, he shows that despite his age and considerable experience, he feels "overmatched". "I always felt, as I grew older, God would come into my life somehow." This represents older people not as the wise characters or mentors we often see in film, but

rather as people as confused by events as those younger. Interestingly, Carla Jean, though far younger, has a similarly resigned attitude to the evils of the world - when Chigurh visits her after her mother's funeral, she seems almost too exhausted to show the appropriate level of fear.

Gender

- The film seems almost like an 'elegy' for a particular type of American masculinity that has been mythologised by the Western genre. Bell, particularly, is the embodiment of traditional decency: law-abiding, faithful and loving to his wife, doing his best to hunt down the 'bad guys' and bring them to a justice he believes in. His opening monologue about how his ancestors didn't even carry a gun show us that - even in the violent and depraved modern world - he is a man who shies from violence. Wells, though a bounty hunter working for one of the villains also displays these qualities. Moss also shows remarkable moral character. He does steal the money, but this seems like an impulsive rather than greedy decision. Afterwards, he puts himself in danger by returning to give water to the dying Mexican, by going on the run to draw the danger away from his family, and he even resists the advances of the woman at the motel. All of these suggest he has a moral 'code' that he must follow. By the end, however, the consequences of his actions result in his (and his wife's) death. The message seems to be that, admirable though these values may be, the amorality of the modern world will soon overwhelm them.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Cinematographer, Roger Deakins, was inspired by both traditional Westerns, and by trying to capture how 'the West' is changing. The opening shots feature no humans, it could easily be the dawn of time. Then we begin to see signs of humans: fences, a wind turbine. Deakins lit and exposed the film differently for the desert and urban scenes. For the scenes in the desert there is a 'burnt' colour palette of blanched out beiges and browns - creating a sense that in this brightly-lit landscape there is nowhere to hide. The urban scenes are more garish and often lit with fluorescent tubes to accentuate the artificiality.
- One sequence reflects the theme of the rapid

change: he returns to the site of the drug deal to give water to the dying Mexican, and is spotted by the villains and pursued. As the jeep begins chasing him, it is night; but as he splashes into the river to escape, dawn arrives... and shortly after, as he binds his wounds, it is bright morning. This emphasises the theme of rapid change that the characters struggle against.

- The sound design (by Skip Lievsay) is almost as significant as the cinematography. A very good example is the scene in the hotel, as Moss awaits his assassin's inevitable arrival. The groan of a floorboard, the steady beep of the transponder and the ringing phone all build the tension to an excruciating level. The film is also sparse in terms of dialogue, especially for the Coen Brothers, who are well-known for lyrical and verbose characters like in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998). This is especially true of Moss, who spends much of the film (when he isn't being chased) in silent reflection - yet we only hear the final words of his inner monologue: "... Yeah" or "...Okay, then.". This continues the use of ellipses that litter the film's narrative.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Historical

- The writer-directors, and Cormac McCarthy, have said that the narrative reflects the 'changing West'. Westerns were incredibly popular in the first half of the 20th century and were amongst the first genres Hollywood produced. One reason for this was because there were still genuine cowboys starring in travelling shows. It was relatively easy to use these performers to provide spectacular stunts in early cinema. During the mid-part of the century, the Western took on a moral dimension, with stars like Gary Cooper and John Wayne representing a kind of American decency that Sheriff Bell in *No Country For Old Men* is mourning. His conversation with Ellis, however, reminds him (and us) that this landscape has always been intrinsically violent, and that he is being nostalgic about an imagined past that never actually existed.

Political

- Violence in films has always been a controversial issue. Every decade has its own moral panic about the way violence is depicted, and its effects on viewers and wider audiences. The films of

Sam Peckinpah, mostly Westerns set in the same environment as *No Country...*, were particularly demonised for the glamorisation of violent spectacle. *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) set the template for concerns about the 'aesthetics of violence' that continued through 1980s and 90s action cinema. Unusually for such a brutal film, *No Country...* is quite minimal in depicting violence. Though we explicitly see Chigurh's killings in the first half of the film, in the second half most of the killings happen off-screen: Wells' death is out of frame, the murder of the chicken truck driver is suggested, and the murder of Carla Jean is hinted at so subtly that many viewers have debated whether it even takes place. Throughout, the Coens don't indulge the violent action, and even big set pieces like the confrontation in and near the hotel evoke fear and suspense rather than excitement. Instead, they often focus on the aftermath of violence, including - frustratingly for some viewers - the demise of Moss.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - SPECTATORSHIP - STARTING POINTS

- The film encourages the audience to be engaged and active in interpreting the narrative. The absence of non-diegetic soundtrack makes us far more sensitive to the sound design of each scene and upsets our expectations. The Coen brothers said they wanted to remove the 'safety net' of incidental music that tells us when to feel scared, relieved etc. Without a score to guide our emotion, the spectator becomes more attuned to the subtleties of the cinematography and performances in order to interpret the action. Even in narrative terms, the film is full of ellipses that require the spectator to 'fill in the gaps', the most notable being death of Moss, which would have traditionally been the climax of the story. (The use of ellipsis is also referenced by Wells when he says "...in the elevator, I counted the floors. There's one missing.")
- Genre can often provide a frame of interpretation for the spectator, but in *No Country...* the conventions of the Western are consistently challenged, surprising the audience. The landscape, mise-en-scène and character types are immediately familiar. But Chigurh is different, seeming to belong to an entirely different genre (perhaps horror?). Instead of the typical revolver or rifle that Bell and Moss carry, the assassin uses a 'captive bolt pistol' (reducing his victims to 'cattle') and even his gun looks odd.
- Westerns conventionally reach their narrative and moral climax in the duel: a direct confrontation between the forces of good and evil, where good usually triumphs and closure is achieved. In *No Country...* the duel between Moss and Chigurh happens halfway through the film - and is inconclusive. This upsets the expectations of the audience - what will happen now? To further avoid the satisfying closure of the duel, our hero (Moss) confronts the Mexican villains off-screen, and is killed. Who is now the hero? Our attentions switch to Bell and we expect him to confront Chigurh when he returns to the hotel room. But there is no confrontation - instead Bell sits, confused and defeated, unaware that his prey stands just feet away. The silhouetted figure in his stetson is in mourning, perhaps for the stable moral paradigm the Western once offered.
- Not only does the film challenge the spectator to make meaning, but how we interpret the world is a core theme in itself. The characters and audience are given visual and sonic clues to decipher exactly what is happening. These function on three levels: denotation, connotation and 'occult' symbolism. As hunter and hunted swap roles, there are numerous POV shots of tracks left behind. These denote what we haven't seen explicitly - blood trails of a wounded dog, or of Moss/Chigurh after their gunfight, or scrapes in a crawlspace where the money bag has been moved. Then there are connotations: the unstated threat of the coin toss, Chigurh cleaning chicken feathers from the back of the truck, and checking the soles of his boots after visiting Carla Jean - all building on our knowledge of this character's evil to infer violence.
- The final level of symbolism is ambiguous, opaque and 'occult'. There are patterns and symbols throughout that seem to have some meaning, but which are left to the spectator to interpret. The scuff marks on the floor as Chigurh strangles the cop are lingered on by the camera as if there is some significance to their pattern. There are numerous examples of 'twinning' throughout: the numerous shots of characters removing or putting on boots; the buying of a shirt from a random passer-by; the way both Chigurh and Bell sit in Moss' trailer, both sipping milk, both reflected in the television in a repeated shot.
- The film also ends on a monologue of 'occult' symbolism, as Bell describes a dream about him

and his father. The imagery is resonant with what we've just seen with the Western genre: a man and boy, on horseback, venturing into darkness. Is this symbolic of Bell's journey towards his own death? (Echoing what Ellis says earlier: "You can't stop what's coming") Or of Bell's despair at the darkness of modern crime, where the memory of his father is all he can cling on to? The film ends mysteriously, provoking the audience to debate their own interpretations.