No Country For Old Men

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By David Coates
Wednesday 6 February 2008

“That is no country for old men. The young
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees
– Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.” – From “Sailing to Byzantium” by Yeats.

No Country For Old Men is the latest movie from Joel and Ethan Coen, an adaptation of the Cormac McCarthy novel of the same name, starring Josh Brolin, Javier Bardem and Tommy Lee Jones.

The plot is simple. Llewellyn Moss (Brolin), a welder in small-town Texas, happens across the remainder of a gone-wrong drug deal. Amongst the dead bodies he finds a truckload of Mexican heroine, and on a corpse not far from the scene, a briefcase containing two million dollars in cash. He initially tries to keep the cash hidden from his wife (Kelly MacDonald), and when she finds out, tries to keep her from the danger he is clearly in, sending her to her mother’s house in Odessa. Meanwhile, Anton Chigur (Bardem) is murdering his way across the county on Moss’ trail. Old-timer Sheriff Bell (Jones) watches these events unfold, seemingly a couple of steps behind both men.

And that’s about it. The rest of the plot unfolds with an alarmingly fatalistic inevitability, each character pushed along by forces (ostensibly) beyond their control.

The majority of the film’s major episodes are played without dialogue, expanding upon the Coens’ penchant for characters who fail to communicate, resulting in some frustrating yet compelling acts of apparently meaningless violence. Chigur is a truly terrifying and unsettling character, easily on a par with Hopkins’ Hannibal Lector; purposeful, hyper-pragmatic, and – unlike the diminutive Welshman – physically imposing. The characters he interacts with – ‘meets’ doesn’t quite cover it – all react in the same way: they don’t understand him, but are damned sure they don’t want to stay around him. His air-powered cattle-gun becomes a remarkably sinister prop, almost taking on a life of its own as it repeatedly fills the field of vision. On the other end, Brolin’s Moss is not exactly a clear-cut hero. In keeping the money, he puts himself and his wife in danger, yet it is clear that his compassion – he is more concerned with her safety than his own; he is almost caught in the act of trying to save the one survivor at the crime scene – is one thing that makes him morally superior to Chigur. He is fully prepared to kill to save himself, and seems to have the same sense of survivalist ingenuity as the man hunting him.

Jones has come a long way from Batman Forever and Men in Black. He has the perfect balance of genuine hopefulness and weary desperation as Sheriff Bell, confused and frightened by the intensity of the violence happening in his back yard. It is in his scenes that the film finds its emotional core; unlike Moss
and Chigur, he is only doing his duty. He has no vested interest in the money or the men’s survival, and comes chillingly close to confronting Chigur. He is the old man of the title, bewildered by a world he can no longer recognise, overwhelmed by events so far beyond his understanding. The film’s climax is stunning in its simplicity and in its lone, piercing note of hopefulness.

No Country For Old Men is a remarkable revival for the Coens after the relatively average Intolerable Cruelty and The Ladykillers. The cinematography is astounding, portraying the deep south as a geographical and moral wasteland, while the soundtrack pitches an atmosphere of isolation and chaos that fits snugly with the on-screen violence. The supporting cast is strong, particularly in a cameo from Woody Harrelson, while the script’s black sense of humour prevents the film from becoming completely nihilistic. While it might draw comparisons with Fargo, this is unlike anything the Coens have tried before, and almost certainly their best and most mature work to date.

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