

## Something Different: The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford

[Michael Maitland-Jones](#) gives an overlooked masterpiece some well-deserved exposure

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Here at **Nouse**, we like to challenge readers to think a little differently, take in new things and try "Something Different". Modern multiplexes are flooded with superheroes, shared universes and the occasional *Star War*. They are all vastly entertaining and a big part of modern cinema, but there is also so much more. Film is a medium of near-endless possibilities. Images and ideas come from all directions, fizzing with the creativity, wit and intelligence of their makers. This regular section of **Nouse** allows our writers to review films that most of us may have missed and treat our readers to a new cinematic gem.



Image: Warner Bros.

**8/10**

**Director:** Andrew Dominik

**Starring:** Brad Pitt, Casey Affleck

**Length:** 2hr 40m

**Rating:** 15

**Released:** November 2007

In 2007 two immediate classics were released into cinemas in the form of *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*. To be clear, these are both brilliant, original films that lend themselves to hours of analysis and discussion. Arguably however, neither have as much present-day relevance as the oft-ignored and just as significant third masterpiece of 2007: *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. With the film now nearing ten years old and it seemingly just as obscure as it was on release, maybe it's time to give one of the great overlooked films of the century some well-deserved time in the spotlight.

Despite a title that for obvious reasons would be unlikely to spread easily via word of mouth, Andrew Dominik's Western-set drama seemed like Oscar gold on paper; it had one of the world's most recognizable movie stars in the form of Brad Pitt as one of the titular leads, the legendary Roger Deakins behind the camera (as if shooting *No Country for Old Men* hadn't been quite strenuous enough), and a director at the helm whose last film *Chopper* had proved a domestic box office smash in his native Australia. The ingredients seemed to be laid out for both critical and commercial gold; sure, nobody had made a straight-up Western genre film in quite the same vein as this for a while now, but



Image: Warner Bros.

wasn't it about time that one of America's most beloved and long-lost genres made a swaggering return to the big screen and picked up a few Oscars in the process? Well, long story short, perhaps not.

Production problems on the film surfaced worryingly early with reports of the young director clashing with the studio in regard to the filming and editing process; Pitt had allegedly convinced numerous studio execs to let the young director see the project through to the end and the money men, despite fearing a fiasco similar to *Heaven's Gate*, begrudgingly agreed. After numerous cuts (some over five hours long) the film finally limped into cinemas and proved one of the biggest box office bombs of the decade, making just 15 million off the back of a 30 million dollar budget and picking up only two Oscar nods (neither of which it won). The film had proved a staggering commercial failure and before people had a chance to maybe give it some reconsideration it was out of cinemas and lumped in with the mass of films ostensibly made as shallow Oscar bait.



Image: Warner Bros.

It's a pity that *Jesse James* stumbled so heavily off the starting block because it just might be, in spite of all its flaws, one of the best films ever made. It matters not if your knowledge of the outlaw Jesse James or the coward Robert Ford doesn't stretch beyond the Bruce Springsteen song; this is a film that puts narrative second and character first, and in doing so is able to dissect the concepts of celebrity and idolisation in a way that has yet to be surpassed. The plot follows a naively boyish Robert Ford (Casey Affleck) as he attempts to befriend, and eventually proves to be the undoing of, America's legendary outlaw Jesse James (Brad Pitt); the set-up is kept simple and deliberately straight-forward. Where the film finds its voice is not in over-complicated narrative turns or hackneyed revenge plots, it is in the complexity and genuine verisimilitude of its two leads. Affleck picked up the best actor Oscar this year but it was arguably 10 years overdue; in this film he is nothing short of astonishing with a level of pathos to his performance that feels real and heart-breaking. One of the most surprising elements however is Pitt. As Jesse James he completely dispenses with the cliché tough-guy mythos that plagues characters of this kind; violently psychopathic one minute and blubbering like a baby the next, he's an individual that's altogether impossible to fathom. His character is utterly flawed, complex, and not even remotely like the celebrity the young Robert Ford initially imagines. Ford perhaps sums it up best with beautiful simplicity upon realising the truth behind his hero, "He's just a human being".

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Who wants a perfect film when you could have a great one?

The assassination itself is, by design, not meant as a surprise and when it finally rolls around it is swift and nasty but perfectly in keeping with the film's tone; the real shocks come afterwards. Drawing attention to the assassination is perhaps a good starting point to discuss violence in the film in general; whilst not the focus, it is as painfully close to a wholly truthful portrayal as it's possible to get in cinema. From the opening train robbery the gun-slinging swagger of the Wild West is replaced with an uncomfortable sense of brutality; when blood is first drawn you'll wince and will continue to do so for the rest of the film. Dominik took his subversion of movie violence a step further in his follow up film with Brad Pitt, *Killing Them Softly*; a film perhaps best described as *Goodfellas* minus the gloss. It was in *Jesse James* that Dominik first began this subversion however, and it remains one of the most unique aspects of his work (to date he's only made three films). Whether cinema is using violence as a means of fun B-movie entertainment in the vein of Tarantino or, more irresponsibly, using it as a means of titillation in what is intended as serious drama (sorry *Braveheart*), Dominik remains one of the few directors whose handled it in a way that feels true to life. It's the kind of mature approach that many directors with twice his success and experience are yet to attain.



Image: Warner Bros.

Mentioning the level of filmmaking craft on display in *Jesse James* feels almost superfluous not just because its brilliance is undeniable but because it works in such perfect harmony with the story being told that discussing it as an isolated element feels strange. A brilliantly made film and a brilliant film are not always the same thing but Dominik seems to strike the balance; the gorgeous sepia-tinted camerawork of Deakins, not to mention the achingly evocative score by music legends Nick Cave and Warren Ellis feels as vital to the film's overall effect as the performances or screenplay. It's a rare thing to see a film where it genuinely feels like every aspect of the production process was treated with equal care but it's nearly impossible to fault anything about *Jesse James* on a technical level; it's quite simply one of the best assembled pieces of cinema ever made that somehow never feels even the slightest bit showy. *Birdman* may have taken home every technical Oscar there was but it could never really be called subtle.

*The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* is a film that achieves greatness but not perfection; there's pacing that can be grating and a large cast that don't all manage to register, as well as a 15 minute sequence at the end of the first act of the film that is so misplaced and bizarre it defies any kind of description. But who wants a perfect film when you could have a great one? The film carries with it a message that will imprint itself upon the viewer with blistering clarity long before its poignant closing scene and will only increase in effect upon repeated viewings. In an age where substance in films is becoming a dwindling currency it's terrific to have a film like this that has earned the right not just to be called good but essential; and that's not a description that should be used lightly.



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