

The Coen Brothers: Serious Men?

Outline Programme

- 10.30 Introduction to the Coen Brothers: 'independence', genre and 'playfulness'.
- 12.15 Lunch break
- 12.50 Screening of *True Grit* (Pictureville Cinema)
- 15.00 Discussion of *True Grit* and analysis of its reception, relationship to the western genre and American identity.
- 16.30 Close

Introduction

Joel and Ethan Coen are unusual figures in American Cinema. First of all they have managed to achieve longevity as filmmakers in a cut-throat industry where as the old adage goes "you are only as good as your last movie" – in other words, money is usually more important than reputation. The Coens have made 15 features in 25 years – but, perhaps more importantly, 8 in the last 10 years. You can get some idea of their track record in industry terms from the data on page 2 of these notes.

The latest Coen Brothers film, *True Grit*, is a Hollywood mainstream studio picture. It has brought the brothers' work to a much larger audience (at least in North America) than ever before. For diehard fans this might be a problem since up to now the brothers have occupied a place in American culture that has always had an 'independent' edge – a place a little away from the centre which has allowed the brothers to develop their own distinct perspectives on cinema and on American society more generally. In turn this has helped to attract more fans outside America.

In choosing to make *True Grit*, the Coens have consciously decided to tackle the central edifice of American popular culture in the shape of the 'American genre' of the western – and not just any western but one based on a popular novel (by Charles Portis, first published in 1968) and previously brought to life in 1969 via an iconic performance by John Wayne (the most popular star in Hollywood in the 1950s and 1960s according to cinema polls).

The Coens' publicity for *True Grit* explicitly dismisses both the genre and Wayne's portrayal of Rooster Cogburn and this is re-iterated by the cast in interviews. Yet there are clear similarities between the films, both of which are quite 'faithful' to the novel in many ways.

Re-making films has always been a common practice in Hollywood. In the 'studio period' of the 1930s-50s many films were remade more than once, sometimes under different titles. The studio that owned the rights was simply

exploiting them by making a new version every ten years or so. Paramount, one of the original studio majors, holds the distribution rights for both *True Grit* films – and has re-released the John Wayne version on DVD and Blu-Ray.

The Coens' statements about *True Grit* are perhaps an indication of what some critics have called their 'playfulness' – the 'ludic' quality in their work. In this case they are 'playing' with ideas about what is a mainstream movie and how it is different from an independent movie. In some of their films, the play is with ideas of genre so that the films themselves purport to be one thing but turn out to be another. We will probably want to argue this point after seeing *True Grit* – is it, as they say, a historical story (a girl's adventure story perhaps) set in Arkansas in 1872, or is it a 'western'?

Coens background

Joel (b. 1954) and Ethan (b. 1957) were born and schooled in Minnesota. Joel went to film school at NYU and shares a background with other NYU graduates such as Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch. Ethan went to Princeton. Initially Joel was credited as 'director' and Ethan as 'producer', but they have always written scripts together and since 2004 both have been credited as director. They are intelligent and hugely talented filmmakers. Fans and critics have identified several recurring elements in their films:

- stories are often located in very specific time periods and American regions (e.g. New York/Los Angeles in 1941 in *Barton Fink*, Minnesota/North Dakota in *Fargo*, West Texas in 1980 in *No Country For Old Men*). Designing/re-creating locations and authentic accents/dialects are important;
- distinctive cinematography (Roger Deakins since *Barton Fink* in 1991) and music scores (Carter Burwell and T-Bone Burnett)
- strong ensemble performances from a group of actors drawn from a loose 'stock company' (e.g. John Turturro, John Goodman etc.)
- 'play' with certain genres (film noir, screwball comedy etc.)

The Coens' career begins in 1985 with *Blood Simple* and properly takes off with *Raising Arizona* (1987). This was the period in which a new institutional category, the so-called 'American Independent Cinema' emerged, partly as a result of the potential funding of low budget films offered by new distributors of films on VHS tape (who hoped to see returns on their investment in the home market after brief theatrical runs in 'alternative cinemas'). This new and very 'open' sector is often defined by the success of films such as Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989) and by the early careers of directors such as John Sayles, Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch. The end of the sector as 'independent' of the big studios is defined by the success of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) – by which time

Release Date	Title	Distributor	Gross Box Office	Widest Release	Opening Weekend	Initial Release
12/22/10	<i>True Grit</i>	Paramount	\$164,797,553 (to date)	3,464	\$24,830,443	3,047
10/2/09	<i>A Serious Man</i>	Focus (Universal)	\$9,228,768	262	\$251,337	6
9/12/08	<i>Burn After Reading</i>	Focus (Universal)	\$60,355,347	2,657	\$19,128,001	2,651
11/9/07	<i>No Country For Old Men</i>	Miramax (Disney)	\$74,283,625	2,037	\$1,226,333	28
3/26/04	<i>The Ladykillers</i>	Buena Vista (Disney)	\$39,799,191	1,589	\$12,634,563	1,583
10/10/03	<i>Intolerable Cruelty</i>	Universal	\$35,327,628	2,570	\$12,525,075	2,564
11/2/01	<i>The Man Who Wasn't There</i>	USA Films (Universal)	\$7,504,257	259	\$664,404	39
12/22/00	<i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i>	Buena Vista (Disney)	\$45,512,588	847	\$195,104	5
3/6/98	<i>The Big Lebowski</i>	Gramercy	\$17,451,873	1,235	\$5,533,844	1,207
3/8/96	<i>Fargo</i>	Gramercy	\$24,611,975	716	\$730,265	36
3/11/94	<i>The Hudsucker Proxy</i>	Warner Bros	\$2,816,518	126	\$104,490	5
8/23/91	<i>Barton Fink</i>	Fox	\$6,153,939	189	\$268,561	11
9/21/90	<i>Miller's Crossing</i>	Fox	\$5,080,409	289	\$28,202	1
3/13/87	<i>Raising Arizona</i>	Fox	\$22,847,564	697	\$36,240	1
1/18/85	<i>Blood Simple</i>	Circle Films	\$3,851,855	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Table 1: The North American (US/Canada) box office performance of each of the Coen Brothers' films

Figures show the opening weekend with the number of screens on initial release, the widest release pattern reached (maximum number of screens) and the total gross. (Figures from www.boxofficemojo.com)

'Specialised Films'

Blood Simple – film noir
Miller's Crossing – film noir/gangster
Barton Fink – film noir
Hudsucker Proxy – surreal comedy drama
The Man Who Wasn't There – film noir
A Serious Man – surreal comedy drama

Mainstream Films

Intolerable Cruelty – screwball/romantic comedy
The Ladykillers – comedy
No Country For Old Men – western/thriller/literary adaptation
Burn After Reading – spy comedy
True Grit – western/literary adaptation/historical adventure

'Somewhere in between'

Raising Arizona – crime comedy
Fargo – crime comedy-drama
The Big Lebowski – slacker/crime comedy
O Brother Where Art Thou? – comedy-drama, literary spoof

Note

The Coen Brothers films have in some cases been released differently in the international market. The first few films tended to be best received in North America, but after that most films have made more money outside North America (with certain exceptions). This general trend is interesting because of the 'Americanness' of the Coens' material.

Table 2: A possible classification of the films by genre and by release pattern

the studio majors are moving into making similar films through subsidiary brands (often independent companies they have bought).

Throughout this period, the Coens hover somewhere in the background. Their films are initially low-budget and they are clearly disruptive or alternative in some way, undermining the assumptions of mainstream entertainment. On the other hand, they don't seem politically committed like John Sayles, culturally committed like Spike Lee or experimental in terms of aesthetics like Jim Jarmusch. They also distance themselves somewhat. Here's a quote from Ethan Coen (from the Internet Movie Database):

"We aren't the grandfathers of any movement. In the 1980s, the so-called indie film movement was a media creation. What I found irritating is that 'independent' became an encomium. If it was independent, it was supposed to be good, and studio films were bad. Obviously, there are bad independent films and good studio films."

You can see his point to some extent. 'Independent' is something of a weasel word anyway since all filmmakers are 'dependent' to the extent that they need a source of funding. The Coens appear to have begun by working with small production companies and gradually moved towards the 'boutique brands' of the majors and with *True Grit* directly into dealings with a studio major itself. In virtually every case, the Coens' have found themselves with major studio support in terms of distribution, if only indirectly in some cases.

Table 1 shows the performance of Coen Brothers' films at the North American box office – and very impressive it is too. None of the films has 'failed', though some results have been much better than others. The results also indicate quite clearly that the Coens have followed a strategy of a smaller, more specialised film followed by a larger more mainstream production. This pattern is important in throwing into more relief the mainstream nature of *True Grit* – by far the biggest release, the biggest box office and the clearest genre choice, no matter what the Coens might say about "not making a western".

Table 2 tries to classify the films by release pattern and by their use of specific genre repertoires. These are fairly arbitrary classifications and you might make different choices. However, there is little doubt that the two main broad genres that interest the brothers are crime/film noir and comedy. Or to put it another way, most films involve crime and most include a comedy element. So, although *The Big Lebowski* and *True Grit* have little in common at first glance (apart from Jeff Bridges), closer inspection reveals that they both have crime narratives and distinctive comedy elements. What is different is the extent to which one repertoire dominates the other.

To test this out we'll look at an extract from each of three different Coen Brothers films.

***Barton Fink* (1991)**

This is a 'small' specialised film that won an award at the Cannes Film Festival (the Coens have won many awards – see IMDB).

Ostensibly a drama about a left-wing theatre writer lured to Hollywood in 1941, *Barton Fink* turns out to be a highly stylised film noir thriller with a dark comic undertone and a strong fantasy element. The film relies heavily on the performances of leading figures in the Coens' loose 'stock company' – principally John Turturro and John Goodman.

The film lampoons/satirises at least two well-known figures alongside a range of easily recognisable 'types' – the studio boss, the producer, secretaries etc. 'Barton Fink' himself is arguably based on the playwright Clifford Odets and he meets a writer who may be modelled on William Faulkner. The film also plays up the 'Jewishness' of the theatre and Hollywood – something even more pronounced in *A Serious Man*. In some sense, *Barton Fink* is a 'serious comedy' or a stab at film art (beautiful set design and cinematography) – but it's difficult to see what the satirical target might be apart from Hollywood itself.

***The Big Lebowski* (1998)**

To some extent a disappointment on release, *The Big Lebowski* has subsequently become a cult film in that mysterious way that these things happens. The story about a case of missing identity also flirts with being a spoof of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and in some ways it resembles another Chandler narrative, *The Long Goodbye*, in the 1971 film in which Robert Altman turned Philip Marlowe into a bit of a slob as played by Elliott Gould. But this isn't what made the film a cult hit. Fans appear to have been entranced by the (comic) ensemble playing of Goodman, Steve Buscemi, Turturro et al and in particular Bridges as 'The Dude'.

***No Country For Old Men* (2007)**

Before *True Grit* this was the Coens' biggest commercial and critical hit. What is significant about the film is that in three ways it marks a departure. First it is what is often called a 'faithful' remake of an acknowledged literary work, the novel with the same title by Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy is an author with a strong authorial voice and although the Coens did add something to the mix in the form of Javier Bardem's performance (with its very dark comedic undertone), the film still feels like a representation of McCarthy's story rather than as an original Coen Brothers film. Along with McCarthy's authorial voice comes his sense of the American West in the near past, especially the border country in West Texas. *No Country For Old Men* is arguably first a western, a genre the Coens had not attempted before. Compare the film with Sam Peckinpah's version of *The Getaway* (1973) a Jim Thompson story set in the same region. Also, like some westerns of the 1960s/70s, the narrative has some (post) Vietnam metaphors to explore.

Finally, the Coens' cast the film without using any of their original loose company. Part of the casting was designed to give an authentic feel – both Josh Brolin and Tommy Lee

Jones are from the region where the story is set, whereas the Spanish actor Javier Bardem is suitably 'exotic/mysterious as Anton Chigurh.

The film no doubt introduced a large new audience to McCarthy's vision of West Texas, but there is also a sense in which this was a 'safe' or 'conservative' choice of project by the Coens despite the controversy that surrounded some of the violent scenes.

The Western

The western is often termed the 'American genre' in that it deals, at least in its major form, with the foundation of the American myth. Although historically based – in its classical form dealing with the short period between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the 'closing of the frontier' at the end of the 19th century, a mere 30-40 years – the western has always dealt more with myth than reality. Most outlaws were shot in the back or hanged, not defeated in gun battles on the street, many 'cowboys' were African-American etc. But as myth, the western has been open to all kinds of interpretations and has developed many themes about 'civilising the wilderness', bringing justice to the lawless, developing a frontier spirit etc.

More westerns have been made than almost any other genre apart from comedy and crime – but not that many since the 1970s. On the other hand, the cinematic form that Hollywood knows as the western has migrated to many other film industries, including Europe, South Asia and East Asia. Westerns have transmogrified themselves into science fiction or urban crime narratives and the definition of what we might consider as a 'western' has expanded to include stories set in the contemporary West (e.g. *Brokeback Mountain*) and earlier. The geographical setting has also expanded beyond the 'Western Frontier' – to Alaska, Mexico, Florida etc.

If we are going to discuss *True Grit* we need a sense of how it relates to the development of the western genre. We might expect a Coen Bros' film to undermine the genre in some way.

It's generally agreed that the Hollywood western began to change significantly during the 1960s – especially with the impact of European westerns. The so-called 'classic western' of the major Hollywood studios was established during the 1940s following the success of John Ford's *Stagecoach* in 1939. (Although the big studios were never that enthusiastic about westerns – which played best in the South and West and not in the major population centres of the North East.) John Wayne's career was revived by *Stagecoach* and he became the No 1 box office star to be associated with the genre. His portrayal of Rooster Cogburn in the 1969 version of *True Grit* (directed by Henry Hathaway and photographed by Lucien Ballard – both experienced western hands) is a kind of farewell to the traditional western. Wayne's last few western roles before his death were in different ways 'non-traditional'.

***Ride the High Country* (1962)**

Sam Peckinpah's second feature was dismissed by its studio, MGM, on release but saved by major commercial and critical success in Europe. Over time it has risen up the 'best of' lists and the critic Pauline Kael dubbed it the last of the great westerns.

The film makes an interesting comparison with *True Grit*. It shares several story elements with the later film. In this film two old gunfighters, one a rogue and one a reformed man are joined by a younger man and a young woman who they must escort through the mountains. Peckinpah was a 'real' Westerner, raised on Peckinpah Mountain in the East Sierras and most of his films deal in some way with the 'death of the west'. The opening of the film is quite interesting in terms of 'new' elements in the traditional western. Like the 1969 *True Grit* it was photographed by Lucien Ballard and the two old gunfighters are played by Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott – for western fans of the 1950s, Scott is almost as iconic as John Wayne.

In 1969, the same year that the first *True Grit* appeared, Warner Bros released Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, a clearly different form of western – the genre was changing fast leaving John Wayne marooned.

***The Assassination of Jesse James By the Coward Robert Ford* (2007)**

Andrew Dominik's film starring Brad Pitt and produced by his Plan B company is one of the handful of westerns released in the last few years (including the remake of the classic western *3.10 to Yuma*). It is particularly interesting for us because it features another of Roger Deakins' amazing attempts to 'revisualise' the West and we can compare these ideas with his work for the Coens.

This film 'revises' ideas about the myths of the West – in this case the events surrounding the demise of the most famous 'outlaw'. This might have been a model to follow for the Coens but it was not a big box office film. It cost \$30 million to make and made only \$4 million in North America (but three times as much overseas).

One other possibility to consider is the much more adventurous *Dead Man* made by Jim Jarmusch in 1995, a black and white film with a haunting score by Neil Young and an interesting cast led by Johnny Depp. (The involvement of pop, country and rock musicians in westerns goes back to the singing cowboys of the 1930s.)

References and further reading

Higgins, Charlotte (2011) 'New *True Grit* owes nothing to John Wayne, say directors', *Guardian* 10/2/2011

Fuller, Graham (2011) 'No country for young girls', *Sight and Sound*, February

Roy Stafford, 25/2/2011

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