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CRITICS AT LARGE
The Coen brothers' twists and turns

The Coen brothers' "No Country for Old Men" casts an ominous and mournful spell from the first shot. Over scenes of a desolate West Texas landscape, an aging sheriff (Tommy Lee Jones), ruminating on the new viciousness of crime, says that he's not afraid of dying. But, he adds, "I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand. A man would have to put his soul at hazard." Without transition, we see Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), an odd-looking man in a modified Prince Valiant haircut, murder first a deputy sheriff, then a stranger whose car he needs. (He strangles the deputy and shoots the stranger with some sort of gun attached to what looks like an oxygen tank.) The movie jumps again, to Llewelyn, an early-morning hunter (Josh Brolin) who's out in the desert tracking antelope. In the distance, he sees five pickup trucks arrayed in a rough circle and some dead bodies lying on the ground. He moves in slowly, rifle held low. His attentiveness is so acute that it sharpens our senses, too.

In the past, Joel and Ethan Coen have tossed the camera around like a toy, running it down shiny bowling lanes or flipping it overhead as naked babes, trampolined into the air, rise and fall through the frame in slow motion. Now they've put away such happy shenanigans. The camera work and the editing in the opening scenes of "No Country" are devoted to what the hunter sees and feels as he inches forward: earth, a brush of wind, and the mess in front of him, the remnants of a drug deal gone bad. So powerful are the first twenty minutes or so of "No Country" -- so concentrated in their physical and psychological realization of dread -- that we are unlikely to ask why Chigurh kills with a captive-bolt gun (the kind used in killing cattle) rather than a revolver, or if it makes any sense for Llewelyn, a likable welder and roughneck, to return to the scene with water for a wounded man after he's made off with two million dollars in drug money. "No Country" is based on Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel, and the bleak view of life that has always existed in the Coens' work merges with McCarthy's lethal cool. After these initial scenes, Chigurh poses hostile and unanswerable questions to the baffled owner of a roadside gas station (Gene Jones), and the mind games are prolonged to a state of almost unbearable tension. Watching the movie, you feel a little like that gas-station owner -- impressed, even intimidated.

That's a strange way to feel at a Coen brothers movie. For almost twenty-five years, the Coens have been rude and funny, inventive and tiresome -- in general, so prankish and unsettled that they often seemed in danger of undermining what was best in their movies. Have they gone straight at last?

The Coens form a conspiracy of two -- industrious, secretive, amused, and seemingly indifferent to both criticism and praise. Early in their careers, they gave detailed interviews, but in recent years they have discussed only specific and relatively trivial matters concerning their movies, avoiding comments on larger meanings or anything approaching a general intellectual outlook. This strategic reticence -- the avoidance of art talk -- is solidly in the tradition of American movie directors' presenting themselves solely as pragmatic entertainers. But the Coens have gone further into insouciance than any old-time director I can think of. In the opening titles for "Fargo" (1996), they announced that the movie was based on a true story, though it wasn't. "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" (2000) begins with a title stating that the movie is "based upon he Odyssey' by Homer," which they later claimed they had never read. From the beginning, they've been playing with moviemaking, playing with the audience, the press, the deep-dish interpreters, disappearing behind a façade of mockery.

Consider a key moment in their first film, "Blood Simple" (1984). Two adulterous lovers, Ray (John Getz) and Abby (Frances McDormand), frightened and at odds with each other, are standing at a screen door. As they talk, we see something flying end over end toward them. It hits the door with a thwack, but turns out to be just the morning newspaper. "Blood Simple" is the kind of adultery-and-murder story that James M. Cain would have written in the nineteen-thirties and Hollywood would have made a decade later into a seductive work of cinematic nightshade -- the kind of picture that, as James Agee put it, lulled the audience into "a state of semi-amnesia through which tough action and reaction drum with something of the nonsensical solace of hard rain on a tin roof." There's no such solace in "Blood Simple," which was shot not at night in the labyrinthine big city but in the glare of rural Texas.

That thwack gave the audience notice that the Coens were going to pull at any rug it might be standing on. For example, the romantic attraction between the lovers, which sets the story in motion, doesn't mean a thing; it's completely without heat. What interests the Coens is how foolishly people behave, and how little they understand of what they're doing. The lovers keep misreading signs, misperceiving what's going on. The Coens may be the first major filmmakers since Preston Sturges to exploit the dramatic possibilities of stupidity. In Sturges's movies, however, you don't feel that the rubes and yokels are being put down. Sturges was an affectionate satirist of gabby democratic vitality, but the Coens can be sardonic, even misanthropic. In their world, stupidity leads to welldeserved disaster. In "Blood Simple," the cuckolded husband (Dan Hedaya) hires a vicious private eye (M. Emmett Walsh) to get rid of his wife and her lover, but the private eye double-crosses the husband, killing him instead, and sets up the lovers to take the fall. He laughs to himself, enjoying what a bad guy he is, but then, chasing Abby, he reaches out of a window and into an adjacent one, only to get his hand tent-pegged to the sill by her knife. The Coens

spread dark blood on the floor in a spirit of play. Even fans of the movie (including me) came away feeling a little wounded.

If "Blood Simple" suggested that the Coens didn't want to make a thriller so much as tease one into existence, "Miller's Crossing" (1990) sported with the form in heavier and grimmer ways. The movie is set during Prohibition, in a nameless, sombre-looking city dominated by Irish and Italian gangs. The openly corrupt atmosphere and much of the slang ("What's the rumpus?") come out of Dashiell Hammett's novels "Red Harvest" and "The Glass Key," as does the hero (Gabriel Byrne), a morose, alcoholic, and mysterious loner who plays the gangs off against each other. Shot in sullen browns and greens, "Miller's Crossing" begins as a rapturous Bertoluccian piece of filmmaking, and, with the Gabriel Byrne character front and center, the Coens seem to be saying, or confessing, something about the inability to express feeling. But the situations and the dialogue are so stylized -- so manically fretted with crime-genre allusions and tropes -- that the Coens killed whatever interest we might have taken in their story or in their hero. Perversely, they invented a new form of failure, acting in bad faith toward themselves.

In the comedy that the Coens made between those two thrillers, they found a style that didn't trip over its own excesses. "Raising Arizona" (1987) has the lilt and shock of a disjointed folk ballad. This tall tale is set in a sun-drenched Arizona whose reddish deserts and magnificent mountains are disfigured by trailer homes and Short Stops -- paradise giving way to suburbia. A young married couple -- Hi (Nicolas Cage), a semi-retired convenience-store thief, and Ed (Holly Hunter), an ex-cop -- decide that, since they cannot have a child of their own, they have the right to snatch one of the quintuplets born to a wealthy couple. This time, the Coens expressed open affection for their lunkheads: Hi and Ed talk in moralistic platitudes culled from the Bible and self-help manuals, and, loving their snatched quint, they desperately want to do what's right -- that's the comedy built into their outrageous behavior. Their struggle is accompanied by subdued yodelling and Beethoven's Ninth, played on a banjo.

The Coens' joking is inseparable from topography. In every movie, working first with the cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld and later with Roger Deakins, they establish a specific landscape, and pull whatever eccentricities they can out of it. In "Arizona," two prison buddies of Hi's show up at the house and steal the baby, but then mistakenly leave him in a car seat along the road. Shrieking with remorse (they, too, have fallen in love with the kid), they drive back for him, and the camera sweeps across the blacktop, as if sliding on an oil slick. The Coens may have been larking again with genre spoof -- this time, of the late-sixties road-hog films -- but they were the first to think that a tot's point of view might be cooler than a biker's.

These three movies established the emotional and stylistic range of the Coen turf -- the flagrancy, the jack-rabbit creativity, and the self-destructive whirl of unhinged pop scholarship. The filmmakers clearly had no interest in ordinary Hollywood realism. They could not tell their stories straight or develop themes; their movies were jangled in style, adolescently skittish in mood, brilliant and flashing but without sensuality or much interest in women. (Holly Hunter and Frances McDormand, who is Joel Coen's wife, play most of the women who show up.) Using a stock company of actors (John Turturro, John Goodman, Steve Buscemi, Jon Polito) who were willing to play meatballs, hysterics, and killers, they made lurid thrillers and screw-loose comedies, all of them shot with a liberated camera that alternated between swooping runs and trancelike fixations on objects dislodged from their context -- a hat flying beautifully through the woods in "Miller's Crossing," a pair of dead fish lying atop a Zippo lighter in "Blood Simple." These objects were stuck somewhere between gag and symbol -- a symbol without a referent. (Gabriel Byrne's fedora, in "Miller's Crossing," epitomized the décor of thirties gangster movies, but not their meaning.) The movies were skewed genre commentary: surreal parody, offered without irony; spoof that was too unstable to settle into satire. As in a David Letterman routine, derisive quotation marks surrounded the higher sentiments.

"Barton Fink" (1991), for instance, was a bizarrely malicious joke on a left-wing playwright (John Turturro) -- Clifford Odets as he might have been imagined by Nathanael West. The Coens portrayed the Odets character as an openmouthed prig and phony who goes to Hollywood in the early forties and sinks into artistic paralysis. As the answer to Fink's lame and literal high-mindedness, the Coens appeared to be offering their own media-hip fluency. They turned the writer's hotel into a flaming, horror-film fantasia out of "The Shining." In "O Brother," three more openmouthed clods (Turturro, George Clooney, and Tim Blake Nelson) horse around in a Depression-era South soaked in myth and legend. The movie is a stunningly uneven mix of cornpone monkeyshines, condescension, and lovely pastoral imagery. Although "O Brother" revived the blues and country music of the period, it scorned such affecting Depression-era classics as "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang" and "The Grapes of Wrath." The Coens, it seems, are irritated by the earlier naïve strains of earnestness or pathos. You could call them nihilists, if only their subversions were more systematic; or postmodernists, if their fooling weren't so random that it shattered any academic category you could place it in.

Before "No Country," the Coens had never made a movie that grossed more than fifty million dollars domestically, but, for good or ill, they've never given up their aberrant panache, maintaining their independence by writing their own material and by keeping budgets low -- sometimes very low. ("Fargo" was made for just seven million dollars.) If some of the movies have been misfires or hodge-podges, there are astonishing passages in many of them, like the Klu Klux Klan musical number in "O Brother." Except for "The Man Who Wasn't There," a dud academic exercise, nothing the Coens did was spiritless, and a little more than a decade ago they stopped banging movie references together and made two harmonious masterpieces in a row, the first a tragic comedy, the second a slacker hymn of praise so gentle and goofy that it has floated off the screen into the fantasy life of the nation.

In "Fargo," the Coens' topographical obsession yields a view of landscape as moral destiny. Despite the title, the movie is set largely in Brainerd, Minnesota, where the snow falls so heavily that the fields and the sky merge into a single blinding mass. Watching the horizon line disappear, one thinks of evil's white body -- Melville's white whale and Robert Frost's "dimpled spider, fat and white, on a white heal-all." The movie is about the blurring of the ethical distinctions that people see and live by. The protagonist, Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy), who manages a car dealership, is deep in debt and needs more cash for a real-estate scheme. He hires two thugs to kidnap his wife; his wealthy father-in-law, he assumes, will come up with the ransom, which Jerry will use to pay the kidnappers, while keeping the lion's share.

Jerry is the most destructive of the Coens' dopes; the confusion that he unleashes is so violent it comes close to farce. But for once the Coens didn't cross the line, and it turned out to make all the difference. The pace of "Fargo" is deliberate, the tone deadpan, the style a flattening out of realism. The Coens grew up in Minnesota and believed that something strange was going on there -- a regional verbal tic that masked a collective nervous breakdown. Jerry's idiocy is a product not just of personal fecklessness but of a way of life in which rampant greed (among other things) gets covered over by an implacable blandness. Committed to politeness and the best of all possible worlds, Jerry has no inkling of his own wickedness -- no words to put it in -- and not the slightest fear that his idiotic scheme might fail.

The Coens' steady hand in this movie gives stupidity an appalling power. The quiet directorial style takes in not only Jerry's depraved normality but also the brutishness of the two kidnappers (Buscemi and Peter Stormare). The morose Buscemi character protests against the silence of Stormare's dead-eyed killer so frequently that Stormare responds by feeding him into a wood-chipper, an act so casually ghoulish that the only response to it is laughter. The black comedy encompasses even the good folks. The pregnant sheriff, Marge (McDormand), is more shocked by rudeness than by the bloody homicides that she successfully investigates. She and her stolid husband, Norm (John Carroll Lynch), a wildlife artist who paints wooden decoys, demand little; they cuddle together in bed, awaiting their child, far happier than the grasping people outside in the snow. In "Fargo," the comic, violent, and gentle elements in the Coens' temperament achieve a perfect balance.

The surface of their work is often jumpy, even hyperactive, but in "Fargo" they associated goodness with, of all things, a state of rest. That state, and its surprising life-affirming qualities, turns up again in "The Big Lebowski" (1998). The hero, known as the Dude (Jeff Bridges), a waddling Los Angeles mammal in candy-striped shorts, T-shirt, and gray hoodie, gets into all sorts of trouble but wants only to be left alone. "The Big Lebowski" received mediocre reviews and did little initial business, but over the years it has built an effervescent cult following. There are minuscule and profane versions of the film on YouTube, as well as costumes, posters, stickers, and frequent regional stagings of a weekend "Lebowski Fest," at which many White Russians (the Dude's favorite drink) are consumed by young men. The devotion is entirely deserved. As cult movies go, "The Big Lebowski" is much wittier than "Animal House" or "Hairspray," and free of the dumb-bunny silliness of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" or the fumy mystical pretensions of "El Topo."

The jumping-off point for "The Big Lebowski" is the insolent Howard Hawks classic "The Big Sleep" (1946), but this movie doesn't taunt its model; it mutely reveres it, and finds a rhythm of its own. In the Hawks film, Humphrey Bogart's incomparably adroit Philip Marlowe always anticipates the next moment, whereas the Dude, caught up in an indecipherable Los Angeles intrigue, is so limp and vaguely constituted that he can hardly complete a sentence. He resists being drawn into a story; he wants to spend his time bowling with his irascible friend Walter (John Goodman), a Jewish convert who served in Nam and has become a rhetorically enabled face-down-in-the-mud kind of guy -- he thinks the fact that Americans died heroically in Vietnam justifies his getting furious over the smallest incidents in his life. Many of the Coens' idiots are obsessives, but Walter, who has burning eyes and a tight beard outlining a mighty jaw, is so fiercely methodical in his false syllogisms that you begin to understand paranoia as a form of intellectual egotism. "The Big Lebowski" is a tribute to harmlessness, friendship, and team bowling. It offers a persistent "no" to the hard-pressing American "yes." Like "Raising Arizona," it's a ballad held together by tenderness.

But it's not tenderness that impresses audiences in "No Country for Old Men." Stimulated by McCarthy's tough little sentences, which record action and thought but not sentiment, the Coens have hardened their style to a point far beyond what they accomplished in "Fargo." This movie never lets up. Half of the Southwestern drug trade is after Llewelyn and his two million dollars, but they are most seriously pursued by the strangely armed Anton Chigurh. The movie is essentially a game of hide-and-seek, set in brownish, stained motel rooms and other shabby American redoubts, but shot with a formal precision and an economy that make one think of masters like Hitchcock and Bresson. The killer and the money-thief, as played by Bardem and Brolin, are alike in endurance, resourcefulness, and tolerance of pain. We get to know their torn flesh with admiring intimacy. Has there ever been a better chase?

Tommy Lee Jones's sheriff remains on the sidelines (he never really gets into the action of the movie) and continues to make dejected remarks. Civilization, it seems, has come to an end, petering out in the yellow-brown fields of West Texas. But does the story support the sheriff's metaphysical dyspepsia? And have the Coens found, in Anton Chigurh, a correlative for their malign view of life? Who is Chigurh? What is he? He slaughters twelve people, and yet somehow manages to be seen by no one. He kills a cop, yet the authorities never get their act together and track him down. The plot, when you parse it from scene to scene, doesn't hang together as a crime story.

Some people have said that you cannot read the movie literally. Chigurh is Death, they say, a supernatural figure, a vengeful ghost. But what do you do with the realistic body of the movie if you read this one element supernaturally? Chigurh, despite Bardem's gravid tones and elocutionary precision, is not Death but a stalking psycho killer out of a grade-C horror movie. You keep wondering when he'll return, like Freddy Krueger. He's a trashy element in the book, too, but McCarthy gave him a shade more reality -- he returns the money to the head of the drug syndicate and discusses an ongoing partnership. He murders people, but he wants to continue working in the trade; he's not quite the ineffable spirit of Evil.

The spooky-chic way the Coens use Bardem has excited audiences with a tingling sense of the uncanny. But, in the end, the movie's despair is unearned -- it's far too dependent on an arbitrarily manipulated plot and some very old-fashioned junk mechanics. "No Country" is the Coens' most accomplished achievement in craft, with many stunning sequences, but there are absences in it that hollow out the movie's attempt at greatness. If you consider how little the sheriff bestirs himself, his philosophical resignation, however beautifully spoken by Tommy Lee Jones, feels self-pitying, even fake. And the Coens, however faithful to the book, cannot be forgiven for disposing of Llewelyn so casually. After watching this foolhardy but physically gifted and decent guy escape so many traps, we have a great deal invested in him emotionally, and yet he's eliminated, off-camera, by some unknown Mexicans. He doesn't get the dignity of a death scene. The Coens have suppressed their natural jauntiness. They have become orderly, disciplined masters of chaos, but one still has the feeling that, out there on the road from nowhere to nowhere, they are rooting for it rather than against it.