

At the Border: the limits of knowledge in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* and *No Country for Old Men*



The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) and *No Country for Old Men* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007) seem in a number of ways to go together. They are set in west Texas in the present or fairly recent past (1980 in *No Country*). They are both border movies, concerned with the consequences of illegal cross-border traffic between the United States and Mexico. The main action is initiated by the discovery of a body or bodies in the desert. They feature journeys, the goals of which are not achieved, and on which major characters are not, or turn out not to be, in control of events. And in each the moral centre of the movie is a character played by the splendid Tommy Lee Jones.

These are ageing men who occupy iconic Western occupations (cowboy and sheriff) and who are at odds in one way or another with the societies in which they live, societies that are presented as pretty dismal or worse. The films therefore invoke traditions that belong particularly to the western, in which such characters might still be taken to represent the best of America. This is a subject that brings to mind the last great phase of western production, thirty to forty years ago, so it is something of a surprise, as well as a pleasure, to find it in two recent films. 'End of the West' movies often centred on the consequences of the vanishing or even long dead frontier that had mythically validated the westerner's life and given him a pivotal social role (see for instance Gallafent, 1996). In these two films the border with Mexico forlornly echoes just one aspect of the frontier, the defence of 'civilization' against otherness or savagery; unlike the nineteenth century frontier, however, the border is static, a line of exclusion and national definition – though a hopelessly porous one.

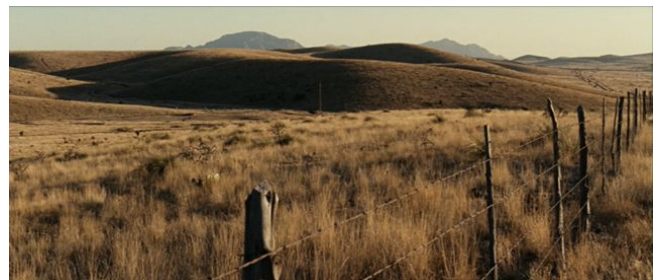
In the DVD commentary to *Three Burials* Tommy Lee Jones speaks of the film's interest in '... how things are different on each side of the river; how they are the same ... the implications of running an international border through the middle of a culture and calling it two cultures. And then enforcing that difference with a threat of violence ...'. Both films dramatise ways in which the permeable border challenges the inherited values and understandings that underpin identity.

My specific focus here is that, in addition to exploring these shared concerns, each film develops its dialogue with tradition in ways that pose questions about the nature and scope of what can be known and understood of the films' events and the worlds they take place in.

Such a question, in its relationship to western traditions, is directly addressed in the opening of *No Country*. After two stark title cards, white lettering on black, a voice begins over a black screen:

'I was sheriff of this county when I was 25 years old. Hard to believe.'

The first image fades in – a pre-dawn landscape with hills in the distance. As the voice continues, 11 further images follow, tracing the growing light of dawn across what is increasingly revealed as a huge landscape of parched scrub. The land is barren and empty, with sparse marks of human habitation (old fences, telephone cables, the odd windmill) but no houses and no signs of life.



'Grandfather was a lawman. Father too. Me and him were sheriffs at the same time – him up in Plano and me here. I think he has pretty proud of that. I know I was. Some of the old time sheriffs never wore a gun. Lot of folks find that hard to believe. Jim Scarborough never carried one (that's the younger Jim). Gaston Boykins wouldn't wear one up in Comanche County. I always liked to hear about the old times. Never missed a chance to do so. You can't help to compare yourself against the old timers. Can't help wondering how they'd operate in these times.'

We are likely to recognise that the speaker is Tommy Lee Jones (we will discover the character is Sheriff Bell) and the voice evokes a continuity of experience (three generations of lawmen) that reaches back towards the old West (a story told later in the film speaks of 1909). Simultaneously, the images present a setting that accords with ideas of western landscape, although there's no evident progression through or across the space. The first 11 shots, linked by cuts, are all

static and have a matter of fact quality (the absence of music is also significant here) that will be a central aspect of the film's tone. Sheriff Bell goes on to talk about crime today. First, the story of a boy he arrested for the murder of a young girl and who went to the electric chair saying, dispassionately, he would kill again. Then, as the camera moves for the first time, panning left from landscape to a police car and a cop pushing a handcuffed man towards the car:

'The crime you see now it's hard to even take its measure. It's not that I'm afraid of it. I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job. But I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand. Man would have to put his soul in hazard. And you have to say "OK" – I'll be part of this world'.

During this passage we see the arrested man shoved into the car, the cop stowing some kind of gas cylinder, then getting in and driving off.



There is a metaphysical note here you might not expect in a western: 'Man would have to put his soul in hazard'. And the introduction of the man in handcuffs (who turns out to be the killer Chigurh (Javier Bardem)) makes him an example of the kinds of criminal that Bell cannot understand and who might lead him to hazard his soul.

The opening sets up the possibility – perhaps the likelihood – that Bell will be the film's protagonist and its informing consciousness. His voice certainly sets a crucial framework for the ensuing action, values rooted in the past but which are acknowledged from the outset to have severe limitations in the present: crime and criminals in the contemporary world are so appalling as to be incomprehensible within his moral terms and even threatening to his soul.

Someone played by the film's major star, a veteran western lawman who might be the central consciousness of the film, acknowledges from the outset his limited grip on the contemporary world. At the same time, while the images establish a setting and imply, in the pan to the cop and his prisoner, a parallel between what is shown and what is said, they also initiate what becomes a decisive separation from Bell's awareness of events.

The questions about knowledge and understanding in *Three Burials* are framed very differently. The central matter concerns the basis of the quest undertaken by the Tommy Lee Jones character, Pete Perkins, to return the body of his friend, Melquiades Estrada (Julio César Cedillo) to his family home in Mexico for burial. This is set up about 50 minutes into the film, in one of its many flashbacks. Pete and Melquiades are sitting near a lake, Melquiades showing Pete a photo of his wife and children whom he left in Mexico when he came to Texas for work and has not seen for five years. Melquiades asks Pete to ensure that, if he dies in



And this little guy is Aaron.

the US, his body will be returned to his family in Jimenez for burial, and he draws a crude map of how to find the place. After Melquiades is killed, Pete abducts Mike Norton (Barry Pepper), the Border Patrol officer who shot him, makes him dig up the body and attempts to honour his promise, only eventually to find – and we find out with him – that neither the family nor Jimenez actually exists.

Whereas *No Country* explicitly presents a crisis of understanding as the starting point of the film, *Three Burials* contains a form of suppressive narrative in which the revelation, late in the movie, of something we had no cause to suspect, completely changes a central character's relationship to his world – and simultaneously changes the spectator's. In different ways each film raises questions about the



Melquiades Estrada (Julio César Cedillo) shows the photo to Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones)

character's ability to cope in the world and, implicitly, about the films' relationship to the Tommy Lee Jones figures and their ways of seeing.

Many fictions are organised around enigmas of one kind or another – things we and/or the characters are aware we do not know. Archetypally, crime stories work in this way, with a mystery being investigated and, after an elaborate process, finally solved. In the telling of such stories there is always a play on narrative information withheld and revealed; more often than not the final revelation acts as an implicit reassurance that what is hidden can be revealed, that the narrative is ultimately subject to no significant limitation and has the authority to render its world coherent and explicable.

But films and novels always have the potential to play more seriously and problematically with what can be known and understood – to pose questions, for instance, about how authoritative the narration actually is and whether it is capable of providing explanatory perspectives (as opposed to withholding information for local effect). In his seminal discussion of these and related matters in Hollywood cinema, George M Wilson uses the term 'non-omniscience' to evoke ways in which epistemic restriction and the limitation of narrative authority have been variously and significantly deployed (Wilson, 1986; see also Gibbs and Pye, 2005). *No Country* and *Three Burials* are films characterised by forms of non-omniscience: each refuses an explanatory overview. More specifically, they are characterised by forms of limited narrative authority that are associated with the perceptions and understanding of their central characters and yet are independent of their subjectivity.

The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada

Three Burials is a film of two halves, almost precisely divided: the first concerns what happens before and after the death of Melquiades, up to Pete Perkins' abduction of the killer; the second is the journey with Melquiades' body into the desert and finally into Mexico. It is also to some extent a film of two modes – the first in part a social drama around the aftermath of Melquiades' death, the second having some of the qualities of a fable. These differences are intensified by the fact that in first half, in a way familiar from other films scripted by Guillermo Arriaga, chronology is extremely fragmented; in the second it is almost entirely linear. The second half consists largely of a journey or quest, a motif familiar from many westerns, and is combined with the relationship between an older, experienced westerner and a callow younger man for whom this is some kind of moral journey and re-education (Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* is a convenient example). As in *No Country* the permeable border is central to the setting but here Mexico and its meanings are more strongly present than in the other film (much of the journey takes place in Mexico), especially around images of the family and of the kind of place where a family might live.

Although the fragmentation of the first half makes exact chronology difficult to work out, we can construct a central spine of narrative in the film's present that begins in the opening sequence with the discovery of the body (in its first grave out in the desert). What follows includes the initial enigma of who killed Melquiades, Pete's attempt to investigate, the sheriff (Dwight Yoakum)'s lack of interest in the crime and refusal to give any priority to the killing of a Mexican, the callous officialdom of Melquiades' second burial, the gradual identification of Mike as likely suspect, Pete's discovery of the truth and his kidnapping of Mike. It also makes the heart of the movie Pete's sense of loss fol-

lowing the death of Melquiades and gives Pete the major narrative role of pushing the action forward. Yet if Pete possesses considerable narrative agency he is also a socially marginal figure, a cowhand with no official standing or significant position from which to battle law enforcement that is riddled with racism, an authority not powerless to act but unwilling to do so.

Interrupting that spine are events in the more or less recent past that gradually build up the back-story: Melquiades' arrival at the ranch looking for work; Mike and Lou-Ann (January Jones) house-hunting as Mike takes up his posting with the Border Patrol; the constant stream of illegal immigrants attempting to cross the border and the Border Patrol's attempts to catch them; Mike's violence; his shooting of Melquiades. Key settings are also introduced – the diner run by Rachel (Melissa Leo) and her husband, Bob (Richard Jones), the Sheriff's office, Pete's shack, Mike and Lou-Ann's mobile home, the desert scrub that surrounds the border town – and the various intertwined relationships – Melquiades and Pete, Mike and Lou-Ann, Lou-Ann and Melquiades, Rachel and Lou-Ann, plus Rachel's three way relationships with Bob and her two lovers, Pete and Belmont, the sheriff.

Bringing past and present into repeated juxtaposition has a number of effects. It enables the film to handle action over a period of months without time scale or temporal order being specified precisely and to introduce the back-story economically. The juxtapositions of past and present invite us to link all the strands of narrative, with Melquiades touching in varying ways on almost all the other characters and their relationships. The fragmentation of our experience (39 scenes in 54 minutes, with constant movement between past and present) provides brief snapshots of a society that lacks any cohesiveness. We see several locations but have no sense of their spatial relationship to one another; the only homes are either trailers or the basic ranch shacks in which Pete and Melquiades live; relationships between men and women seem unstable and intimacy fleeting.

This is the context for the (much too) pointed irony of the TV soap opera extract in Lou-Ann's kitchen when a quarreling couple nostalgically evoke their past ('Don't you remember River Valley. We used to be so happy') and reach for a similar future ('We'll be happy again ... There'll always be a River Valley for us') that seems unlikely to materialise. The extract makes a second, more incongruous appearance when Pete and Mike, riding through a rocky desert area, come across a group of Mexican men watching a TV hooked up to their pickup truck. And in turn this relates to the image Melquiades conjures of his own home and family.



A further effect of the fragmented and elliptical first half is to enable the film to restrict access to context and motive without obviously doing so: the circumstances of Rachel's affairs with two men; why Lou-Ann makes up a foursome with Rachel, Pete and Melquiades, when the intention, clearly understood, is that that she will sleep with Melquia-

des. Were there other such meetings later? We can't know. Equally, we know nothing of Pete's previous life. We might want to draw inferences from some of the gaps but the film deliberately offers no help. The film's reluctance to claim privileged insight is one aspect of a sympathetic engagement with the characters and their relationships, however circumscribed these may be (the overtly critical representation of Mike and Sheriff Belmont stands apart from this pattern to some extent, though even these critical perspectives are significantly qualified). Such reticence, acknowledging the difficulty of knowing other people, prepares the way for what we discover about Melquiades in the second half of the film.

Melquiades' request to Pete takes its significance from these contexts. Pete has abducted Mike, made him dig up Melquiades' body, and just before they take to horseback the film cuts to the scene by the lake. Coming where it does, the scene has an expository function (this is why Pete is doing these extraordinary things) and there's inevitably a good deal of pathos in its tone. But it also sets up the journey on the basis of a nostalgically invoked image of family that has no parallel in the Anglo world of the first half, and it makes of the return of Melquiades' body a quest for home, another idea that has had no real presence in the film so far. What is set up here will lead to the twist of the final movements.

The dynamic of the film depends on the way in which it presents this image of family and makes it a convincing rationale for Pete's journey with a decomposing corpse.



Several things are in play. The apparent authenticity of the photograph grounds Melquiades' story and long-term absence contextualises his idealisation. There is the very strong value placed on the friendship – the love – between Pete and Melquiades that is the basis of Pete's determination to keep the promise he made. The presentation of the Anglo world makes the image of family attractive and highly charged – something to be cherished. Strongly informing the opposition between this world and Mexico are traditions of the western in which Mexico can be a mythic location for such dreams of community and the possibility of a kind of life increasingly hard to locate in the U.S. It is this vision of family life across the border that underpins Pete's quest. Are we invited to have doubts? I am not sure. What I do not think we expect is that there will be no family and no Jimenez – that Melquiades' story will turn out to be a fantasy. This is the core of the film's play on our epistemic position.

The film gives us no insight into Melquiades' motivation for making up his story and no explanation of how he came to be in the photograph with the woman and her children. We can speculate about how an itinerant cowboy might almost have come to believe the fantasy of family and home but the film is silent on these matters. They represent another of the things we cannot know, and it is vital to the final movements of the film that it should sustain, both for

Pete and for us, this position of limited knowledge and understanding.

We might take the revelation as something of a rebuke that we have been credulous enough to fall for one of the hoary old myths of Mexico, but pulling the rug from under our feet in order to expose the limitations of our ways of seeing does not seem the film's priority here. Equally, the twist could utterly undermine Pete – his credulity cruelly betrayed. After all, he also seems to have believed that Rachel might love him enough to leave Bob and marry him. Again, the film is not interested in taking that route. What seems crucial is that Pete should vehemently reject what Mike now tells him, that his friend lied. In the last movement of the film Pete's determination to hold to the existence of Jimenez allows us to think of this as a refusal of reality: when he identifies the ruins they come across as Jimenez, the place in which to bury Melquiades for the third and final time, Tommy Lee Jones's performance certainly suggests that Pete is no longer quite rational. Yet the film does not descend, as it could, into pathos, disillusion or despair – although these are feelings and attitudes that shadow the ending. Notably, this is the point at which Mike no longer questions Pete. It is not, I think, that he believes that they are in Jimenez, but he says 'You found it, Pete' in a way that implies he is not just humouring him. Something more profound has been recognised in what Pete has done.

At best, we can only infer what is in Pete's mind. If he *might* be unwilling to face reality, his refusal to believe that he was lied to could imply his acknowledgement of the validity of a dream that could focus a life. It also holds to the value of friendship. Perhaps what Mike recognises is the value of keeping faith, even when the basis of that faith has been shaken. The film shows that not knowing or understanding other people is just the way things are – there are simply things we cannot know – but that that does not negate the value of trust and relationship; if anything it intensifies it.



The film ends with two familiar tropes from the western: the change the younger man has undergone as a result of the journey, and the westerner riding off at the end of the tale. We could see both here as pretty bleak. We know that Mike's wife has left him; what will he go back to? Pete is still in Mexico, though now alone; there is no promise of marriage for him. Where is he going and what kind of life can he make? To read the ending too bleakly, however, would be to deny what has gone before and what is established in these final exchanges. Pete has given Mike the fine horse Melquiades generously gave to him, a gift that was an emblem of their friendship. And the film ends with Mike's line, 'You goin' to be alright?' – his first unselfish note of concern, however tentative, for another person. I don't think the film finds these trivial gestures.

No Country for Old Men

Sheriff Bell's role in the film's dramatic structure turns out to be strikingly at odds with the focal position the opening seems to set up. He does not appear on screen until almost 28 minutes into the film. In the film's 116 minutes he is on screen for less than 28, with a longest continuous presence of just under 12. In one section of the film he disappears for 30 minutes. Chigurh, the killer, is on screen for 36 minutes and Moss (Josh Brolin), who steals the money and is pursued through the film, is on screen for just over 47 minutes. We can add to this that in terms of the investigation of crime and the apprehension of criminals Bell achieves very little; he is repeatedly chasing the game, always arriving too late (Pete, in *Three Burials*, has a much more active narrative role). These are ways of indicating how de-centred the sheriff is from narrative control or domination of the film's space. If his own take on events is that he is uncomprehending and the forces of law he is associated with are effectively powerless, his place in the film's formal organisation and in the unfolding action reinforces this.

The film's spatial independence from Bell is therefore embedded in the sustained cutting between strands of action that gives us access to events at which Bell is not present and of which he has no knowledge. This is a version of the most familiar narrative method in movies and might be thought of as a form of 'omniscient narration', or at any rate as 'all-seeing', everything significant is available to be shown. Yet what we find as the film goes on is that this apparent freedom to follow the action is in fact significantly circumscribed. For instance, there are whole dimensions of the story that remain closed to us. We only see the Mexican criminals who are pursuing Moss and the stolen money separately from Chigurh when they intersect with the central characters. Bell refers to the fact that the crime scene in the desert will be crawling with other agencies but we never see them – on the law enforcement side we stay exclusively with the sheriff. We can add that – remarkably, given his dramatic status – we are not present at Moss's death. These limits placed on the film's freedom to explore its world spatially and temporally are accompanied by severe restrictions in terms of the knowledge it claims and the explanatory frameworks it invokes. We never discover what was behind the massacre in the desert or what organisations were involved (we see the corporate offices of one organisation but no more); what happens to the money Moss steals remains obscure; we also never know why Chigurh allowed himself to be arrested at the beginning.

The creation and presentation of Chigurh, which have been major talking points in discussions of the film, are pivotal in all this. From the outset, he is identified as an embodiment of the new forms of criminality Bell speaks of, so what Chigurh is like – how he is created – becomes a central index of what is appalling about the contemporary world and also of what stands as the limit of the comprehensible for Bell. We can evoke some aspects of what Chigurh is like negatively, with reference to associations he carries but which the film does not indulge. He is a serial killer in that he kills many people but the film does not conform to the familiar narrative patterns of serial killer movies or animate the compulsive motivations that tend to characterise fictional serial killers. It is suggested several times in dialogue that Chigurh is 'crazy', even that he is 'a psychopathic killer' but when Sheriff Giddens (Rodger Boyce), in a scene late in the film, asserts 'He's just a goddamn homicidal lunatic, Ed Tom', Bell says, 'I'm not sure he's a lunatic' and the cumulative weight of the film is behind Bell.

What makes his murders so chilling is that they appear to be impersonal, motivated not by psychological necessity but by will and what he takes to be the logic (sometimes the extreme logic) of the situation. This, together with his extraordinary ability to deal with pain and to treat his own wounds, make him almost machine or cyborg like (allusion to the Terminator seems invited and Bardem himself made this reference in interviews). His name and appearance intensify the sense of otherness. He stands outside the predominant ethnic division between Anglos and Mexicans; the name 'Chigurh' itself is difficult to place. McCarthy's strategy in the novel of adding to Chigurh's mysteriousness by barely describing him was not available to the filmmakers but the decisions they took in creating the character's iconographical profile, including the much commented on hairstyle, reinforce his strangeness. The result is



a character that can operate with ruthless effect in the film's world but seems in a range of ways not to be of it.

For Joan Mellen the moral disorder in the world of the film is attached to the experience of the Vietnam war and she argues that, like Moss and the hired investigator, Wells (Woody Harelson), Chigurh ('a paragon of military discipline, who seems to have extinguished all compassion') is a Vietnam veteran, his 'murderous skills' honed in the jungles of Southeast Asia (Mellen, 2008: 24-25). Yet neither novel nor film indicates that Chigurh is a veteran, any more than he is to be understood within the conventions of the serial killer or the cyborg: the film does not allow him to be explained, or explained away, in such terms. If he is neither a 'lunatic' nor a cyborg, however, then he is some form of sane human being. It is this that proves such a challenge to Bell and the film ensures that even though, unlike Bell, we see Chigurh and witness many of his actions, he remains just as opaque to us.

In fact, although our spatial access to the film's world is independent of Bell and our epistemic position is not identified with his (we see, hear and therefore know more than he does) the film's overall restrictions of understanding and explanation align our horizon of comprehension closely with Bell's. This is, I think, something of a crux in thinking about the film. Bell is present to us for only a quarter of the film's length and we hear his voice-over only once; we see much of the action independently of him; yet these forms of separation do not produce a significant distance from the limitations of his understanding.

This tension is rooted in the adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel and especially in the film's approach to Bell's voice. Like the film, the novel presents much of the action independently of Bell but the novel also provides extended access to Bell's consciousness through thirteen sections of italicised interior monologue that contain biographical detail excluded from the film as well as Bell's reflections on events. This gives him a narrative status that has no direct equivalent in the film. The novel's privileging of Bell's voice is accompanied by a close association with

his values and the familiar American traditions he represents: a life of service to the law; a life in which marriage and home carry fundamental value; a life rooted in a version of Christian morality, with a specific inflection to the old West and the mythic American strengths that it embodied. Without making Bell the narrator of the whole novel, this narrative and moral commitment to the sheriff and what he represents anchors the novel's alignment with his incomprehension at what is happening to the world around him.

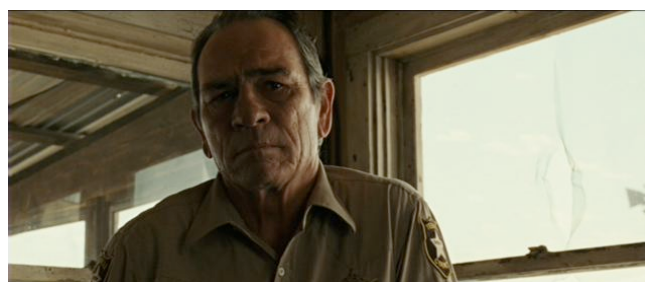
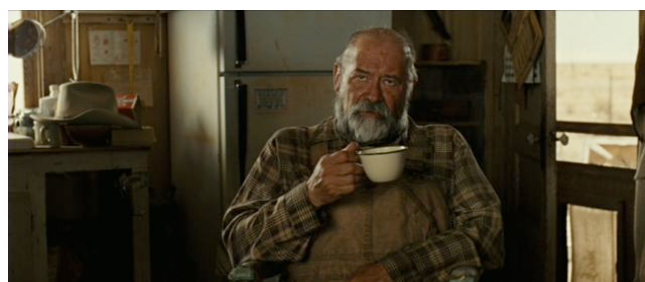
Although the film does not maintain the structural use of Bell's voice, it does maintain the moral commitment. A selection of material from the novel's first person passages are absorbed into dialogue scenes so that, although direct access to his subjectivity is limited, Bell's remains the only extended response to events. Crucially too, Tommy Lee Jones' performance gives physical expression to this engagement with Bell: he makes him an attractive and humane figure, as well as a capable one within the limits he acknowledges. Lacking the recurrent presence of Bell's voice, however, there is a much more obvious disjuncture between his narrative position and the film's alignment with the limits of his understanding.

Not the least of the film's distinctions is that in a number of their informing decisions the filmmakers implicitly address the tension this produces between the narrative's considerable spatial freedom and its restrictions of scope and comprehension. Two stylistic choices are particularly significant: the absence of a traditional score and the restraint of the film's visual style. The decision to dispense with a score is particularly unusual. The Coens' regular composer, Carter Burwell, contributed about 12 minutes of music but, apart from what accompanies the end credits, his composition (played on 'singing bowls') is so integrated into the film's soundscape that the meticulously constructed sound track seems to consist entirely of sound originating in the fictional world. Sound functions dramatically, of course, as in the repeated use of sound bridges between sequences, and contributes to mood and emotional colour, as for instance in the recurrent sound of the wind across the film, but not with the 'editorial' force of a conventional musical score. Equally significant in this context, however, is that non-diegetic music tends to imply an arc of development to the action, an overarching shape and direction. In this and other ways music almost invariably has an epistemic dimension: part of its force is often to suggest that the film knows where the action is going and what kind of action context we are in. Sound editor Skip Lievsay commented: 'Suspense thrillers in Hollywood are traditionally done almost entirely with music. The idea here was to remove the safety net that lets the audience feel like they know what's going to happen. I think it makes the movie much more suspenseful. You're not guided by the score and so you lose that comfort zone' (New York Times online, 2008).

It is also notable, in a film characterised by inter-cutting between strands of action and containing a number of suspense sequences, how far visual style parallels decisions about sound. Scene dissection and editing in *No Country* are orthodox in that the film cuts with considerable freedom around and between spaces but across the range of visual decision-making – in editing, the choice of lenses, the placement and movement of the camera, for instance – overt rhetoric is minimised. There is a constant liveness in the scene dissection but also an analytical quality, as of intent observation. To take as examples scenes I return to below, the café sequence with Sheriff Giddens, like a number of the other two-way dialogue scenes, is shot very simply using angle/reverse angle editing to dissect the space and with the



camera entirely static. The scene between Bell and the disabled ex-lawman, Ellis (Barry Corbin), involves character movement and is correspondingly more complex visually but again extensive use is made of static shots, camera movement within the angle/reverse angle sections restricted to the low key emphasis of a very slow advance towards each man in the inter-cutting of the scene's final passages.



Together with the absence of music, the effect of such decisions, sustained across many of the film's sequences, is to develop what I referred to in the context of the film's opening as the 'matter-of-factness' of its tone, as though the action was being witnessed but not judged or contextualised.

Even within suspense sequences the filmmakers play at times on the limitations of viewpoint to undercut expectation and remove, in a different ways to the soundtrack, 'the safety net that lets the audience feel like they know what's going to happen'. The film invents passages of cross-cutting that have no parallel in the novel. The most significant and extended is that in which Chigurh in his car is closing in on the signal emitted by the transmitter that Moss has been unwittingly carrying. In the novel Moss has recovered the money and left the motel just before Chigurh gets there but in the film Moss, oblivious to the immediate danger, painstakingly constructs a long rod with which to reach the case



containing the money that he has secreted in the motel's air duct. The film cuts between them, drawing out the suspense as Chigurh arrives, rents a room, removes his boots and walks silently around the motel, gradually approaching the room he is looking for. When he shoots out the lock and bursts into the room it is occupied not by Moss but by Mexican gangsters whose presence the film has not revealed to us in advance. When the suspense sequence reaches its violent climax Moss is not involved. He hears the muffled sounds of gunshots and is able to escape.

There are details in the sequence, such as motel room numbers that do not correspond, that can disturb a straightforward reading but the cross-cutting between the two men creates a sense of convergence so powerful that it is difficult to resist. We seem to be in the know, as in Hitchcock's famous definition of suspense, only for the film to spring a surprise. If the film's narration was generally *knowledgeable* this sequence could well feel like a cheat, creating suspense on false premises, manipulating our responses by withholding crucial information for local dramatic effect. Within the actual context of a more circumscribed approach to narrative information, the sequence is consistent with the systematic limitations that accompany and qualify the film's spatial and perceptual freedoms. As I have noted, the film never shows us the Mexicans independently of other characters – their sphere of action is closed to us. The anxiety generated by the cross-cutting is both released in an action climax (the killings) but also undercut (it's not Moss's room). It is as though the trope of cross-cutting itself, with its apparent claims of epistemic freedom and authority and its arc of anticipated convergence, is choked off, its limits revealed. The film is able to anticipate action; it can shape it within the sequence in various ways, including, for instance, condensing time; it can take us from character to character and use rapid cross-cutting to create suspense; but there are limits beyond which it cannot go.

All these methods build non-omniscience into the film's narration. While adopting some of the familiar freedom of narrative to move through space and story, ways of seeing that exceed any human gaze, the filmmakers simultaneously build in restrictions of reach and of comprehension that more closely equate with individual human perspectives. By not claiming explanatory authority they create structures of point of view that parallel, without pretending to duplicate, Bell's lack of understanding. Although Bell is ageing and out of touch, his values seen (and understood by Bell) to be associated with the past, it seems a major part of the filmmakers' intentions in relation to the sheriff to refuse irony – they have no wish to appear superior to or knowing about him.

Even scenes which have the potential to be critical of Bell are poised. Two closely follow one another after the death of Moss. The second is Bell's visit to Ellis, an ex-lawman crippled in the line of duty. Towards the end of what is an evocative and nuanced sequence Ellis queries Bell's retirement plans and uses the story of a relative,

gunned down in 1909, to admonish Bell: 'What you got ain't nothing new. This country's hard on people. You can't stop what's coming. Ain't all waiting on you. That's vanity'. The perspectives here are of the inevitable failures of understanding and control that come with age and of the danger of making too much of your own experience as an index of the state of the world. But the treatment is muted, Ellis's words allowed to stand but not rhetorically underlined.

The scene with Sheriff Roscoe Giddens, which comes a few minutes earlier, also involves two veterans reflecting on the state of the world but here the potential for ironic detachment is more obviously present. The scene (the two sheriffs talking over coffee after viewing Moss' body in the morgue) has no direct parallel in the novel, most of the dialogue elaborated from brief passages in two of Bell's internal monologues that have nothing to do with Giddens. As written the dialogue seems to descend into bathos, moving from appalled incomprehension at what has occurred to a lament for lost manners:

Giddens: It's just goddamn beyond everything. What's it mean? What's it leading to? You know, if you'd told me twenty years ago I'd see children walking the streets of our Texas towns with green hair, bones in their noses, I just flat out wouldn't have believed it.

Bell: Signs and wonders. But I think once you quit hearin' 'sir' and 'ma'am' the rest is soon to follow.

Giddens: It's the tide.

Bell: It's the dismal tide. It's not the one thing.

Giddens: Not the one thing.

In the way the scene is played and filmed, however, the bathos is held at bay. There are no nudges either in the performances or in the visual treatment that break the intensely somber mood. After two over the shoulder two-shots that establish the setting, the reverse-angle shots of Bell and Giddens retain the same static framings throughout. Clearly,



we can register the huge disparity between the events that are 'beyond everything' and teenagers with dyed green hair but the film respects the genuine bewilderment that produces Giddens' responses. At the same time, there is no in-

dication in Tommy Lee Jones' performance that Bell is either humouring or indulging Giddens.

All these things confirm and intensify the film's relationship to Bell. Severe limits are set to what can be known and understood. Bell's sense of impotence seems to become the film's: terrible forces at large that are indestructible as well as incomprehensible; no-one caught, nothing resolved, nothing understood, nothing to be done. A bleak ending with Bell retired and seemingly lost, unable to find anything meaningful to do. (Perhaps it is worth saying that western heroes might ride off, get married or die but they don't generally retire.) We might take all this as a deliberate withdrawal (by novel and film) from any attempt to understand or analyse.

Looked at more broadly, the film seems to go even further in its pessimism and exclusion of hope. Moss's humane gesture of taking water to the dying man at the scene of the mass killings leads remorselessly to his own death and that of his wife. Family and community have very limited presence in the film: Bell's wife is hardly present, the value of the marriage suggested more than shown. It is tempting to cite D.H. Lawrence's warning about 'the novelist [who] puts his thumb on the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection' (1925, 1956: 110). Going beyond its alignment with Bell, the 'predilection' underlying this range of decisions seems to be despair. Robin Wood concludes his brief discussion of the film: 'Is this the great film it's been acclaimed as by practically every critic? I don't know. Certainly it's coherent and inexorable in its negativity. But it's a sorry state of affairs when negativity should become accepted as the intelligent reaction to the collapse of a culture' (2005: 67).

But that isn't quite the whole story. If anything qualifies the bleakness it is that, however loaded the scales are, the avoidance of irony, the refusal of judgment and the informing decisions that embody severe constraints of viewpoint all imply respect for the characters' humanity. The performances confirm this: there is a striking absence here of the caricature and grotesquerie that informs much of the Coen Brothers' previous work, just as the visual style avoids the quirky camera angles, distorting wide-angled lenses and visual flourishes they have deployed elsewhere. Respect for characters' humanity also involves identification with their human limitations. And that in turn involves not claiming to know or understand significantly more than Bell does.

Conclusion

In pursuing a single topic and taking for granted many of the accomplishments of *Three Burials* and *No Country*, I have wanted to argue that central to their achievements, and among the things that make the films most valuable, are their approaches to the limits of knowledge. Another, closely linked, is that they take their traditions seriously, something that is embedded in the mood and tone of both films, and that they take them seriously even though each tacitly acknowledges that the old paradigms no longer have significant explanatory power. In fact, the films have nothing to set against the challenges of the present except aspects of those traditions. The films look bleakly at the United States, challenged at its border by forces it can neither control nor effectively combat, and each is in its way appalled by what is happening to the country: its racism, the warping of law, the scale of violence. They embrace two characters who embody traditional American values but have extremely limited powers of action – certainly none that can change the world. These are not westerners who can suddenly reassert long buried skills to defeat anyone. They are men approaching old age, their values belong to the past and they are – or they become – socially marginal figures. Bell formally retires but we can take Pete Perkins riding away on a mule as a kind of retirement too. If Pete can be seen as achieving some kind of (very qualified) closure, Bell certainly does not.

Identifying with such figures can seem like an acknowledgement of defeat. But I want to take a more positive view of the films' refusal of the dramatic ironies that their narrative and visual structures make potentially available. The absence of condescension and superior vision is welcome in itself. We have become very familiar with knowingness about tradition and with the pervasiveness of many kinds of irony within American cinema; and, almost the opposite, we became familiar during the period in which these films were made with the strident confidence of certain voices in the culture more generally claiming to know more than was knowable. These are contexts that inform my admiration for the endorsement of values that are not confidently asserted and for the appreciation of viewpoints that accept their limits and their fallibility.

Douglas Pye



Loretta Bell (*Tess Harper*) and the retired Ed Tom Bell (*Tommy Lee Jones*)

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Douglas Pye is Visiting Fellow in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading. He co-edited *The Movie Book of the Western* and *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* and currently co-edits the annual series *Close-Up*.