

Living in a Faith-less World: A Reading of 'No Country for Old Men'.

1. Popular culture is frequently accused of communicating nothing of significance, of being merely a form of escapism for the masses. Theorists from both a conservative and from a progressive background seem to agree with this assessment. However, I want to show that this elitist view is unwarranted: the recent movie directed by the Coen brothers, 'No Country for Old Men' (2007) goes a long way towards dispelling the 'escapist' notion. If the genre defines the audience it seems that there are an increasing number of movies (Pan's Labyrinth, The Fountain) that engage the viewer at a more sophisticated level; the widespread popularity of such movies is a sign that there is something about them that touches a chord with viewers.
2. 'No Country for Old Men' can be situated within the context of postmodernity defined by Lyotard as, 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives' (1979: xxiv). The movie goes beyond what is a psychological attitude – belief or disbelief - in metanarratives to an actual state of affairs i.e., the world is assumed to be without metanarratives. The world in No Country for Old Men is a world without the metanarratives – whether secular or religious - to sustain it. The values of truth, justice, progress, reason no longer hold sway.
3. The movie revolves around three main characters each of whom respond differently to the end of metanarratives, an end that depicts the world as one without meaning, order and reason. Chigurh is the figure, who, having accepted that there is no ultimate meaning to the world, who accepts that there is no foundation for judging something as good or evil, adopts evil as a way of life. Llewelyn Moss is the figure of the one confronted with this evil and who challenges it; his is a defiance in the face of that which is certain to destroy him. Sheriff Bell is the figure of the person who started his career in the belief that there is something that gives a sense to the world, something that makes it a place that ultimately can be understood, but who, during the course of his career has learnt to leave all hope behind. The world has changed so much that it is now unlivable, it is no longer a 'country for old men'.
4. Given the lack of ultimate significance or foundation to the world, then the world is transformed into a place of chance events and happenings. It is a place without morality. The problem confronting the characters is the irreducible contingency of the world. A contingent world is one where events happen but they do not have to happen. Given the contingency of the world, the movie is an attempt to come to terms with the meaningless-ness of existence. It offers a sustained and elaborate meditation on the anguish brought about by the realization that evil in the world cannot be explained away.
5. The problem of the existence of evil in the world traditionally distinguishes between two kinds of evil: there is the evil that is part of the way the world is for

it to be the specific world we live in: on this account, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions are part of the network that makes, not just this world, but the possibility of their being any world at all. The choice here is between the world including these evils – the Judeo-Christian tradition - or nothing at all, the Buddhist tradition. Unpleasant as the Judeo-Christian option seems there is an even more sinister version of the problem of evil: this is the evil that is intentionally caused, the evil that humans bring upon each other – murder and rape among others. It is this second notion of evil that pervades the narrative of the film.

6. The character of Chigurh is a personification of evil as intentionally caused death. Chigurh seems to have followed through Dostoevsky's saying that without God everything is permitted by opting for evil. This evil is displayed in a number of ways:
 - (a) In its ruthlessness: he kills ruthlessly with no sense of remorse or even the slightest recognition that anything wrong was done. Chigurh is the perfect killing machine that will kill anyone who gets in his way. Getting in his way does not necessarily include only those people who were an obstacle to him, who were actively trying to prevent him from doing something such as the police officer who took him to the local lock up or Carson Wells a killer sent to kill him. His killings also include a number of people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were not actively hindering him, but were more useful to him dead than alive (he needed to take their cars). Chigurh is the perfect model of instrumental reason: he knows what his goal is and has the means to obtain it. His is an efficient way of killing and his signature for the murders is a bolt-gun from a slaughter house.
 - (b) As principled: Unlike other murderers who killed for some material gain, he is a killing machine that kills for something more than material gain. Although Chigurh's killing spree is triggered by the money of a drug deal gone wrong, we are introduced to him under arrest and handcuffed by the police officer (who he soon murders to escape). This introduction to Chigurh tells us that his killings had been going on for some time, before the narrative of the movie began. It is fairly clear that money is not the only motivation for his murderous violence. Carson Wells describes Chigurh as transcending money or drugs: in an ironic gesture towards Kantian moral philosophy, killing is a question of duty, of necessity. Carson Wells comments that he kills out of principle – someone might have annoyed him - and therefore deserves to die. Or, to the person who has failed to kill him, death is his just reward. This is why Chigurh refuses to spare Carson Wells's life even though he offers to reveal the location of the money he is looking for. Carson Wells tells Chigurh, 'you don't have to do this' failing to remember what he had said earlier, that it

was a matter of principle, that he had to do it. It was not about the money, but about the duty to kill those who try to kill you. A similar scenario is re-enacted when Chigurh meets Carla Jean Moss, the wife of Llewelyn Moss. He tells her that he had to kill her because he 'gave his word' to her husband. She is obviously perplexed but he explains that her husband had the possibility of saving her life by sacrificing his. Instead, he chose to save himself and therefore, to sacrifice her. And in 'No Country for Old men', the gods will have their blood.

- (c) As omnipotent: the figure of Chigurh is intriguing in his adopting a god-like status. The power to take away a life, to decide if one wants to take it away or not, to let the other person know that their life is in your hands. This power must induce a sense of fear and trembling in the Other, in the victim. Can the figure of Chigurh be read as an inversion of the Abraham narrative, where the sacrifice of others - whether willed or not - is not a test of faith, but is itself a source of pleasure? This idea suggests that the figure of Chigurh is an evil-god, a god who finds pleasure in toying with human life. The solution to the problem of evil is that there is evil in the world because the maker of the world is evil. The god-like power over human life is seen twice when Chigurh uses a coin toss to determine whether the person should live or die. The life and death of a person is just another chance event. The first time coin toss occurred was when the harmless chatter of a shopkeeper irritated Chigurh and without revealing explicitly that his life was at stake, he asks, 'what's the most you ever lost in a coin toss?' The shopkeeper guesses correctly and lives. The second coin tossing instance takes place with Carla Jean Moss. She protests that 'you got no cause to hurt me,' and 'you don't have to do this'. Chigurh laughs, noting how everybody says the same thing when facing death. His best 'offer' is to toss the coin. She refuses to play along and this increases his frustration. The scene ends with Chigurh leaving the house: we are not shown whether he kills her or not, though given his track record it seems that he does. Moreover, Chigurh's god-like power is also reflected in the unpredictability of his will. There are two instances when we think that Chigurh is going to kill but does not. In the first instance, we can see a visibly aggravated Chigurh asking for information from a receptionist who does not deliver it. Her tone of voice is defiant and it is this (her abruptness as opposed to the politeness of the others who were killed) that perhaps saves her. The other instance takes place when Chigurh kills the man who hired Carson Wells to kill him. The terrified accountant who happened to be in the room asks Chigurh, 'are you going to kill me?' and he replies, 'that depends, do you see me?' Sinclair pointedly reminds us of Shakespeare in this description of Chigurh, 'Like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport' (2008:18).

There is an ironic twist towards the end of the movie when Chigurh is involved in a car crash as a result of someone else ignoring a red light. Even Chigurh is subjected to the

ways of the world, to those incalculable events that are beyond control. The car collision at the end of the movie does not kill him, but shows that he is not immune to the forces of chance that govern the world. Although this might suggest that there is some 'justice' in the world, I would hesitate in passing this judgment: breaking one's arm in a car crash somehow does not quite seem to compensate for the numerous acts of evil that he commits.

The character of Llewelyn Moss reminds us of the frailty and futility of the human will as it struggles to overcome meaninglessness. It was Nietzsche who pointed out, in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1996: 76), that it is not suffering per se that bothers humans, but pointless suffering. Humans are ready to die – as testified by the Christian martyrs – if they believe there is a point to their death, if their death can be re-configured within a larger framework of meaning, a metanarrative. It seems that a necessary feature of the human condition is that the world within which persons live is meaningful, that there is a metanarrative to give coherence the seemingly random sequence of events. But what if this assumption is mistaken? What if, rather than meaning, order and reason, we find the forces of chaos, meaningless-ness and irrationality at work? Llewelyn Moss is confronted with this situation in the form of the capriciousness and ruthlessness of Chigurh.

However, the first sign of the meaningless irrationality of the world is also the trigger that leads to Llewelyn Moss's eventual death. Stumbling across the corpses of the drug deal shoot out, he finds a badly wounded survivor in a pickup who asks for some water. Llewelyn Moss abandons him, without giving him any water, and looks for the money that he finds at a distance from the scene. Later that night, he is unable to sleep disturbed by the thought of having left the man without giving him any water. If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, then Llewelyn Moss's road has just started. His 'good' gesture of taking water to the dying Mexican is 'punished' and this scene points to a world indifferent to the actions of men.

There is, however, in the figure of Llewelyn Moss the human attempt to resist the cruelty of this world in its indifference. When he talks to Chigurh on the phone, Chigurh makes him a tempting offer: give him the money and his life in exchange for the life of his wife. Llewelyn Moss refuses, not out of callousness to his wife, but as a gesture of defiance towards that evil which wants to use fear to humiliate him. He refuses to let the knowledge of death cower him – whether his own or his wife's - into submission. This refusal transforms him from a man on the run to a man ready to face his fears: Llewelyn Moss decides to confront Chigurh, he decides, in other words, to kill death.

The narrative of Llewelyn Moss can be read as a model of human existence: the human desire to live (and preferably to live forever) is confronted with the inevitability of death. The irony of Llewelyn Moss's situation is that the journey to find and kill death can only result in one way: his own death. There is an inkling of this early in the film, when leaving his wife to take water to the dying Mexican, he tells her to say goodbye to his mum, and she replies that his mum is dead. 'In that case' he continues 'I'll tell her myself.' Llewelyn Moss himself seems to be anticipating his own death.

There is an interesting twist to the narrative as it negotiates Llewelyn Moss's death. On his way to the motel, shortly before he is killed, Llewelyn Moss talks to a woman sunbathing and drinking beer by a pool. She asks him what he's doing and he replies 'I'm looking for what's coming' and the woman prophetically replies, 'no one ever sees that'. Llewelyn Moss is on the look out for any sign of Chigurh and the inevitable confrontation between them. But, while he waits for Chigurh, he is unexpectedly killed by other Mexicans who are trying to retrieve the money of the drug deal. The moral of the story here is that while we know that we will die, death will always catch us unaware, when we least expect it. The question as to why we must die remains unanswered and there is no suggestion that the Christian account of something wrong having taken place at the beginning of time, can answer this question.

The figure of the Sheriff Bell represents the realization that there is no metanarrative that can sustain a person. The title of the movie 'No Country for Old Men' is itself a direct reference to him in that the postmodern world is not the place for him. The movie monitors the struggle of the Sheriff Bell as he realizes that he is a stranger to the world, and during the opening sequence of the movie he comments, 'to be part of this world one has to put his soul at risk.' To be able to fight the evil represented by Chigurh requires that one is equally evil.

As Sheriff Bell attempts to unravel the killings that are taking place, he realizes that both Chigurh and himself are a product of the same meaningless world: 'he's seeing the same things as I'm seeing and it made an impression on me'. As Sheriff Bell utters this he looks into the blank screen of a television set, sitting in the same place that not too long ago Chigurh was sitting in. They were - to use an old metaphor - both staring into the abyss of nothingness. The difference between them lies in their reaction: Chigurh reacts by imposing his own values upon the world, while the Sheriff Bell 'drops' out of it, relinquishing the illusion that the world might have some sense.

After Llewelyn Moss had been killed the Sheriff of El Paso asks, 'what's it mean?....how do you defend against it?' these words could have easily come from Sheriff Bell's mouth. If the lack of sustaining narratives leads to horror, then how is one supposed to live? What can be done? These are the existential questions that movie puts forward to the viewer and although no answers are offered, a warning is sounded towards the end of the movie, 'you can't stop what's coming'. It seems there is no turning back the clock to the modern values of justice, truth, progress and meaning. The postmodern condition is, for better or for worse (and in this movie, the 'for worse' option dominates) here to stay.

There seems to be no redeeming factor in 'No Country for Old Men'. The lack of a metanarrative that makes life meaningful is weaved into the idea of life and death as sequence of random events without any moral dimension. It is a gloomy vision that leaves the viewer struggling to take away some lesson from it. I would like to suggest that it is in the figure of Llewelyn Moss that something positive can be read out of the film. It was Blaise Pascal who had commented that

'Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But if the universe were to crush him,

man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and the advantage the universe has over him, the universe knows nothing of this.' (*Pensees*: 66)

Despite knowing that they will be crushed by the universe humans remain superior because, unlike the universe, they are aware of what is happening to them, while the universe is unaware of itself. If we apply Pascal's thought to today's world, so that we replace the indifferent and crushing universe with the absence of metanarratives, then we are left with the person whose dignity enables him/her to live on. The person of dignity is the one who is defiant in the face of meaningless-ness: he/she is the one who will not surrender to the evil made possible by the disappearance of metanarratives. Perhaps Nietzsche's prophecy is coming about: Llewellyn Moss is the exemplar of new person whose strength enables him to live without the need for metanarratives. Rather than a lesson, the movie is better read as a challenge: given the possibility of living without metanarratives, is there any space where the discourse of faith can be re-configured for today's world, where faith can offer an alternative model of life.

References

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