No Country for Old Men

No Country for Old Men was a movie that I originally saw in fragments once or twice before I finally borrowed the DVD from a library for a full viewing. That often happens to me, seeing no more than parts of a picture, because of the broadcast changes on the movie channel I usually watch. A dozen years ago, when I discovered AMC-TV, a movie was broadcast in its entirety without advertising. The film was introduced by a speaker; I remember the middle-aged Bob Dorian, seated in a plush arm chair with book shelves behind him, offering some facts about the Hollywood stars we were going to see, and later on a handsome younger guy who read a script while standing in front of a teleprompter. The credits rolled and the movie began, without any break. Some years later, AMC introduced a single interruption near the middle, but ultimately gave in and chopped the movie up with enough advertising to double the length of time needed to broadcast the film, if even that happened without cuts.

Hence my first view of No Country was in fragments, as I say--bits and pieces that I caught on TV. By the time I saw the entire film on DVD, the performances had "grown on me," so to speak, or perhaps I just got used to them. Tommie Lee Jones initially seemed a bit exaggerated as the burnt-out case, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, musing on the apocalyptic impact of drugs in southwest Texas, baffled and stunned by the transformation of his part of the state. I had a vivid memory of Jones in The Fugitive as the decisive, confident Deputy Sam Gerard, who was anything but a burnt-out case. Javier Bardem, the Spanish actor cast as Anton Chigurh, the psychopathic killer who dominates the film, seemed absurd and a bit mechanical with his strangely cerebral you-can't-escape-me shtick. Only Josh Brolin as Llewelyn Moss, the young husband who sets the story in motion by coming upon the scene of a deadly and aborted drug
deal, seemed persuasive from the outset. But on succeeding viewings the acting seemed to me more plausible and effective, even if I have little taste for violent films and almost never watch them.

But what really impressed me about *No Country* the first time I saw it on TV, anyway, was its connection to a much earlier movie, *The Getaway*. This is a Peckinpah action film from 1972 that Steve McQueen made with Ali McGraw, and I believe I saw it first in 1976 when I lived in Argentina. Both movies are set in south Texas and involve proximity to the Mexican border, and both take place in about the same time period. *The Getaway* was filmed in 1971, and *No Country*, the film as well as the novel, is set in 1980--an early scene allows for exact dating. Steve McQueen and Ali McGraw are fugitives who hope to cross the border, seeing Mexico as a safe haven where they can rebuild their marriage. Quincy Jones, not quite at the height of his fame, produced a wonderful score for the film. I have seen it several times over the years, and although there is a weak scene or two--the story line involving Sally Struthers and Al Lettieri is a bit over the top--it remains a personal favorite; it captures the early seventies very effectively, from the styles of cars and clothing, manner of speaking, office to domestic furnishings. Amtrak was new to the American landscape back then--it had just replaced private carriers that had abandoned passenger service--and the scenes at a small train station fit right in. McQueen was one of the great actors of his generation, of course, and the story-telling of *The Getaway* is excellent. Both he and Ali McGraw are the most sympathetic characters in the movie, but Sam Peckinpah clearly treats his human material as rubbish, often literally. Near the end of the movie the two leads seek refuge in a dumpster which is soon emptied into a dump truck; both characters are shortly unloaded from the truck and can be seen falling into a smoking and burning dump. Later, they make their way to the border which they succeed in crossing. In a
brief, memorable cameo role, the inimitable Slim Pickens appears as a big, aging, and impoverished Texas hayseed who sells his ancient, banged-up pickup truck to the couple for an absurd amount of money. The final scene is a shot from a stationary camera behind the truck, which is diminishing in size as it takes McQueen and McGraw down the road, safe and alone and apparently reconciled to one another. The conclusion appeals to an audience that has seen the movie's evil figures come to their appropriate end.

Joel and Ethan Coen, the brothers who directed No Country, borrowed a number of scenes from The Getaway, I assume as an act of homage. Both movies are set near the border, as I've said, and both involve sympathetic characters who seek to escape from people who want to recover money they have stolen. Each story presents the lives of marginal people, smart but uneducated, capable of dishonesty and theft, surviving on modest salaries in impoverished small towns and living in cheap dwellings. They seldom use words with more than two syllables and rely on TV for easy and accessible entertainment. In each case, a married couple draws the sympathy of the audience as they try to elude their enemies—McQueen and Ali McGraw in The Getaway, Josh Brolin and Kelly Macdonald in No Country. Llewelyn Moss met Carla Jean, his wife, when she was a clerk at Wal-Mart and married her when she was a teenager.

This is the bare, proletarianized present, in other words, which always has the appeal of the real. In the older movie, Mexico is sleepy Mexico of the American image, not very exciting perhaps but a reliable place of refuge, with people walking about in serapes under a bright sun or preparing dishes of cornmeal and beans on small stoves in simple adobe huts. In The Getaway, an indifferent Mexican guard waves the couple and Slim Pickens across the border without even a cursory inspection of their truck's contents. An obvious stereotype, perhaps, but nothing very dangerous happens in that version of Mexico. In No Country, the state has become demonic, the
source of drug-related, gang-inspired violence transmitting anarchy and death to the American side of the border. No one would think of seeking refuge there. Josh Brolin receives medical treatment in a hospital on the Mexican side of the frontier, but he does not stay there, and certainly would not have been safe if he had. As the character Carson Wells points out, too many people--U.S. and Mexican drug lords, not to mention the American police--are after him.

A few scenes from *No Country* seem almost directly lifted from the earlier movie. Late in *The Getaway*, McQueen enters a sporting goods store and has an irritated exchange with a middle-aged clerk behind the counter just before he steals a shotgun. A minute later, he uses it to disable a police car (without injuring any police, however). Josh Brolin has a somewhat similar exchange with a clerk at a hardware store when he tries to buy tents while he really only wants the poles; he needs them to manipulate a document case filled with cash that he has secreted away in the ventilating ducts of his motel room.

Near the conclusion of *The Getaway*, McQueen is seen relaxing with Ali McGraw in bed and he suddenly sits upright, disturbed by a sudden insight. Both he and Josh Brolin in their respective movies have asked the desk clerk to alert them if anyone suspicious enters the hotel after they have checked in--Moss's "any swingin dick" in the novel *No Country* becomes "any swingin dude" in the movie. In *The Getaway*, McQueen suddenly recalls that the elderly clerk is a drinker who manages the place with the help of his family during the day. Their absence from the hotel is an ominous hint that something is up and prepares the audience for the final confrontation of the movie. In *No Country*, Josh Brolin, is sitting alone on a bed in a darkened room in the Eagle Pass Hotel, the second lodging he has been to. He declares to himself, "There is no goddamn way"--no way, in other words, that the demonic Chigurh could have found him in the first place that he fled to, a cheap motel in Del Rio, south and east of his home in Sanderson.
Moss then examines the document case holding the money and discovers, buried in the bound bundles of cash, a transmitter that is emitting an electronic signal to the relentless Chigurh's receiving unit. When Chigurh arrives shortly afterward at the Eagle Pass Hotel, a shootout erupts that is even more violent in the novel than it is in the film, one from which the badly injured Moss barely escapes. Later he is killed in a third lodging north of Eagle Pass in Balmorhea by a Mexican gang also determined to recover the cash. In the movie, perhaps to simplify the story line, the Coens suggest that Chigurh is responsible for the death, though the killing is not observed by the audience. Moss is seen floating lifelessly in the swimming pool of a motel he had checked into. Both Brolin and Kelly McDonald are dead by the end of the movie, which the conclusion of *The Getaway* can only leave the audience disturbed.

"Legitimate" authority is corrupt in both films. In *The Getaway*, the excellent Ben Johnson plays a dishonest, sleazy official who has manipulated a parole board into arranging McQueen's release from prison. This only happens after McGraw, McQueen's wife--whom he actually married after the movie was released--agrees to spend a night with him. Ben Johnson has a second motive, however, which is to set McQueen up with a gang of robbers who plan to hit a small Texas bank after a major deposit has been made. The heist goes bad, and sets the stage for the action that follows. (In keeping with a theme of the movie, Ben Johnson's confederates decide to have his corpse dumped in a well rather than bury him after Ali McGraw shoots him.) The subject of "official" corruption is far more sinister and vague in *No Country*, in both the novel and the movie. An unidentified Houston businessman ensconced in the office of a high-security skyscraper overlooking the city is involved in that aborted drug trade--which he terms (in the novel) "that colossal goatfuck"--that Moss stumbled on at the beginning of the story. He hires Woody Harrelson to find and kill Chigurh, whom he mistakenly assumes has the
money. (Chigurh instead kills them both first.) Lying in bed near the middle of the novel, Chigurh wonders whether a company called the Matacumbe Petroleum Group might also be among the parties on the trail of the missing millions. No further mention is made of the subject, but the name certainly suggests a formal business organization. The movie ends with Chigurh walking away from a terrible car accident—caused, ironically, by a young driver mishandling his car under the influence of dope. But a late scene in the novel, omitted from the film, has Chigurh finishing one more task after shooting Llewelyn Moss's wife in Odessa. (The passage where Carla Jean Moss tries to persuade Chigurh to spare her life, identical in the novel and movie, bears a strange resemblance to a scene Donald Hall penned for *Argument and Persuasion*, a story published in the spring 1987 issue of the quarterly *Antaeus.*)

Having recovered the cash from Moss's motel room in Balmorhea, he travels to an unidentified party who appears to be a businessman somewhere in Texas. If there were anything comic about the episode, excluded from the film version of the novel, one might call it a satire of business. Chiguhur enters an office suite "dressed in a suit and tie" and waits as a receptionist admits him to the room of the unnamed party to whom the money "belongs." Chigurh presents himself "as someone who is expert in a difficult field" and has subtracted from the cash just enough to "cover expenses." He returns the money to "establish his bonafides" and his "seriousness." Someone, in other words, who can be trusted, who can be used in the future for contract assignments. It all sounds very business-like.