True Grit. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. Jeff Bridges, Matt Damon. Paramount Pictures / Skydance Productions, 2010. Film.

"Do you need a good lawyer?" asks Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) to her captor, the outlaw Lucky Ned Pepper (Barry Pepper), in Joel and Ethan Coen's *True Grit*. Lucky Ned responds: "I need a good judge." Notions of justice are central to the Coen Brothers' contemporary take on the Western genre. Many have argued that Westerns offer narratives of nation, and are inscribed with the social / political conditions of the decade in which they are produced: *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Sam Peckinpah's Western-as-an-anti-war-diatribe, for example, is radically different than the earlier Westerns of John Ford, textually and thematically. Therefore, it does not feel out of place for a Western released at the end of a decade shaped by the so-called "War on Terror" to inquire into the nature of justice and the folly of revenge narratives. *True Grit's* characters may traverse through familiar terrain (Oklahoma, 1870) pursuing a familiar set of villains (the Pepper gang led by Lucky Ned, previously portrayed by a young Robert Duvall), but it is this new orientation the Coen Brothers lend to the genre that ultimately de-familiarizes this previously traveled path.

From the film's beginning, it is clear that *True Grit* is not a remake of the 1969 John Wayne film, but rather an interpretation of Charles Portis' novel from a 21st century vantage point. The film begins with fourteen-year-old Mattie's arrival into Fort Smith, Arkansas, where she will begin her quest to hunt down a "coward by the name of Tom Chaney" and "avenge her father's blood." These opening scenes are composed with striking chiaroscuro from cinematographer Roger Deakins, a long-time Coen Brothers collaborator, signaling that Mattie's journey will be tainted with moral ambiguity. As she wanders through the town in search of a bounty hunter to aid her quest, she encounters a public hanging of three men, impersonal justice meted out by the State. The sequence that follows, in which Mattie selects the bounty hunter to track down Chaney, provides a stark contrast: the brazen, one-eyed US Marshal Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) is first revealed in a courtroom sequence, where the justification of his use of lethal force in apprehending a gang of wanted men is called into question. For Mattie, there is no question; the justice she seeks to bring down upon Chaney (Josh Brolin) must not be impersonal or impartial, and

Cogbum's "true grit" is what she needs in this task. The Western genre, as a privileged site for affirming or contesting the mythology of the West, the triumph of a righteous, masculine violence over the primitive and the lawlessness, is repurposed here to address the new subjectivities that have arisen in the wake of American involvement in two foreign wars that are part and parcel of a larger, and seemingly endless, war.

At first, *True Grit* appears to stand apart from the Coen Brothers' oeuvre, lacking the tonal shifts and genre bending of much of their previous work. Even their gangster film *Miller's Crossing* (1990) is more playful with genre conventions. It is in the characters and how the film acknowledges the spectator, however, where Joel and Ethan's authorial signature can be felt. Mattie's companions on her quest, Cogburn and the buckskin-clad Texas ranger, LaBoeuf (Matt Damon), also tracking Chaney for a separate crime, would, in any other film universe, be over-the-top kabuki performances. Yet this flirtation with caricature, coupled with a well-calculated delivery of prose (much of which is lifted straight from Portis' novel), is what provides a connective thread between *True Grit* and the Coen Brothers' previous work. The head-strong Mattie, the brash Cogburn, the arrogant LaBoeuf, and the pitiful Chaney are used to enhance the genre and provide it with a new orientation, just as the characters of *Fargo* (1996) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998) have had a lasting impression on the audiences of their time. Cogburn is by no means a successor to Clint Eastwood's William Munny character from *Unforgiven* (1992), nor are Chaney and the Pepper gang successors to *Tombstone's* (1993) villainous "cowboy gang." The film's adherence to generic conventions also places it in sharp contrast to the subversive *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995). *True Grit* uses its exaggerations of character and genre codes to place the spectator in a Western world that simultaneously feels familiar and alien.

Justice in *True Grit* is neither as clean nor as messy as in previous Westerns. Before Mattie, Cogburn, and LaBoeuf set out in search of Chaney, LaBoeuf warns Mattie not to get involved, arguing: "it is not important where Chaney hangs." LaBoeuf later ridicules Cogburn's Civil War past, in which he was one of Captain William Quantrill's raiders, highlighting the absurdity of Cogburn's position as a man of law. The revenge quest leaves Mattie physically broken and bereft of friendship; sentiments that are echoed many recent "War on Terror" narratives in film and television. Although not an explicit morality play, *True Grit* still prompts speculation

on the mythology of the West; its critique could have been stronger and more explicit, though perhaps this would be asking too much of the Coen Brothers, especially when one makes a comparison with their previous work. As a contemporary reworking of the genre, however, *True Grit* is a notable success.

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