TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION:
CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*

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Abstract

As in any case of translations from one medium into another, the specific process of adaptation faces its own difficulties, and, in the end, the result of such an endeavor may or may not constitute a success. In the case of Cormac McCarthy, whose prose is famously distinctive, there have been a few cinematic adaptations, but from among them, the present article will deal with what is by far the most popular of McCarthy's adaptations, the Coen brothers' No Country for Old Men, *by focusing on the mechanisms and choices which make this film such a popular and critical success.*

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, authorship, adaptation theory, adaptation mechanisms.

1.The Question of Cinematic Adaptation

As part of a modern spectatorship, most individuals, this author included, seem to witness a tendency of associating films with the commercial or the merely entertaining, rather than with the possibility of creating and recreating meaningful works. This happens perhaps because we have come to be surrounded by films as the most common and popular form of entertainment, but also because the sheer number of movies made each year appears to still be increasing, while the truly original scripts or visions superimposed on an already known material seem to be proportionally decreasing. In this context, we have arguably grown rather unimpressed, even jaded, in the face of the endless repetitive narrative patterns which make up a series of movies in the same genre, or in that of a collection of adaptations and variations with the same original source, and little to set them apart, except the faces of the actors or the quality of the image on screen.

A similar sense of ennui, generally mixed with tepid reviews of the movie in question, appears to also haut the special category of cinematic adaptations. From the newest adaptations of classic novels, which boast epic casts and famous directors, to the first attempts to screen the works of contemporary writers, adaptations in general are deemed successful or not by virtue of one crucial criterion, namely the fidelity with which it follows the original, written source. This issue has been discussed at large in the field of adaptations, with some giving precise rendering a crucial role, while others insisting on the novelty of transposing the essence of the written source on screen when it comes to the success of an adaptation. The present article does not presume to settle such a debate, since both aspects, and the fragile balance between them, can and often do contribute to the making of a well-rounded transition from page to screen. Instead, the aim of this short work is to take one particular example, namely the

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2009 adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men,* and describe on the one hand the 'translation' mechanisms and the creative choices which have aided in the successful screening of a difficult novel. Moreover, in the final sections, this article also ventures an explanation why this particular Cormac McCarthy adaptation has met with the highest degree of cinematic recognition. Thus, in order to achieve this dual goal, the present article will first provide a theoretical frame of interpretation for the most important elements to be considered when dealing with filmic adaptations, then it will dwell on the relationship Cormac McCarthy has with films, and finally, after describing some relevant pieces of information about the production of this particular movie, the last part of the article will focus on the transcribing of themes and details from the novel to the screen.

1.1.Dealing with Films and Filmic Adaptations

With the effulgence of the seventh art in the twentieth century and, more recently with the advent of the internet, contemporary audiences now find themselves being constantly bombarded by the visual, a fact which has consequently led to a higher degree of familiarity when it comes to extracting meaning from images. This familiarity notwithstanding, images and words employ different mechanisms in order to convey meaning, with words ascribing to the Saussurean dichotomy of signifier and signified and images carrying an additional and inherent cultural baggage, since they do not denote the object and the concept only, but also "the *way in which they are represented*" (Turner, 1993: 46-47). Still, despite appearances, this distinction does not hinder the process of adapting a written text onto a screen. On the contrary, since images can afford the filmmaker a "wealth of alternative ways" (Boozer, 2008: 9) in which to render the possible nuances of a text through this particular additional layer of meaning, the complexity of the original source can be offered in this new medium as well.

Taking this into consideration, myths which have lingered in the critical field of adaptations and have dealt with the issue of the 'unfilmable' or the superiority of prose should be disregarded from this point onwards. In fact, in his introduction, James M. Welsh claims that many literary aspects deemed 'unfilmable' were translated in one form or another by enterprising filmmakers (Welsh, 2007: xv), while Brian McFarlane argues that people approaching adaptations from the point of view of literary criticism, which is by far the most frequent case, rarely possess the analytical tools to appreciate the value of or the creative techniques used in a given movie, making them less likely to consider that film as a success and maintaining a constant attitude of disappointment with the adaptation (McFarlane, 2007: 3-6).

In short, it is true that, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, telling a story with words will never be the same as "showing it visually" (Hutcheon, 2006: 23); still it is becoming clearer that the means of transposing the essence of a written text into a the pattern of a film not only exist, but are abundant, and that successfully telling the same story with different means depends rather on the decisions taken in the production and pre-production stages of an adaptation. In consequence, the following section will attempt to provide an answer as to who exactly makes such decisions and how important they become for the final result.

1.2.On Authorship

To modern viewers, films seem to have always been a fixture in their cultural, and mostly in their private lives, yet the perspective which characterizes a movie has shifted since its beginnings in a few key aspects prompted either by technological advancements or the radical notions of some of the field's forward thinkers.

The introduction of a narrative line in the early days of short films or the doubling of image with sound are only two such examples, yet they stand so far removed into the past that they hardly seem to be of use to the present discussion. The movement initiated by the French director François Truffaut in the mid twentieth century may now seem as distant as the previously mentioned innovations, yet its effects remain deeply engrained in the mind of contemporary audiences and its existence bears emphasizing in the present discussion since it introduces, among other pertinent elements, issues such as the role of a script or of the 'author'.

In "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema", Truffaut took as a starting point the works of his predecessors, criticizing the notion that cinematic value was given in the rigid adherence to the scripts or that a film was made in the strict, mechanical transfer of the script onto the screen. In Truffaut's view, the script was to be regarded as a fluid guideline and the task of the director, as creator, was to infuse his or her own perspective and creative vision into the film. (Buckland, 1998: 52-3) These elements make up what is now considered auteurism or author theory, a notion which remains one of the most influential perspectives on authorship in films. It is so influential, in fact, that the public and some critics alike tend to lay the success or failure of a film solely at the feet of the director, disregarding the role of the actors, team of script writers or economic pressures from the producers.

When it comes to adaptations, all these elements are naturally to be taken into consideration, yet the main axis which defines authorship is that which connects the novelist with the writer who adapts the screen play and with the director who gives coherence to the movie. At its core, the whole process is twice removed or, in other words, it consists in two major steps of translation. On the one hand, an author's complete novelistic product is adapted into a script especially designed to serve filmic conventions, and on the other hand, this adapted script is then given visual form under the helm of a director or filmmaker. But, in the end, as Margaret Montalbano observes, any adaptation of a book into a script represents one reading among many possible interpretations (Montalbano, 2004: 386), and the final cinematic product qualifies as successful or not based on the validity and coherence of that reading.

2. Cormac McCarthy and Film

2.1. Adapting Cormac McCarthy for the Screen

Cormac McCarthy is a contemporary American writer, whose career started almost half a century ago and whose works have lingered in relative obscurity until his last published novel, *The Road*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. This accolade has prompted an interest in the author himself, as well as in all his literary products. The only filmic adaptation of his novels until that moment, *All the Pretty Horses*- directed by Billy Bob Thornton in 2000, was soon followed by other cinematic projects. No *Country for Old Men* (2007) and *The Road* (2009) are the most famous and the critically acclaimed, while the newer *Child of God*, adapted and directed by James Franco in 2013, is generally disregarded as a sub-par rendition. Apart from these novel-into-film renditions, McCarthy's name is also linked to an original script – *The Counsellor*, directed in 2013 by Ridley Scott, and to the well-received *The Sunset Limited* (2011), the adaptation of the play written by the author in 2006.

These cinematic endeavors suggest not only the interest which Hollywood filmmakers and actors[2] take in the works of Cormac McCarthy, but also the tight relation which the author has with film, as a medium of creative expression. McCarthy himself admits that he takes his inspiration from everything around him, including films (Woodward, 1992), and the cross-pollination of influences between literature and film that many critics allude to (Tibbetts and Welsh, 2005: xvi-xvii) is quite visible in the American author's novels, especially in the descriptive passages of his Western novels or the experiments with time which he employs in fast-paced sequences[3].

Irrespective of this close relationship which the author seems to have with films and which is just beginning to be explored by McCarthy specialists, the author's prose poses a few problems for the

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[2] Apart from production companies, who are typically the ones interested in acquiring filming rights, actors such as James Franco and Tommy Lee Jones have also acquired the rights to some of McCarthy's works and have created or brought to fruition plans to adapt these works into films or short movies.

[3] In fact, in *No Country for Old Men,* the sequence when Llewelyn Moss is running from the drug dealers (McCarthy, 2007: 32) boasts an artful example of how time is described in slow motion, in a passage which gives readers the impression they are experiencing the deliberate movements of a camera rather than reading a descriptive paragraph.

filmmakers who choose to adapt his works. The long and often lyrical descriptive passages which frame the lines of dialogue, the lack of commentary when it comes to the characters' inner lives or the tendency to promote ambiguity are only a few of the general issues which might create obstacles in the successful adaptations of McCarthy's novels. As in the case of the Coen brothers' film, these issues can be resolved by clever cinematography, voice-over segments and a strict adherence to the details which the author shares on the page. What I believe is the true test for any adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's work is the choice of what elements to keep and what elements to leave out.

Infused with references to anything and everything, from famous American trials to ancient Greek myths, McCarthy's works create a dense type of literature which needs several readings if it is to be understood completely, or, as completely as it is possible. Therefore, as Willard P. Greenwood observes, it is the "epic scope and allegorical nature" of the author's works which muddles the process of adaptation (Greenwood, 2009: 100), more I would say, than any other particularity of the McCarthy's individual narrative style.

And this also explains why, as Stacey Peebles states, this adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* was lauded for being faithful to the original, a trait which was a source of criticism for another McCarthy's adaptation, *All the Pretty Horses* (Peebles, 2013: 167). The issue alluded to by Peebles is not the fidelity of rendition per se, but rather the fact that wishing to keep all or most of the elements present in the novel, Billy Bob Thornton managed to over-complicate the structure of his movie, while an inspired reduction of themes on the part of Joel and Ethan Coen has helped their adaptation enormously.

2.2. A Critical and Commercial Success

The endeavor undertaken by Joel and Ethan Coen was met with unequivocal critical and commercial success, since *No Country for Old Men* won four Academy Awards in 2009 and performed well at the box office, both in America and worldwide. This is partly due to the decision process which was discussed in the previous section, but also because the directorial team took part in many of the essential creative processes of the movie.

Among all the other adaptations of Cormac McCarthy's novels, this particular adaptation has the advantage of a team of film-makers who work often together and are used to envisioning cinematic narrative patterns together. This is not the single creator-auteur Truffaut spoke of, yet the directorial duo is as close to this concept as possible, since the two brothers are usually involved in most aspects of the creative process. They directed the movie together, using pseudonyms they edited the scenes so well as to garner another nomination for the Academy Award in this category, and more pertinently for this discussion, they created the adapted screenplay from McCarthy's novel and won the Oscar for this achievement.

Still, their involvement is not limited to these major facets of movie making. From the interviews granted by cast and crew it becomes apparent that many of the details viewers now associate with the infamous figure of Chigurh, played by Javier Bardem, are a direct result of the directors' vision. They approached the actor directly for this specific part, they suggested the haircut which the character sports throughout the movie and they came up with the personalized weapon Chigurh uses to kill, since the description in the novel remains ambiguous.

With these necessary details in mind, the following section will shift the discussion back to the movie adaptation and the examples of creative choices which make *No Country for Old Men* successful as both a film and an adaptation.

3. No Country for Old Men (2009)

As previously hinted, the main reason for the great achievements of this movie adaptation lies in the clever decisions the filmmaking brothers made when drafting the screenplay. For instance, the initial sequences are a work of art onto themselves, in my opinion, since they follow closely the order of the

vignettes in the novel, yet they manage to convey the main theme of the novel and of the movie, in a languid, almost lyrical fashion.

In the novel, the interview-like vignette in the 'italicized voice' of the older Sherriff Ed Tom Bell provides a meditation on the changes witnessed throughout a long career as a police officer. In the cinematic adaptation, the first image that is presented to the viewer is the title of the movie, in white block letters, against a completely black background. Then, the mood shifts, and this first stark visual declaration, "there is no country for old men", transforms into a slow and deliberate explanation for the validity of this truth, touching in the voice over of Sherriff Bell, played by Tommy Lee Jones, on the theme of violence in older and newer times. The images which accompany the Sherriff's declarations, all lines from the initial pages of the novel, are of typically American western landscapes, becoming increasingly visible with the aid of the rising sun. Until day breaks completely, the chromatic spectrum which is visible in these images mirrors the hues in McCarthy's own descriptions-black, blue, grey, yellow- and lingers on the play of shadow and light in nature.

This detail, which would normally be overlooked in landscapes shown to viewers at dawn epitomizes one of the author's recurring manners of description and career-long obsessions, since the interplay of shadows and light suggests the often dramatic mixture of the good and bad, ugly and beautiful, violent and kind which characterizes McCarthian diegesis. As such, this theme is paid great attention throughout the novel, and is continued in the adaptation as well, since Llewelyn Moss, played by Josh Brolin, and Anton Chigurh are often shown in the dark, looking out of windows, with the lights of the city or that of the moon hiding or revealing their faces. Natural or artificial light, on the page or in the novel, the meaning of shadows remains the same and follows the same pattern.

When the light of day brings clarity to the features of the landscape in the initial sequences, the elements which are shown on film, such as rundown buildings, shabby fences or old telephone wires, are meant to reinforce the archaic, nostalgic perspective and the time frame to which the Sherriff refers, belongs and understands. Yet the stories we hear in the voice over about the young man who killed his girlfriend because he was curious to do so facilitate the contrast between these "old" times and the reality of the present.

This present, which the Sherriff witnesses during the unfolding of the chase and struggle over stolen drug money, brings to the fore the image of Anton Chigurh, the sociopathic killer who, just like the youth in the story, has no apparent reason for committing violence, but rather revels in it for its own sake. The histrionic prowess of Javier Bardem aside[4], the film character of Chigurh has become so emblematic partly because he was described so coherently in the Coens' adaptation. Just like in the novel, he comes across as intelligent, but aloof, meticulous in his work, but also capable of sudden bursts of violence.

The core elements of the character have been seamlessly translated into the film, and most of his significant and telling scenes from the novel remain points of focus in the movie as well. Still, by the assumedly deliberate reduction of the theme of destiny in the movie, Chigurh appears to lose some of its nature as well. In this sense, the most representative scene occurs towards the beginning of the film, when Chigurh enters a gas station and decides the clerk's fate with the help of a coin. In the film, Bardem chooses to emphasize aggression and annoyance in this scene, delivering the line of "What's the most you ever lost on a coin toss?" without much philosophical preamble. The script keeps only part of the novel's seven-page episode (McCarthy, 2007: 52-8), a decision which is justified by the temporal constraints of a feature film, but which nonetheless has the unwanted effect of taking away from the intensity of this character. In the novel, Chigurh is obsessed with the notion of 'fate' and the extent to which one can change their destiny through decisions or will. Most of his discussions with other characters feature an ample exploration of the topic, which makes Chigurh seem more than an isolated assassin. In the novel, he is part of destiny, he is its instrument, and in this capacity he somehow transcends there the boundaries of evil, boundaries in which he remains mired in the filmic adaptation. In the same vein and with the same effect, the fact that Carla Jean, played by Kelly Macdonald, does not feature as prominently in the filmic version of *No Country for Old Men* disturbs

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[4] The actor won the Best Actor in a Supporting Role Academy Award for his portrayal in this film.

the balance of Chigurh's character; in the novel, Carla is a strong counterpoint of interpretation for Anton Chigurh, both of them being connected by a powerful belief in destiny.

As in any adaptation of the sort, some themes or characters are inevitably restricted to key scenes or minimal roles in the economy of the plot. This adaptation of McCarthy's novel is not immune in this regard and even cuts out completely some of the written source's important lines of inquiry, such as the Sherriff's confessions about his dead daughter or his behavior in the war. Nonetheless, its great achievement is that it chooses the elements it wants to convey, systematically explores them as much as it is possible in the limited number of scenes, and when time does not permit it, this cinematic adaptation inserts explanatory visual clues in its frames or shots. This is the case of the obsolete buildings and pieces of technology in the initial credits, but also, for instance, of the coin which can be momentarily seen in the motel room where Llewelyn Moss is murdered. The glimpse of the coin in this specific context alludes to the power of destiny and suggests the idea that Moss has finally met his fate, despite trying his best to escape it and living until the end with the illusion that he could control or make his own destiny. That his death is inevitable is a clear notion in the novel, even from early on, ensured through the help of foreshadowing mechanisms, but which only appears as a hint in the movie, presumably picked up more easily by those viewers who have read the novel beforehand.

4. Conclusions

All in all, despite the unavoidable restrictions and limitations which would displease the critics Brian McFarlane references in his article, the adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* into the 2007 movie of the same name directed by the Coen brothers should be considered a good example of its kind. The success of the enterprise rests in the inspired choices made by the filmmakers in the script, in the visual elements harnessed to the fullest, but most importantly to my mind, in the coherence with which the film unfolds. The advantage of having a creative duo whose influence could be exercised in more than one aspect of the production is clearly visible, and the result is that Ethan and Joel Coen's adaptation stands as a personal, homogeneous and attentive reading of McCarthy's novel.

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