

Film Review

Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

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In 1941 American director Preston Sturges released a film called *Sullivan's Travel*. In this movie an acclaimed director of Hollywood comedies dreams of making a totally different type of film, a realistic movie about the suffering of the poor. The film he has in mind is called *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. In order to get acquainted with the living conditions of the poor he dresses up as a bum and starts leading a deprived existence. Things go wrong, however, when he gets arrested and ends up on the chain gang somewhere in the swamps. Once he is allowed to watch a film at the prison cinema; the director is highly relieved that it is *Mickey Mouse* and not an example of social realism. Back home in his villa he immediately abandons his *O Brother* project and returns to the traditional form of a Hollywood comedy. Preston Sturges's film is a joyful comedy itself; a commentary upon the impossibility of transferring social reality to the screen. It is this basic message that has interested the Coen Brothers; they pay homage to Sturges's film not only by the title of their movie but also by its archaic 1940s display on the film posters: the letters are arranged in crescent shape. Apart from that, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (1999) is also a delightful comedy in the best possible "Coenesque" sense.

The film credits point to a totally different source of inspiration as well. Apparently the Coens have based their most recent film upon Homer's *The Odyssey*. The question arises, nonetheless, as to how significant this grand "classical gesture" is because the Coens have always managed to surprise the expectations of their audience: from their debut *Blood Simple* (1984), an unconventional ride into *film noir*, to the excellent *Fargo* (1996), a bloody thriller full of eccentric characters and unusual plot twists, the Coens have specialized in exploring an "off-beat territory" beyond the realms of traditional Hollywood aesthetics. It can be presumed, therefore, that the Coens use *The Odyssey* as a kind of mythological territory waiting to be remapped and redefined.

Instead, Homer's famous tale gets reduced to a few ironical allusions for the "initiated." There is a character called Ulysses who, sometime in the 1930s, returns home to his wife Penny and his children, and encounters a rival. Then there is a marvellous group of ethereal women called "The Sirens" who, like Nausicaa, wash their clothes while singing. Apparently they can transform one of Ulysses's companions into an animal (like Circe in Homer's text). There is also a dangerous cyclops (played by John Goodman), and a blind seer; both of them remind us of familiar "Odysseyan" territory. But we encounter, in addition, famous legends of

the South: the blues musician who sells his soul to the Devil, for example (an allusion to Robert Johnson and his song “Crossroads”), or “Babyface Nelson” (who appears as a bankrobber from the world of *Loony Tunes*). None of these are realistic characters: they become part of a plot that undermines any notions of “historical authenticity.” The same holds true for the dialogue. George Clooney, for example, must have rehearsed very hard to be able to talk in an almost surreal type of language that constantly shifts from a whole universe of Southern dialects to an archaic mode of expression that is reminiscent of Homer. Also the film’s strange colours indicate that the past itself cannot be revoked: the Coens spent great care on the process of digitally reprocessing the original film colours in the studio so that all tinges of freshness finally disappeared. The spectator is confronted with faded images that seemed to have turned yellow over the years.

The Coens present us with a vision of the Mississippi Delta that is entirely held together by its frame story: three convicts called Ulysses (George Clooney), Pete (John Turturro) and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) look for a treasure while, simultaneously, being on the run (they have escaped from prison). There is a goal ahead of them, and there are hunters behind them: an original plot arrangement that allows for many amusing plot twists. In the film’s best scene the entire film set drowns in a flood of biblical dimensions. We watch the film’s main characters floating by; they tumble under water, together with the remnants of a sunken town. This scene works as a meta-commentary upon the film’s aesthetic approach: the whole film consists of a series of amusing mini-tales and funny images.

The film also serves as a kind of “panoramic view” of the Mississippi Delta and its music, primarily Bluegrass and Gospel: it offers a cultural history in capsule form while, simultaneously, taking a satirical stab at the so-called “*Kulturindustrie*” (cultural industry), as Theodor Adorno would call it. Ulysses, Pete and Delmar finally hit upon a treasure by making a record under the name of Soggy Bottom Boys which becomes a massive success. They don’t hesitate, nonetheless, to allow a senator to use their song for his election campaign. In this manner, culture, politics and capitalism walk hand in hand in perfect harmony.

The film’s overall impact is that of a highly amusing journey into the Mississippi Delta and its culture. The Coens use mythology, film and cultural history as a kind of playground for their very own aesthetic approach. In this manner they succeed in combining a sense of tradition with an ironical mode of representation in the name of the mock-heroic.

Work Cited

Adorno, Theodor. “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Trans. and eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. New York: Continuum Publishing Company 1982. 270-299.