

Thematic Compression in the Film Adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*

Michael PRONKO

No Country for Old Men is a film adaptation that follows the novel closely. For that reason, it is a good test case for the last remnants of fidelity discourse. That discourse, which has largely become outdated, or out-theorized, holds that film adaptations are necessarily reductions of the complexities of the source novel. Fidelity discourse can be thought of as a tendency or determination to place higher value on the written text than on cinematic adaptation. As Bortoletti and Hutcheon argue:

This common determination to judge an adaptation's "success" only in relation to its faithfulness or closeness to the "original" or "source" text threatens to reinforce the current low estimation (in terms of cultural capital) of what is, in fact, a common and persistent way humans have always told and retold stories. (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 444)

This line of argument holds that adapting is a primary creative process that should not be disparaged, but recognized for its own value. The theorizing of film adaptation that rejects fidelity discourse has fervently argued for the value and integrity of film adaptations. Those theorists have largely made the case that films can be as complex as novels. Proponents of adaptations, especially those with a postmodern approach, have argued extensively for the value and importance of film narrative. They have sought to place film narrative at the same level with novel narrative,

and those arguments can be accepted at the level of textual importance. Film has won a place in the academy through such efforts and arguments, and thus opened up the larger study of narrative to be more inclusive and comprehensive, not to mention more realistic since so many narratives consumed by reader/viewers are in film form in this media-saturated age.

However, once questions of relative textual merit or value can be set aside, the question remains as to which form provides the more powerful textual experience. When comparing the film to the novel for any particular purpose, it is important to be careful of what Stam calls, "the axiomatic superiority of literature to film," (Stam 4). There must still be some means to investigate the differences and theorize the divergent means between the two narrative forms. The question remains whether film can be a text not just of equivalent value, but of equivalent complexity as a novel. Complexity of theme is one area where novels may have the edge over film. When a film adaptation is topographically and linguistically similar to the source novel, the comparison can be fruitful. Such is the case with the Joel and Ethan Coens' (hereafter to be referred to as "the Coen Brothers" for their close collaboration) adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*.

Because this film version follows the novel's narrative contours fairly closely, it provides a good case to see whether film has limitations in the scope of its thematic development. Dissatisfaction, though, can come not from a condescending evaluation of film altogether, but rather from the ways the two narrative forms establish themes. Because, as Bayless says, "the audience member aware of the original cannot help but be a little dissatisfied...a film like the Coens' *No Country for Old Men* that preserves its source text becomes something of a welcome relief for audience members, reviewers, and critics alike" (7). In the novel, the scope of the theme is in great part defined by dialogue and monologue. In the film, that scope of the theme is defined by dialogue, monologue and visual language. The case made by many proponents of the value of film adaptations have centered on the degree to which the visual language of film compensates for

the reduction of verbal language in the process of adapting the novel to film. That argument is a substantial one that can be accepted as is, with the important recognition that film is also a highly verbal medium.

The degree to which visual language can render the thematics of the narrative with the same subtlety, complexity and expansiveness as novelistic language remains in question. The possibility that film adaptations always express themes in less complex terms may simply be one reality of the process of adaptation. It might in fact simply be a limitation of the two different textual forms. However, that need not be a compelling criticism. It may simply be a function of the temporal necessities of consumption. Films run by quickly, while novels read more slowly. It may be the case that, while ultimately limited, films express as complex themes as allowed by the temporal limitations of running time and the cognitive and consumptive processing of viewers. Since novels have more "running time" to work with, their themes can develop, expand, reflect, and expand continuity in a way that films cannot. Films offer more bang for the buck, though ultimately the "bucks" may be fewer. Wallach argues that the source novel "... is in fact a cinematic script overwritten by a literary narration," (Wallach xvii). However true that may be at one level, the novel develops complex, allusive and broad themes that the film truncates.

Those who will argue for the relative equality of texts must explain how the films reduce the scope and complexity of themes, even while doing a spectacular job of presenting the story, characters and language. As Bayless and Redmon note:

... the Coens seem more than willing to project McCarthy's characters in the same light the novel casts them. The same can be said for much of the dialogue. Memorable lines or exchanges in the novel find their way into the film often verbatim. McCarthy's renowned sense of West Texas slang and sarcasm has been especially preserved. (Bayless and Redmon 8)

The language, then, follows the novel as closely as the film's scenic sequences. However, because the film adaptation is of such high quality, a closer reading of what was cut indicates that something really was lost in translation. However, "lost" again implies a privileged position for the source novel's literary language. It reignites the long-held contention that words can convey more than images and that the word is capable of expressing much more than any image can. However, the examination of how the different narrative forms and the language, both verbal and visual, can develop themes is still crucial. The conclusion is less a matter of finding a new way of valuing the different forms as to find out the ways in which narratives construct and convey their most complex elements. The divergences between narrative forms deserves reconsideration by examining the specific differences in language use, the development of dialogue and the patterns of scenic development, especially at the end of the novel and film, to see just how different they are, or are not. Interestingly, theme may be the element with greatest overlap between novel and film. These issues, though, are best discussed by examining the language of the novel and film as they occur in specific scenes.

The placement and embodiment of language

The quantity of language is inevitably reduced in any film adaptation. However, the misunderstanding that film is somehow insufficiently verbal and is primarily visual can be laid to rest by an examination of the dialogue in the film. The screenwriters, Joel and Ethan Coen, employ the most important dialogue in the key scenes and it is taken nearly verbatim from the novel. The verbal element of the film is extremely important. The film also creates powerful ironies in the juxtaposition of the verbal and visual elements. For example, when Chigurh goes with the drug cartel's two fixers to examine the initial murder scene, and then shoots them, the conversation they hold provides an extremely important foundation for the development of the theme of death, fate and character. This

is important since, as Woodson argues, "... the competing discourses of moral responsibility in the language of Sheriff Bell and of determinism in the language of Chigurh contradict" (Woodson 5). When those discourses and the language that carry them are reduced significantly, though, the contradiction becomes less sharp and less intricate.

The acting of Javier Bardem, who plays Chigurh, in the film's early scenes (*No Country for Old Men* 26-7), in large part compensates for the reduced dialogue and the removal of the indirect internal dialogue. The view of the dead bodies, the setting in the *bajada* country, and the quick deaths of the two unidentified men, all establishes a substantial base on which to develop the themes. The dialogue is nearly exactly the same, in phrasing and length, however the film's themes, it can be argued, are richly established by the visuals. The thematics are much more powerfully and fully accomplished in the film, at least in this scene, it can be argued, because the minimal dialogue and spare action are fuller and richer visually than in the novel. In the novel, the scene is equally crucial to understanding Chigurh's character and the themes that grow out of his character's progressive revelations. However, the novel presents this quick scene with fast pacing to move to the next chapter, where the internal monologue of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, always a disembodied and non-emplaced voice, returns. In the film, those monologues become voice-overs accompanying establishing shots of the country.

However, the use of verbatim dialogue here means the same words, phrasing, and rhythmic exchange, however, it does not mean the full dialogue. In several key scenes the dialogue is greatly reduced in the film. That reduction has important consequences for the development of themes. An examination of those scenes will help explore the differences in thematic development between the novel and film. The reduction of monologue and dialogue in the film reduces the scope of the themes, though does not undermine them entirely. In parts of the film, when language is reduced, cut or condensed, visual language takes over to compensate for the verbal compression or deletion. The film is an especially

relevant work because it is so “faithful,” to borrow the penitent language of fidelity discourse, to the novel. It is one of the few film adaptations that can be considered to follow the novel nearly scene by scene and it is an adaptation that has received both commercial and critical praise. However, the important dialogue that is cut or compacted, especially towards the end of the film, creates consequences that deserve exploration and hold implications for adaptation studies.

Thematic complexity: how many words are enough?

When dialogue and monologue are cut towards the end of the film, the story is not lost but the theme fails to develop as fully and completely. The final scenes of any narrative are crucial to the completion of thematic development and the establishment of the larger abstract comprehension of the narrative's purpose, intentions and direction. Without the dialogue to complete the final scenes, the film lacks closure on the final unveiling, or establishment, of the broader themes. The film seems to not want to push the thematic complexity to the final reaches, though it hardly ends up with a classic feel-good Hollywood ending. The film seems to pull its thematic punches, and does that by reducing the dialogue without compensating for that with visual language or other cinematic additions.

In particular, Chigurh's self-explanations are crucial to understanding his motivations, motivations that move his actions from the level of psychopathic killer to an embodiment of the force of death. The Coen Brothers keep a key bit of dialogue in the film to remind viewers of this, when the character Wells, who has been hired to track Chigurh says, “He's a psychopathic killer but so what? There's plenty of them around,” (Coen and Coen 96). The motivations of this murderous figure are at the heart of the novel, and are what gives it both Shakespearean and mythic proportions. Reducing that conversation to a more compact, streamlined conversation could arguably be a necessity for adapting any filmic scene, and it might be argued that the visual elements at least in part make up

for the cuts in dialogue. However, as Vanderheide argues, in a reading of McCarthy's novel as a classic allegorical quest narrative, "The terrestrial sovereign cannot lay claim on the dead, yet this is precisely what Chigurh does. The sovereign Chigurh attempts to embody is not the terrestrial but the absolute sovereign" (42). That is, the characters, particularly Bell and Chigurh, evolve continually to a higher plane of meaning. Their discourses are what move them to that higher plane, and their discourses are rooted in their dialogues and monologues. Without sufficient language in the film, the story remains a terrestrial one.

An analysis of the visual language does in part compensate for the reduction in dialogue from the novel, however, only partially. What is lost from the dialogue is a great deal. A closer examination of the important dialogue of the novel and a comparison to the language in the film will be followed by an analysis of the compensatory visual language from the film. Thematically, the film does not rise to the levels of ambiguity, allusion and complex thematic subtlety as the novel.

In the penultimate scene in which Chigurh delivers his murderous view of the world and the reasoning inside it in the novel, he sits calmly talking with his next victim, Carla Jean Moss. The film's visuals and acting by Javier Bardem make many of the themes clear, however, much is removed from the dialogue so that Chigurh appears more of a killer in a human sense, just another psychopathic killer, than an embodiment of the larger forces of evil, expression of the death drive or archetype from the worst reaches of the human psyche.

First of all, as several critics have pointed out, in the film Carla Jean refuses to call heads or tails when presented with the coin toss, a repeated motif in the film and novel both. However, in the novel, she does call the coin, heads, but it comes out tails. Chigurh, in the novel, goes on to explain about the coin, both before and after the fateful moment. Beforehand, Chigurh "... drew out a few coins and took one and held it up. He turned it. For her to see the justice of it" (McCarthy 258). Carla Jean argues with him more fully in the novel than in the film, denying his

reasoning, even as he insists "I got here the same way the coin did" (McCarthy 258). As Bayless and Redmon point out, "The cinematic Carla Jean silences Chigurh and supposes an authority she is never given in the novel by refusing to accept that a coin should determine Chigurh's action or her fate" (15). In the film, Carla Jean becomes a heroine confronting an evil, and very human, killer by refusing to subject herself to his view of destiny. She denies him the satisfaction of choosing, the pleasure of his gaze and his listening, by refusing to go against what she says God would not want her to do. In both the novel and the film, Carla Jean points out how crazy Chigurh is, but in the film this emphasizes his humanness, while in the novel it points towards a larger incomprehension of death, fate and time.

By framing Carla Jean's choice as a heroic one, the film promotes her as a real-life heroine, which is an important interpretation of the scene. Unfortunately, it lessens the way the scene promotes Chigurh's ascension as an avatar of death, revenge or Thanatoptic desire. The novel presents a much bleaker theme by presenting the fruitlessness of the hero's choice. Whether she "calls it" or not, heads or tails, death remains inevitable in the novel, but in the film, ironically by removing this choice, the inevitability of death is denied, since she might have called it right and lived. Chigurh's self-explanation, which is severely truncated in the film, gives a fuller account of his belief in the justice of death and his lack of culpability. The film's scene establishes the ongoing dialectic between survival and morality on the one hand and the utterly amoral certainty of death on the other in a very different way from the novel. The novel presents a fuller, broader examination of death's inevitability.

Lost words, lost themes

After the coin toss, or failure to toss the coin, the film removes a great deal of dialogue that continues to expand the themes. In the novel, Chigurh insists that, "For things at a common destination there is a

common path" (McCarthy 259), while Carla Jean realizes "Everthing I ever thought has turned out different... There aint the least part of my life I could of guessed" (McCarthy 259). Her realization of the inevitability of death gives the novel's scene a fatalism that is both existentialist and classically tragic. In contrast, McCarthy's manner of drawing upon the fatalistic denouement of Greek tragedy, while infusing a philosophical contemplation of death is not fully fleshed out, so to speak, in the film. The Coen Brothers' film restrains the themes, not just by cutting scenes, but more by reducing dialogue in the scenes it does keep.

Chigurh's insistence upon Carla Jean's understanding what will happen to her comes off as a moment of added cruelty in the film, while in the novel it is that, of course, first but with a substantial and extended exploration of theme. Barber, rightly, argues that, "By refusing to call the coin toss, she refuses to accept that violence is something beyond human control. Thus, her abstention from Chigurh's coin ritual challenges the death-sacralizing fatalism he lives by" (Barber 167). The novel, though, allows the violence to be considered beyond human terms, as a basic principle of the world. She becomes a sacrificial object in both cases, but a human one in the film and a spiritual one in the novel. Ironically, she ends up being more heroic in the film for refusing to blaspheme god by choosing and remaining outside of Chigurh's sacrificial system.

The same goes for Chigurh's denial of involvement in the larger workings of fate, when he says, "I had no say in the matter" (McCarthy 259). Because so much of the surrounding dialogue was cut in the process of adaptation, the film's scene comes off as slightly ironic and much more cruel in the film, just another psychopathic killer instead of a philosopher with a pistol. The dialogue in the novel is a philosophical reflection on the nature of larger issues of fate, death and consequences for one's, or other's, actions. Perhaps the Coen Brothers, in writing the screenplay and directing and editing the film, decided that these themes were already sufficiently developed in the other sections of the film. However, the novel's scene is much more complex, allusive and challenging. Chigurh

and Carla Jean debate free will and determinism in the novel, but in the film, the discussion focuses on her survival.

You don't owe nothin to dead people.
Chigurh cocked his head slightly. No? he said.
How can you?
How can you not?
They're dead.
Yes. But my word is not dead. Nothing can change that.
You can change it.
I don't think so. Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact. (McCarthy 255-6)

This dialogue from the novel, which did not make it into the film, is crucial for developing the concepts of death and fate to a broader, fuller level. The dialogue develops the idea of death in the person of Chigurh as a god-like controller of destiny. He seems to be justifying his actions by disavowing that they are actions of his choosing, at the same time as he suggests he is usurping god's control over human affairs, while also hinting at the larger forces of destiny that he must help enact by keeping his word. He sees himself as the "the one right tool," or simply the same as the coin, but at the same time, he himself knows he is above the simple use-value life of the ordinary world, and aspires humanly, in the film, and transcends symbolically, in the novel, to a god-like level of being. The difference, though, is crucial. In the film, he remains human, but in the novel, the readings allow for multiple interpretations.

Importantly, though, the film does expand the themes in visual terms. Before Chigurh's and Carla Jean's conversation in her bedroom, the film has a brief scene of Carla Jean's mother's funeral. The film's cut from the shape of the tombstone to the shape of the house emphasizes the beginning and middle and end of life that the novel describes more fully. The interior shots of the house and the framing of Carla Jean, as well as the

acting help to convey a great deal of the thematic material. Carla Jean, in the film, sits in front of a vanity mirror, while Chigurh remains in the shadows, with only his hands lit by the incoming light from the window. The contrast in their faces, the lighting, the voices, and even the silence of Chigurh and his mocking tone in the film when he intones the phrase, "They all say the same thing... They say: You don't have to do this," (McCarthy 257) all serve to develop the complexity of the themes surrounding death and fate. The film's final words in the scene, from Chigurh, "I got here the same way the coin did," (*No Country for Old Men* 1:50:54) become strongly emphasized, another way of enhancing the theme.

The film also substantially abbreviates the explanation from Chigurh about choices and paths in life. That explanation puts Chigurh at another level of understanding, or perhaps false illusion, about how the world's paths and choices are made. His explanation to Carla Jean in the novel, which is cut in the film, is worth quoting at length:

Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning. (McCarthy 255–6)

The explanation here gives Chigurh's worldview more substantiality, and presents a challenging set of ideas that McCarthy presents for readers to contemplate. As Barber argues, "Chigurh is a symbol for both the violence foundational to culture and the fascinating draw such violence continues to have in contemporary culture" (Barber 163). The reduction of the dialogue that frames Chigurh's actions leaves the action of killing more exposed in the film. That, it must be understood, corresponds to a

simplification of the themes. By reducing the dialogue and monologue, the film presents actions without their accompanying thematic challenge. The violence in the film is much more violence as a statement of the nature of the world, but in the novel the violence is a disturbing trigger for thought. McCarthy's novels put violence, and there is always a lot of violence in his novels, into a broader thematic context.

Early in the novel, Bell identifies Chigurh as a "true and living prophet of destruction" (McCarthy 8) and then later calls him a ghost and a symbol of Mammon. Though those phrases are included in the film, the complexity of language use in the novel pushes Chigurh more fully into the larger roles of prophet, ghost or Biblical symbol. McCarthy's particular style of dialogue employs rhythmic patterns similar to that found in dramatic or cinematic dialogue, however, when the dialogue itself is cut, the themes do not build and develop in the same way or to the same extent. Language becomes reduced to another narrative action in the film, a plot point that moves the story forward quickly, rather than slowing down and rising to the level of thematic contemplation as in the novel.

The ramifications of a reduction in language can be seen even more fully from the following novel dialogue. Carla Jean is still trying to negotiate her life with Chigurh, but Chigurh explains to her much more than his own reasons. He explains the entirety of one's narrative existence.

You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn't allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps. In this case to small purpose. Most people don't believe that there can be such a person. You can see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of. Do you understand? When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way.

You're asking that I second say the world. (McCarthy 260-1)

Chigurh's explanations go towards explaining his motivation and his particular deterministic beliefs, and how he fits into the determined world. His unique mix of megalomania and humility, his self-confidence that there could not be another person like himself, both surpassing the everyday morality of most people and yet positioned within the larger forces of the world, offers a complexity of theme that the film fails to develop.

Character and confrontation: thematic dialogue

The film does develop the themes in the contrast between Chigurh and Sheriff Bell, the two central characters who never meet face-to-face in either the novel or the film. The embodied characters and the quick editing from one to the other establishes an important, and complicated, back-and-forth between their characters, their explanations and their two worldviews. That said, the film never offers the possibility that Chigurh is anything other than human. Bayless and Redmon argue, "The Coens' Chigurh is not some embodiment of evil, some instrument of karma, or some mechanical or animalistic force unwilling or unable to change. The film proposes that as proficient a killer and escape artist as Chigurh is, he is still human" (12). That is, the film, through systematic reduction of dialogue, much more than through the embodiment of the character in an actor, restrains thematic development

The film includes a significant portion of the internal monologue of Sheriff Bell, though far from all of it. The reduction of the italicized monologue of Bell's from the novel is compensated for in the film by accompanying the voice-over with gorgeous backdrops of the country, as if the voice is rising from the breadth of the world's expanses. That level of "compensation" for lack of a better word, feels less like a desperate way of translating pure language than in adapting it to visual language. The film does a remarkable job of translating from verbal language to visual.

The visual shots of the country, with wide horizons and a stunning degree of spaciousness, feel adequate to convey what Bell is as a character and what thematic functions he expresses. He becomes the country, to put it in poetic terms, or at least becomes the old man in the country from the title, which is taken from the first line of W. B. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium." The visual background for the voice-overs works magnificently to position Bell's voice deeply into the country, and by extension position Chigurh as somehow alien to the setting he traverses with such murderous ease.

At the same time, though, Chigurh somehow does not rise above or out of the landscape. He remains fully immersed in it, and so, then, do the themes he speaks about. The final scene where Chigurh speaks is important because it develops him as a character more fully, and develops the themes he represents more fully. In those scenes are the only glimpses of the reasons behind his actions, and the only chance to understand his point of view. The film, by reducing his dialogue, reduces the themes he conveys. The contrast in the two characters' points of view is important because Sheriff and Chigurh, even the sound is similar, form the opposing poles of the thematic dialogue. In the final two scenes of dialogue, the conversation between Chigurh and Carla Jean is set up parallel, almost perfectly parallel, to the final conversation between Sheriff Ed Tom Bell and his wife, Loretta. The two ending scenes with the characters' closing lines follow each other more closely in the film than in the novel.

In the film, Sheriff Bell's internal monologue becomes spoken dialogue with the country behind him outside the kitchen window and cuts to his wife, Loretta. The thematic ironic contrasts of that scene with Chigurh's scene of explaining to Carla Jean come out much more strongly, and do much more thematic work, in the film than in the novel simply because the scenes are positioned closer. The novel has various actions by Bell, in several different scenes, intervening. However, in the film, the only thing that intervenes between Chigurh's final words and Bell's final words is a very loud and bloody car crash. Chigurh is injured, and any

moral observer of the film would want to say, punished, before he recovers and walks off still alive. That scene in part enacts what he says in the novel about paths, choices and being unable to predict what will happen. However, because the words are not spoken in the film, they remain more of an enigma, a surprise *deus ex machina*, that propels the storyline to the next level of understanding, that of the world's irony. However, the film scenes do not move the themes forward as fully as the words do in the novel.

When thematic understanding is located within the particular point of view of a single character, and in the words of those characters, as it is in these two novels, then something is indeed lost when those words are removed. The film ends up with significantly different characters and significantly different themes, and a different contrast between them. Interestingly, their similar attitudes to the dead are part of what makes their opposing discourses so richly complex in the novel. Vanderheide notes, "As much as Bell personifies an ideology opposed to Chigurh's nihilism, he nevertheless seems to share many of the same convictions" (43). Both of them end up in the same places and they even are reflected in the same blank TV screen, in the film version, when they enter Moss's trailer. However, the visual parallels are not enough to make the themes as complex as the novel's language.

Furthermore, the reduced monologue of Bell means that his discourse about moral responsibility becomes deflated in the film. In the following passage, which ends the film and the novel both, Sheriff Bell has retired and become just Ed Tom. In the film, he tells his wife at the breakfast table what he dreamed the night before and in the novel, he speaks in the italicized monologue, but the words are the same:

Two of 'em. Both had my father. It's peculiar. I'm older now'n he ever was by twenty years. So in a sense he's the younger man. Anyway, first one I don't remember so well but it was about meetin' him in town somewheres and he give me some money and I think I lost it.

The second one, it was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin' through the mountains of a night. Goin' through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and snowin', hard ridin'. Hard country. He rode past me and kept on goin'. Never said nothin' goin' by. He just rode on past and he had his blanket wrapped around him and his head down. And when he rode past I seen he was carryin' fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin' on ahead and that he was fixin' to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold, and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up. (McCarthy 309)

The film's scene is not put in voice-over with a pan of the country, as is done in other parts of the film, but is told in dialogue. That way of delivering the dialogue helps to establish Bell's character and helps to develop the theme of the continual dialectic, one that unfolds all the way through the film in both visual and verbal terms, not so far different from the novel. However, that final close-up of Tommy Lee Jones' face and shoulders at the kitchen table ends up pushing very close to being a full closure of themes. It is not that the scene is a Coen-esque happy ending, one infused with more questions and ironies than resolve, but rather the moral tone of getting the "last word" overpowers the words of Chigurh. In the novel, the two characters are matched, word for word, but the film gives precedence to Bell, which is one way of resolving their thematic conflict, perhaps too neatly.

No country for conversation

No one would argue against the basic understanding of how important language is for the development of theme, however in *No Country for Old Men* the conversations stand out as especially important because they

contrast with the action. In the film adaptation, when the conversations are shortened, the themes do not develop as fully. This is important since, as Lilley points out,

In the same way that [McCarthy's] characters realize a paradoxical freedom within the determinism of their landscape, so too we as readers — similarly subjected to the determinism of plot and language — find an impressive, qualitative 'dynamic space' within the confines of the text. (Lilley 284)

That is, the conversations in the novel help to define the country where the determinism limits the characters' actions and shapes their destiny. The occasional coin toss might allow for what Chigurh in the novel says is "a final glimpse of hope in the world to lift your heart before the shroud drops, the darkness" (McCarthy 159), but the language remains essential to the novel in a way that it is only another part of the action driving the narrative forward in the film. That difference may be the difference between novel and film narrative.

The constraints and how they work are notable in both the novel and film in an early scene in which Chigurh brutally strangles the deputy who brings him in. As Malewitz notes, in "... the most audacious inversion of use value, Chigurh opens the novel by strangling a police officer with the very handcuffs designed to restrain him" (726). Again and again, as Malewitz argues, objects are misused or used for other purposes, and indeed he titles his article about McCarthy's concepts of use value and consumerism with a quote from Chigurh that appears in both novel and film, "Anything can be an instrument" (721). And yet, the use of objects for different purposes is a central metaphor for language. Language is used by Chigurh and Sheriff Bell in entirely different ways and for very different purposes. The characters' language, then, when cropped or condensed, changes significantly the presentation of their character and the themes rooted inside their character.

Bortolotti and Hutcheon argue that adaptations of novels into film can best be thought of as more similar to biological adaptation. They argue that it is not worthwhile to think in terms of faithfulness or unfaithfulness, nor to conceive of the novel as the original or source, since those terms are already loaded with evaluative connotations. As they argue, "Instead, the 'source' could perhaps be more productively viewed as the 'ancestor' from which adaptations derive directly by descent" (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 446). Their concept of story memes as replicating endlessly through various narrative forms is an appealing one. However, when the film adaptation is given sufficient praise on its own terms as a descendent or derivative of the source novel, it still remains open to question whether the film is as complex thematically as the novel on which it was based.

Wallach, in his introduction to an important volume on the novel's adaptation, argues that, "Aside from McCarthy's dramatic texts, any number of critical studies and reviews regard his novels — in their scenaristic grandeur, intricate descriptions of places and settings, and the schematized melodramatic excesses — as 'cinematic'" (xii). However, Wallach does not mention thematic complexity as one element of McCarthy's work. That is, the themes of his novels may transfer through the other elements into film, but their complexity resists cinematic treatment, and at times becomes reduced in scope and poignancy. That is not to say that the film does not offer a broad vision and sharp emotions. It does. But if both novels and film narratives can in some way be considered related but distinct prison houses of language, it may be that novels are the larger prison houses, while film adaptations, as high quality as they may be, must of necessity be smaller ones in the ways they reduce novelistic themes.

Works Cited

- Barber, Benjamin. "Expositions of Sacrificial Logic: Girard, Zizek, and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 20 (2013): 163–179. *Project Muse*. 23 Dec. 2013.

- Bayless, Ryan and Redmon, Allen. "‘Just Call It’: Identifying Competing Narratives in the Coens' *No Country for Old Men*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 41.1 (2013): 6–18. *Project Muse*. 23 Dec. 2013.
- Bortolotti, Gary, and Linda Hutcheon. "On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and ‘Success’ — Biologically." *New Literary History* 38.3 (2007): 443–458. *Project Muse*. 23 Dec. 2013.
- Coen, Joel and Ethan Coen. *No Country for Old Men Adaptation*. Based on the Novel by Cormac McCarthy. Paramount Specialty Film: White Production Draft (2006). Web PDF.
- Lilley, James D. "‘The hands of yet other puppets’: Figuring Freedom and Reading Repetition in *All the Pretty Horses*." *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy* Ed. Rick Wallach. New York: Manchester UP, 2000. 272–87. Print.
- Malewitz, Raymond. "‘Anything Can Be an Instrument’: Misuse Value and Rugged Consumerism in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*." *Contemporary Literature* 50.4 (2009): 721–741. *Project Muse*. 23 Dec. 2013.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Vintage, 2005.
- No Country for Old Men*. Dir. and Screenplay by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Perf. Tommy Lee Jones, Javier Bardem, Josh Brolin, Kelly Macdonald, and Woody Harrelson. Miramax, 2007. Film.
- Stam, Robert. "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation." *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Adaptation*. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, eds. Maiden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004. 1–52. Print.
- Vanderheide, John. "No Allegory for Casual Readers." *No Country for Old Men: From Novel to Film*. Eds. Lynnea Chapman King, Rick Wallach, and Jim Welsh. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2009. 32–45. Print.
- Wallach, Rick. "Introduction: Dialogues and Intertextuality: *No Country for Old Men* as Fictional and Cinematic Text." *No Country for Old Men: From Novel to Film*. Eds. Lynnea Chapman King, Rick Wallach, and Jim Welsh. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2009. xi–xxiii. Print.
- Woodson, Linda. "‘You are the battleground’: Materiality, Moral responsibility, and Determinism in *No Country for Old Men*." *No Country for Old Men: From Novel to Film*. Eds. Lynnea Chapman King, Rick Wallach, and Jim Welsh. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2009. 1–12. Print.