

Filming the Holy:
Rhetorical Strategies in the Coen Brothers' *True Grit*
By Richard Engell¹

Recently, the remake of the classic movie *True Grit* by Joel and Ethan Coen opened to rave reviews. Many praised it as their most broadly entertaining film to date (e.g. Turan). Nonetheless, Stanley Fish has called it a “truly religious movie.” The purpose of this study is to explore how the film used the rhetorical devices of narrative and cinematic framing to enhance the spiritual potential of the story.

The rhetorical challenge of the religious or spiritual is to manage well the tension between transcendence and immanence (Engnell, “Otherness” 85). Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* characterizes the religious as the experience of the “wholly Other,” the uncanny (26). A truly religious experience cannot be assimilated to ordinary cognitive routines; a tinge of mystery must always remain. Yet since humans can only respond to what is available in this world, effective spirituality also requires what Mircea Eliade calls “hierophanies,” physical manifestations of the Other in ordinary experience (11). Transcendence, therefore, must be made available without compromising Otherness.

The specific rhetorical challenge for film, vis-à-vis the spiritual, is that film is biased towards immanence. Because the medium of film easily presents great amounts of compelling information quickly, it may undermine the mystery central to the Holy. After all, seeing is believing.

Nonetheless, film also possesses extraordinary rhetorical resources for directing and controlling attention and thus reintroducing uncertainty and mystery. There is the strategy of

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visual framing. The huge, vivid image in a darkened room vanquishes competing images and thoughts and “frames” whatever the screen depicts, lifting it out of normal contexts and thus potentially upsetting normal cognitive routines (at least in a theatre setting). The object on screen may appear as “more” or “less” than what ordinary cognition takes it to be (Engnell, “Spiritual Potential” 242-245). Film also excels at narrative framing through its control of sequence. A given scene may “prime” the audience for what follows or retrospectively call into question its normal expectations.

While the plot of *True Grit* has inherent religious potential (life and death, justice, an “innocent” child, etc.), the story may be enjoyed simply as a conventional Western: A 14-year-old Arkansas girl, Mattie Ross, seeks justice in the death of her father. She hires a dissolute federal marshal, Rooster Cogburn, to guide her into the Oklahoma territory and help her capture (or kill) the culprit. At the moment of their victory, however, Ross falls into a pit of rattlesnakes. Cogburn rescues her and races to get her to medical aid.

The Coen brothers, however, use narrative framing to enhance the spiritual potential of a story. The film opens with a Bible verse displayed on screen, then a narration that concludes: “You must to pay for everything in this world, one way or another. Nothing is free but the grace of God.” The film score consists almost entirely of instrumental excerpts or allusions to an evangelical hymn. As the film ends, however, the audience hears the lyrics sung for the first time: “What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms.” By bracketing the narrative with religious material, the film foregrounds its spiritual potential yet the rest of the film contains very little explicitly religious content.

The filmmakers use narrative framing also to emphasize the role of Mattie Ross. The film begins with the voice of the adult Ross as narrator, reflecting on her experience and setting the

scene. The first character clearly depicted on screen is the young Ross as she arrives via train to Fort Smith, Arkansas. The film ends with the aged Ross contemplating a graveyard. The film narrative begins and ends with Ross.

More importantly, the Ross role is magnified through visual framing. Much of the film is given over to watching her talk. She is filmed from the shoulders up far more than any other character; only Ross is awarded extreme close ups. The viewer is clearly directed toward Ross as the film's center.

What we find, however, is that Ross is head-strong, proud, insensitive, elitist, prejudiced, judgmental, and legalistic, quick to appeal to law and contract to get her way. She readily dismisses others as "trash!" Her most admirable characteristic is a fierce commitment to justice (of a sort) but she is little disposed toward mercy. Mattie Ross is a hard child to like.

Because film so easily frames and conveys the face, close camera shots frequently are used to prompt insight into character. They suggest that a character has an "inside." The Ross character, however, does not do nuance well. What we perceive from a distance is what we see close in. While intrigued perhaps by her expressive mouth and eyes, we do not feel that we really know her. In part, the stiff, formal language used in the film distracts the viewer from simply attending to the character. Speaking in full sentences and without contractions or ellipsis also weakens emotional expressiveness. It is also possible that the directors deliberately sought a somewhat flat, one-note performance for the role. In his analysis of the spiritual potential of film, Paul Schrader suggests that some directors over-rehearse so that the actors appear to perform by rote, thus denying the viewers the insight they seek (26, 65-67). One reviewer finds that the Ross actor speaks the dialog in the manner of a memorized school oration (Corliss). However, the camera invites us to scrutinize the Ross character; she remains somewhat of a mystery.

Another way to understand and assess a character is through how the character changes over time. In *True Grit*, however, the Ross figure remains largely unchanged, still attempting, for example, to exploit her legal resources even as she is left alone with the very outlaw she has sought to bring to justice. Though her brush with death might be expected to prompt some inward transformation, the primary narrative breaks off just as she reaches potential aid. The screen, in fact, goes dark for a time.

The film then jumps ahead 25 years to show a middle-aged Ross who is seeking out Cogburn at a wild-west show, only to find he has just died. Her eyes water up at the news, but the episode ends with Ross calling one of the show owners “trash” for not standing in a lady’s presence. Same old Mattie Ross. In the final scene, an aged Ross contemplates Cogburn’s gravesite. Close-ups reveal a thoughtfulness and vulnerability unseen before, but her closing narration still includes the now-expected remonstrances against others. Any sign of transformation is subtle.

There is one way, though, in which Ross has clearly changed. Because of her encounter with rattlesnakes, she has lost her left arm. This fact is both hidden and then emphasized through narrative sequencing and visual focus. It is hidden in that the screen goes dark just when this kind of information would normally be forthcoming. The loss of the arm is then emphasized through cinematic framing. As the screen remains black, we hear the adult Ross begin narrating, and then we see her face framed by the train window. Just as the narration mentions the loss of the arm, we see her backlit silhouette, the left sleeve of her dress pinned up and conspicuously empty. The empty sleeve also figures prominently in the concluding scene. Ross walks away from the gravesite and we again see her silhouetted from behind, with the empty sleeve prominent.

The film presents no explicit spiritual “message” but framing the narrative with religious

material and then focusing narratively and visually on the Ross role encourages the viewer to struggle with the meaning of the story. It preserves mystery while nonetheless suggesting meaning. Perhaps we recall the opening maxim of the film: You pay for everything in this life. Perhaps Ross has “paid” for something with the loss of an arm.

But what would she have paid for? For being an obnoxious, self-centered, bullying person? Well, she was only 14 years old. For lacking mercy? Well, Cogburn was certainly worse than Ross. Perhaps she has paid for nothing. Like Jacob, she has simply wrestled with the divine—in the mode of justice—and came away wounded. Otto maintained that the Holy is apprehended in three modes—as supreme mystery, as supreme beauty, and as supreme danger (1-41). The mortal and flawed is always in danger in the presence of the divine. In the end, Ross bore in her body the wounding of the Holy.

Would the Coen brothers agree with this spiritual take on *True Grit*? Probably not, but their use of narrative and cinematic framing suggests that they would approve the search.

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