

# A POSTMODERN TWIST TO THE WESTERN FILM TRADITION IN *THE BALLAD OF BUSTER SCRUGGS* BY THE COEN BROTHERS\*

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## ABSTRACT

Although the Coen brothers had already made films related to the Western genre, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) is a different venture, since they wrote the script of this anthology movie comprising six stories themselves. Besides delving into some of the themes that they have dealt with in their filmography—mortality, ethics, violence, justice, etc.—they also provide the film with a number of postmodern twists that hint at an effort to work through some of the problems posed by the mythology of the American West. *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* contains the use of intertextuality across various art forms, a parodic treatment, and the inclusion of unusual perspectives that are all typical of postmodern aesthetics and politics of representation.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, Western mythology, postmodern aesthetics, genre conventions, parodic self-reflexivity.

## UN GIRO POSTMODERNO A LA TRADICIÓN DEL WESTERN EN *LA BALADA DE BUSTER SCRUGGS* DE LOS HERMANOS COEN

## RESUMEN

Aunque los hermanos Coen ya habían dirigido películas del Oeste, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) es un proyecto diferente ya que ellos mismos escribieron el guión de este Western episódico dividido en seis tramas distintas. Además de seguir indagando en algunos de los temas que los Coen ya habían tocado en su filmografía—la mortalidad, la ética, la violencia, la justicia, etc.—este filme incorpora una serie de giros postmodernos que revelan un interés por explorar algunos de los problemas que la mitología del Oeste americano plantea. *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* incluye rasgos como el uso de la intertextualidad entre diferentes formas artísticas, toques paródicos, y la inclusión de perspectivas alternativas, todos típicos de la corriente postmodernista.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, Mitología del Oeste, Estética postmodernista, Convenciones de género, Reflexividad paródica.

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The postmodern basks in the proliferation of micronarratives. It holds itself in opposition to all that is static, and attempts to decenter, detotalize, and demythologize while taking nothing, including its own (non) premises very seriously. In this way, postmodernity interrogates all that we once took for granted about language and experience.

Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion*

In the movie's most memorable storylines, the filmmakers appear to be working through some sort of problem in their, and our, relationship to the mythology of the American West. Either they're deromanticizing a long-held archetype [...] or they're attempting to recast a familiar plotline through a rarely considered point of view

Dana Stevens, Review of *The Ballad of B.S.*

## INTRODUCTION

For the past forty years, the Coen brothers have proved that they can deal with almost any film genre and set their stories in various regions of the U.S.—both real and imaginary. Nevertheless, from *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Raising Arizona* (1987) to *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and *True Grit* (2010), it is also evident that the American Southwest and Far West have always held a special appeal for the gifted duo. Michael Koresky has remarked that “themes of the American white man’s bumbling attempts at realizing his own ‘manifest destiny’ can be detected through all the Coen films we might dub Westerns” (2018, 37). Indeed, the Coens have shown that they feel as comfortable with a canonical Western such as *True Grit*, which contains many of the devices and story beats of the genre, as with hybrid evolutions of the tradition in *No Country for Old Men*, which incorporates features of the psycho-thriller and film noir. Even a black comedy like *The Big Lebowski* (1998) introduces the figure of a cowboy—played by Sam Elliott—who functions as a Chandler-style type of narrator. Although the Coen brothers are well-known for often subverting and parodying the codes and styles of different film genres, in the case of their incursions into the Western tradition, audiences have had to wait until *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) to enjoy a full-fledged deconstruction of the myths, tropes and conventions of the genre. As William Jensen has noted, “this anthology film consists of six vignettes that explore life and death in the American West in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”; but what is fascinating about it is that “sometimes the Coens put a new spin on familiar tropes, and other times they

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explore virgin territory” (Jensen 2019, 39). Although the film accommodates many of the staple ingredients of Western movies, such as gunslingers, the hanging tree, bandits, wagon trains, stagecoaches, and, of course, the inevitable Indians, the movie is packed with abrupt turnabouts, peculiar characters and engrossing dilemmas that are by no means common in conventional Westerns. In this sense, one could argue that while using many of the typical figures, motifs, and conventions of classical Westerns, the Coen brothers are also trying to challenge and deromanticize many of the myths associated with the American West by concocting memorable, self-reflective narratives. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon describes in great detail the effects that these types of wayward metafiction have on our understanding of history and culture:

Such a clashing of various possible discourses of narrative representation is one way of signalling the postmodern use and abuse of convention that works to ‘de-doxify’ any sense of the seamlessness of the join between the natural and the cultural, the world and the text, thereby making us aware of the irreducible ideological nature of every representation—of past and present. (1989, 53)

The Coens’ process of de-doxification and denaturalization of Western myths begins with their choice of characters, most of which are presented as being blatantly anti-heroic (cf. Koresky 2018, n.p.). Unlike the protagonists of classical Westerns, these are mostly feckless individuals living on the margins of emerging societies who can hardly be said to pursue any laudable goals, other than surviving in a violent environment. As several reviewers of the film have argued, there is something nihilistic about the Coens’ portrayal of these characters because their stories illustrate “the remorselessness of the universe and the mostly hapless efforts men undertake to [...] ‘avert the evil decree’” (Podhoretz 2018, 38). In a characteristically postmodern fashion, the directors play with the reprobate characters—which may range from outlaws and covetous impresarios to gold prospectors and a damsel in distress—to show, mostly by means of ironic inversion, that “randomness, contingency, and even absurdity” (Wilde 1981, 10) usually gain the upper hand in our existence. Although the characters are very diverse and driven by distinct motivations—reputation, greed, loyalty, love, etc.—they are all innocents “alone in an unpredictable universe without design” (McGrath 2019, 45). But if the plots of the six stories are governed by a great deal of uncertainty and randomness, little else can be affirmed about the endings of these short narratives which, while providing a sense of closure, also contain a shade of ambiguity and incompleteness that is habitual in postmodern art works (cf. Davis 2007, 3-5). Curiously, as several critics have argued, the open-endedness of tales such as “Meal Ticket” and “All Gold Canyon” contribute to the audience’s feeling that, despite their diversity in tone and style, the six stories are ultimately part of a single, unified work with thematic and philosophical resonances that are shared by all the episodes (cf. Stevens 2018, n.p.; Koresky 2018, 37).

In the first epigraph to this article, Lance Olsen states that postmodern micro-narratives—such as those comprised in *The Ballad*—are very useful because they come to interrogate and undermine the hierarchies and absolutist discourses of



certain mythologies by means of more plural and parodic perspectives (1990, 148). Very much like Hutcheon, he is convinced that by “using and ironically abusing” specific codes and forms of representation of a genre, art works may destabilize and detotalize it, thus producing a critique of its ideology (cf. Hutcheon 1989, 8). In the pages that follow, a number of postmodern techniques and tactics observable in the Coen’s film will be explored to show how they compel us to look at Western mythology in a very different light. As they have admitted in some interviews, influenced by the spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone, they were interested in doing “deeper things” with the genre by playing with some of its key features (Rottenberg 2018, n.p.). Among the devices that the duo use most profusely in *The Ballad*, a reference to the intertextuality across different art forms—but also with regard to other films—seems totally unavoidable. Not only do they nimbly borrow materials from other arts, but they manage to hybridize them successfully with their sophisticated filmic techniques to get the best out of them. Likewise, the Coens are very fond of introducing parodic reversals of expectations in their depiction of the West which challenge some of the tenets central to the “grand narratives” of the region (cf. Lyotard 1984, 60). Far from merely trivializing our previous understanding of those myths, this parodic treatment attempts to show the constructed—and often prejudiced—nature of those totalizing assumptions. Finally, a few pages will be devoted to the importance of perspectivism and the inclusion of generally excluded points of view in the narratives of the American West. As Hassan has claimed, one of the key features of postmodern aesthetics is precisely this “carnivalization” of the fictional work, which exploits “polyphony, the centrifugal power of language, [and] the ‘gay relativity of things’” (1987, 171).

## INTEGRATING VARIOUS ART FORMS AND THE ROLE OF INTERTEXTUALITY

Something that may bewilder readers when they go over the reviews of *The Ballad* is the fact that they are likely to come across references and allusions to comics, short story collections or illustrations, rather than to other movies. Unusual as these connections may initially appear, once one reads the analysts’ observations, they seem fully justified given the Coens’ dependence on and devotion to those other artistic expressions. Koresky, for example, claims that “ever wary of do-gooder cinema [such as some recent ‘revisionist Westerns’], the Coens have excavated the concept of the dime-store pulp Western, those paperbacks that hearken more than 150 years” (2018, 37). And, indeed, this author manages to evince how the tightness of dialogues and the clarity of observation in the film are reminiscent of this type of popular fiction. Not just that, but regarding question of morality, “dime-store novels are a good reference point for the Coens, whose rich, occasionally florid and grotesque style conceals hard moral centers—if never certitude” (Koresky 2018, 38). Other reviewers have found it much more appropriate to compare the film to the comics and cartoons of the 1950s and 1960s, which often told stories of physical violence and moral depravity, usually buttressed by unexpected turnabouts and



climactic punches (Lalire 2019, 86). It is somehow natural that the movie should be associated with these forms of popular entertainment because they also contain certain generic elements—such as the charismatic outlaw, the wagon train’s tortuous journey or the stagecoach exchanges—as well as the very theme of American frontier, all of which are pushed to glaring extremes and problematized. Although they are never abject imitators of those other art forms, they employ some of their outlines and saddle-worn conventions to dig deeper into their brand of American existentialism (cf. O’Sullivan 2018, n.p.). While it is true that most comparisons in reviews and articles are drawn with popular forms of art, such as penny dreadfuls and cartoons, there are also several references to consecrated authors from which the Coens have also scrounged a few things. Manu Yáñez wrote in *Fotogramas*, for instance, that “it is possible to imagine the film as an unlikely combination of the imaginings of Mark Twain, with his earthy wit, and Cormac McCarthy, with his implacable vision of the most sinister aspects of human nature” (2018, n.p.; translation by the author).

But, of course, the visual device that most ostensibly indicates the Coens’ indebtedness to other forms of art in the movie is the dusty, morocco-bound book of Western stories, each accompanied with a color plate, which opens the film and carries the audience from one story to the next. Obviously, one could think of this age-old gimmick of a book’s turning pages as a facile resource to get the audience to move in a smoother manner from one episode to the next. However, the look and tone of the volume evoke the aforementioned turn-of-the-century dime novels and the children’s books of the 1950s with great detail. According to Stevens, “the book we return to between chapters is a marvelously complete object, right down to the prose we briefly glimpse on its pages, written in a wholly different style than the spoken dialogue—which itself varies widely in style from one story to the next” (2018, n.p.). Likewise, the illustrations do not only capture some of the most emblematic moments and characters in the stories, but they also serve the purpose of bringing art and life closer by being masterfully inserted in the motion picture. McGrath argues that, besides being unified by “the existentially bleak proposition that life is tough and then you die,” the six segments of the film are also connected thanks to these “visual motifs” appearing at the outset and the end of each segment (2019, 44). The concepts of collage and montage, so consonant with postmodern art, come to mind here since what has been described above is a transfer of materials from one art form to another (literature to film) and the subsequent dissemination of those borrowings (writing and illustrations) through the new medium. For Gregory Ulmer, there is huge inventive and subversive potential in these devices: “Montage does not reproduce the real, but constructs an object [...] or rather, mounts a process [...] in order to intervene in the world, not to reflect but to change reality” (1983, 86). By inserting these pieces of Americana, it is clear that the Coens are trying to change our perception of some visions of the West and also setting themselves apart from other cineastes who have opted either for the raw realism of many Westerns or the hushed contemplations of violence by directors like Peckinpah and Eastwood.

Besides the original screenplay by the Coen Brothers, two of the most widely praised and award-winning aspects of *The Ballad* have been the production and costume design, both of which are clearly oriented “to push the limits of authenticity”



(Desowitz 2018a, n.p.). Obviously, art director Jess Gonchor and costume designer Mary Zophres, both of whom have been long time collaborators of the Coens, were expected to make an extra effort to look for the equipment and attire that would best suit the various stories in the film. The former has explained in interviews how difficult it was to reproduce the kind of settings that the film required: “It was like six different movies and one of the hardest things I’ve ever done because there was nothing off the shelf. Everything had to be manufactured, down to the nails and hardware” (Desowitz 2018a, n.p.). Likewise, Zophres had to do her historical research via photographs, diaries, and museums to dress the characters in clothes characteristic of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All reviewers have concurred that both collaborators managed to produce “visually rich” microcosms that successfully complement each of the episodes, “while also remaining true to the overall tone of a quirkily absurd world” (McGrath 2019, 44). In the same line, the soundtrack of the movie, mostly composed of old cowboy songs and 19<sup>th</sup>-century ballads, neatly fits each of the segments, sometimes helping to bring forward the action and at other times creating a very specific atmosphere. Consequently, Carter Burwell’s score works well to reinforce some of the traditional archetypes of westerns, while also occasionally undermining their meaning by showing the fissures in their ideology. Helpful analytical tools have been developed by Bateman and Schmidt to show how these multimodal and intermedial components of films are vital to establish their final meaning; as they contend, “they force themselves on the viewer with an immediacy that appears far more effective and affecting than their equivalents in texts” (2012, 4). No doubt, the Coen brothers were helped in their attempt at integrating different art forms—from cartoons and fashion to landscapes and music—by the utilization, for the first time in their long career, of digital technologies. As their cinematographer, Bruno Delbonnel, rightly noted, it would have been quite impossible to capture on film some of the effects that the stories demanded: “It would have been too expensive and time consuming and we had a lot of visual effect shots. It doesn’t cost much and you can do take after take and we were doing a lot of stunts” (Desowitz 2018b, n.p.).

## THE RHETORIC OF PARODY AND DARK HUMOR

The section above has revealed that the Coen brothers are heavily indebted to other artistic expressions—comic books, short story collections, musical traditions, etc.—which played a central role in building intertextual linkages with other Western materials (cf. Fiske 2000, 220-221). Furthermore, the impression of authenticity—almost hyperreal, at times—of the spaces and the characters in the film was greatly enhanced by use of computerized high tech which allowed them to play with light, textures, and colors in very innovative ways. Thus, although as some critics have remarked, there are noticeable echoes of classics such as *The Searchers* (1956), *Stagecoach* (1939), *High Noon* (1952) or *Destry Rides Again* (1939), *The Ballad* can also be observed to simultaneously reinvigorate and caricaturize some of the commonplaces of the genre (Jensen 2019, 40). According to Hutcheon, this is



precisely what postmodern representations do, for “the postmodern is said to involve rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention” (1989, 93). The key term here is parody, which is supposed to be a contesting revision of the past that—rather than nostalgic—both affirms and undercuts the power of the representations of history and myths (cf. Gehring 1999, 6-7). It should be said that some renowned scholars have played down the role of postmodern parody by arguing that it simply denotes “the imprisonment of the past” by means of pastiche that, in fact, prevents confronting the present (Jameson 1983, 117). Nevertheless, seeing parodic art as a mere self-absorbed game of societies that do not want to face or deal with their past and prefer “to live in a perpetual present” (1883, 125) is to obviate that postmodern films do indeed try to represent history, although in frequently ironic and darkly humorous ways, which can also be remarkably critical. If anything, *The Ballad* shows that the rhetoric of parody has great potential to reveal the kind of misrepresentations that have governed our vision of the American West. Its subversive and contestatory nature is, therefore, undeniable, even if, as Hassan has explained, ultimate truths are never easy to come by in these works (1987, 170).

The two opening segments of *The Ballad*, the title story and “Near Algodones,” set the tone of the movie as they are filled with recognizable elements of traditional Westerns, but the treatment is mostly burlesque. The first begins in Monument Valley—where else?—with Tim Blake Nelson riding a horse and playing a guitar while singing the popular cowboy song “Cool Water.” These early images and rhythms resonate in the audience’s minds with memories of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, although we soon realize that behind the “hero’s” immaculately white garb and easygoing temperament hides the ego of a ruthless gunslinger. The Coens have great fun showing how Buster outshoots all his adversaries with a cartoonish violence that sometimes recalls the most macabre scenes in Quentin Tarantino (cf. Lalire 2019, 86). Needless to say, much of the irony of this initial story lies in the contrast between Buster’s appearance as the most harmless yokel conceivable—always smiling and singing—and his barbarous behavior during the shootouts. Predictably, though, Buster finally confronts a kind of double of himself—although clad in black—who proves to be a faster draw and shoots him through the forehead. The ending of the chapter overflows with the parodic undertones that suffuse the tale as Buster and the young man in black sing a bittersweet duet called “When a Cowboy Trades his Spurs for Wings,” declaring hope of a place above where people are better, while Buster’s spirit abandons his body and rises to heaven:

An’ at’s where I’m off to, to  
trade my gui-tar for a lyre and  
sing those sweet songs where they  
ain’t no clinkers to sour the spell  
and cain’t no gunplay inter-trude. (Coens 2018, 16)

As Yáñez observes, this opening story is “openly caricaturesque” (n.p.) and undermines some of the clichés and images most widely used in Western



mythology. Gehring is right, however, when he emphasizes that “it takes as much creative talent to both perceive a given structure and then effectively parody it as it does to create a structure in the first place” (1999, 4). Much the same thing can be said about “Near Algodones,” in which James Franco plays the role of a hapless bandit who escapes a lynching—thanks to the intervention of a band of Indians—after an unsuccessful bank robbery, only to face the gallows again for a crime he never committed. Once more, the Coens drain this criminal life of any glory and his acts of any antiestablishment exuberance as the story builds to a scaffold gag line that teases at, but refuses moral redemption for the foolish cowboy. Near the end of his execution, the bank robber looks at the terrified, whimpering convict next to him and in a calm voice and with a somewhat patronizing smile asks: “First time?” (Coens 2018, 29). As mentioned above, these initial chapters set the tone for the anthology as they reflect on the capriciousness of human existence and the ambivalence of generic codes—mostly revealed via “ironic inversions” (Hutcheon 2000, 6)—to excavate topics such as violence, inequity or despair.

Nevertheless, as most reviewers have agreed, it is in the next three sections of the film where the parodic treatment of the materials grows particularly effective as they contain both a revision of the myths, often attended by a reevaluation of them, and a permission for “a nostalgic indulgence whose self-awareness indicates critical distance” (Schniedermann 2022, 70). The protagonists of “Meal Ticket,” “All Gold Canyon,” and “The Gal Who Got Rattled” may seem as foreign to our experience as those in the first two segments; still, they come across as much more humane and cordial than the flat and cartoonish characters in the opening tales. Liam Neeson as a traveling Irish impresario and Tom Waits as a dedicated gold prospector deliver performances that are not only highly convincing, but also convey profound messages without uttering more than a handful of lines. Tompkins has shown how distrustful Westerns are of language and domesticity (1992: 49-50), and how that paucity of dialogue opens up space for human actions and gestures that speak volumes about people’s feelings and mental dilemmas. In “Meal Ticket,” for instance, the taciturn showman played by Neeson and the legless and armless “Artist” working under his care—played by Harry Melling—rarely converse; however, when their business revenues begin to decline, their faces and interactions reveal their darkening thoughts and dread of the future. Much of the irony in this story derives from the discrepancies between the Artist’s gorgeously-voiced and exultant declamations of Shakespeare, Shelley, and Lincoln’s addresses and the reactions from their uncouth and illiterate audiences. But the occasional dark humor in the tale turns truly sinister when the viewers realize that it is a rooster that will cause the impresario to put an end to the Artist’s show—and his life (cf. Podhoretz 2018, 39). “All Gold Canyon” is a chapter inspired by a short story of the same title by Jack London, and indeed the audience soon discover clear traces of the original in it—the pioneering spirit, the greed, the suspicion that something may go wrong, etc. Nevertheless, once again, the Coens play with and distort some of those original themes and ideas by giving them a comic twist that shows the moral ambivalence of certain aspirations. For Paul McDonald, though, this dark humor is not so much a destructive, nihilistic force driving us to pure cynicism but, rather, a constructive



and affirmative one that helps to interrogate—and even provide answers to—crises of “values and representations” (2010, 20).

## THE CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE OF PERIPHERAL PERSPECTIVES

In the second epigraph to this article, Dana Stevens maintains that in *The Ballad* the Coen brothers can be seen to demystify some of the common archetypes and codes of the genre, and to refashion some of the “familiar Western plotlines” through peculiar viewpoints (2018, n.p.). Obviously, the fact that they decided to shoot a portmanteau film encompassing different stories helped them a great deal in pursuing this second goal, since the contexts and the participants in each of the segments vary substantially. It should also have become evident in the discussion above of “Meal Ticket” and “All Gold Canyon” that the Coens feel much more sympathy for the lonesome underdogs in these incipient societies than for the heroes. Edward Said has been one of the most consummate defenders of the importance of representing “humane marginality” in works of art—and criticism—precisely as a “counter-practice of interference” against the hegemony of cultural myths (1983, 157). Like other theorists of postmodernism (Hassan, Lyotard, Wilde, etc.), he is fully aware of the power of alternative micronarratives to challenge and delegitimize the values and conventions that managed to dominate certain histories and arts. This shift of interest toward more marginal and often conflicting versions of particular contexts is vital not only because it reveals the constructed nature of the codes governing a genre but, moreover, it also helps to dwell upon the social and moral values underpinning those societies (cf. Hutcheon 2000, 5). In this regard, Jake Coyle has pointed out that *The Ballad* “corrals a stampede of Western archetypes and clichés only to invert, distort and deliriously amplify them,” but this is only the start, since its revisions of “old Western myths” usually come in the form of “morality tales” (2018, n.p.). Although making such a claim may sound a bit overblown—given the above-mentioned ambiguity and open-ended character of the stories—it is important to realize that “The Coens’ work is justified because it uses humor to challenge our philosophies and certainties, whether spiritual or political” (McGrath 2019, 45).

In all likelihood, the two stories in which the Coens’ interest in representing unusual perspectives of the West in their anthology film is clearer are “The Gal Who Got Rattled” and “The Mortal Remains,” which, although bleak in their conclusions, incorporate engrossing insights into the human condition. As Koresky surmises in his review of the film, the duo “may see the writing on the wall, and acknowledge American history’s cycles of brutality and idiocy, but they’re not ready to give in just yet” (2018, n.p.). “The Gal,” as the title suggests, focuses on the adventures of Alice, a “young little lady” heading West on a wagon train to meet her husband-to-be in Oregon. The fact that the segment explores the experiences of a woman in a prevalently masculine microworld is already innovative enough in a Western (cf. Tompkins 1992, 61-65), but, furthermore, the episode offers glimpses of loyalty and romance which contrast with the otherwise brutal context. Unfortunately, despite the devotion and protection offered by one of the trail guides—superbly played by



Bill Heck—during the journey, Alice comes to a sardonic end when she and the other guide come across an Indian party and she is compelled to fulfil the frontier rule of “saving the last bullet for yourself”: “He puts his finger on her forehead. ‘You put it right there so’s ya cain’t miss.’” (Coens 2018, 89). Most reviewers have agreed that, besides being the longest section in the film, “The Gal” delves into topics which are rather unusual in the genre—anxiety, frailty, love or kindness—as most of the turns in the plot are perceived from the perspective of a young woman. The closing chapter of the hypothetical storybook, “The Mortal Remains,” is the most philosophical and also dialogical of all the segments, as it depicts three very different characters—a talkative Frenchman, the wife of a preacher, and a fur trapper—riding a stagecoach to Fort Morgan, Colorado. If “The Gal” is seen to give a nod at Raoul Walsh’s *The Big Trail* (1930), “The Mortal Remains” reverberates with echoes from John Ford’s classic *Stagecoach*, although, as Podhoretz has noted, “this one is more Sartre than John Ford” (2018, 39). And, indeed, the story captures the intense exchanges between the three travelers, each of whom narrates passages of their life stories and then all quarrel about the true nature of human beings. Once again, the Coen brothers lose sight of the more habitual Western topics and let the characters consider more transcendental issues. The threesome, however, are accompanied on their ride by two skeptical bounty hunters—played by Brendan Gleeson and Jonjo O’Neill—who counterpoint the travelers’ deep ruminations about life and mortality with comments and songs that mostly reveal the pointlessness of all those reflections. The disturbing ending of the episode—and of the film—suggests that the iconic Western stagecoach may be playing here “something of a stand-in for the mythological boat that crosses the River Styx into Hades” (Lalire 2019, 86).

Although it is conspicuous that the last two segments of *The Ballad* reflect much more explicitly the Coens’ intention of exploiting the advantages of multi-perspectivism to go on interrogating and subverting some of the codes of the genre, there is little doubt that the other chapters also do the same. If as Hassan and others have maintained, one of the aims of postmodern peripheral perspectives is precisely to drift away from unique truths and a “world fixed and found” (1987, 157), then it is clear that stories such as “Near Algodones” and “Meal Ticket” are intent on pursuing that objective. Even if bank robbers and traveling showmen may be among the conventional fixtures in Western mythology, entangling them in unusual situations allows the audience to see customs and hierarchies from a very different angle. It is no wonder, in this regard, that several theorists of postmodernism should highlight the clear confluences existing between some of their disquisitions about contemporary art works and the proposals put forth by feminist critics, also enthralled and preoccupied by the necessity of alternative perspectives (Hutcheon 1989, 20-21).



## CLOSING REMARKS

Some viewers and reviewers of *The Ballad* have complained that, despite the gorgeous and nuanced elements of filmmaking in the movie, they were disconcerted by the significant variations in mood and subject (see Sorondo 2018, n.p.). As the analysis above has shown, there is indeed a great deal of diversity and heterogeneity across the six tales that were written by the directors over a period of more than twenty years. There has also been an intense debate about whether the film should be watched as a six-part TV series—as Netflix probably intended—or they should be enjoyed in one single sitting, as the filmmakers thought. Although critics have considered the pros and cons of both options, they have generally agreed that trying to simulate the theatrical experience, that is, watching it all at once and without being distracted by any interferences is much more recommendable (cf. Podhoretz 2018, 39). This is so for two main reasons: on the one hand, despite the apparent diversity of the settings and the disparity of topics covered in each case, one can still speak of a single, underlying worldview of the American West present in all the segments; on the other hand, and perhaps more importantly bearing in mind the aims of this article, all the tales seem to share a number of postmodern techniques that can be said to determine their purpose. In Hutcheon's words, "postmodern film is that which paradoxically wants to challenge the outer borders of cinema and wants to ask questions (though rarely offer answers) about ideology's role in subject-formation and in historical knowledge" (1989, 117).

The key aim of this article has been to show how the use of a number of postmodern techniques is integral to the kind of effects that the Coen brothers want to achieve in *The Ballad*. For example, it has been noted that the duo are extremely fond of including references to other artistic works—novels, cartoons, etc.—connected with the American West. As Hallet and other scholars have maintained, this incorporation of intermedial references and representations (both intratextual and extratextual) may "affect many levels and dimensions of the meaning" of a postmodern work (Hallet 2015, 612). In the case of *The Ballad*, it was clear that these intertextual references served the dual purpose of providing unity to the omnibus film and problematizing some of the clichés prevailing in Western narratives. Assisted by the theories developed by experts such as Gehring and Hutcheon, it has also been demonstrated that the use of parody is essential to substantiate the kind of critique—both formal and ideological—that the movie makes of conventions and values associated with the Western mythology. As Gehring states, "because parody is based on triggering a viewer's prior knowledge of a given genre or auteur, it is naturally important to showcase early on (through icons) which particular subject has been nominated for the user-friendly hot spot" (1999, 10). To a great extent, this is what the analysis above has tried to accomplish. Finally, this contribution has also dwelt upon the importance of including multiple perspectives in an art work in order to puncture some of the hegemonic hierarchies and values in a given genre. Perhaps the words of one of the bounty hunters—or reapers—in the closing segment of the film may serve to illuminate this view:



You know the story, but people can't get enough of them, the familiar stories, like little children. Because they connect the stories to themselves, I suppose, and we all love hearing about ourselves, over and over. So long as the people in the story are—us, but *not* us. Not us at the end, especially—the Midnight Caller gets *him*, not *me*... I'll live forever..." (Coens 2018, 111; italics in original)

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