

In The Dark

by George McCartney

Odysseys

Homer's *Odyssey* is the perfect narrative form for film. What other medium is as well equipped to render fantastic journeys filled with willful gods, unreasonable monsters, and enchanting women? This explains why three recent films have drawn upon the epic for their inspiration.

In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, filmmaking brothers Joel and Ethan Coen have decided to go James Joyce one better. Ireland's Homer set his *Ulysses* in Dublin of 1904. The Coens have placed theirs in Depression-era Mississippi, named him Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney), and introduced him by quoting Homer's invocation to the muse. Furthermore, they have blessed him with a tireless Odyssean optimism quite invulnerable to the travails that beset him at every turn.

When we first meet Everett, he's making a break from a chain gang, taking two other convicts with him (they happen to be chained together). He's determined to return to his wife, whose name is, naturally, Penney (Holly Hunter). There's just one problem: Although this Odysseus is cheerfully ready for all occasions, he doesn't have the wiliness his namesake possessed, and so he frequently finds himself overwhelmed by the various challenges thrown in his path. These include three enchanting sirens he and his dim-witted accomplices (John Turturro and Tim Blake Nelson) find washing their unmentionables in a branch of the Mississippi River. These cuties wield Circean powers. In their seductive wake, they leave a lower life-form where once stood what passed for a man. Shortly afterward, the Cyclops shows up in the mountainous form of John Goodman, a viciously cunning, one-eyed Bible salesman. Then there's the state's governor—Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel (Charles Durning)—who believes his political future lies in "mass communicating" on a radio show called Pappy's Hour of Flour Power. Here, Ulysses Everett rises to the occasion, taking to the microphone to sing "A Man of Constant Sorrow" and becoming an overnight sensation.

All of these episodes are carried off with a beguiling comic energy. Never-

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

*Produced by Buena Vista Pictures
and Touchstone Pictures
Directed by Joel Coen
Screenplay by Ethan Coen
with help from Homer
Released by Buena Vista Pictures*

All the Pretty Horses

*Produced by Columbia Pictures
and Miramax Films
Directed by Billy Bob Thornton
Screenplay by Ted Tally
from a novel by Cormac McCarthy
Released by Miramax Films
and Sony Pictures*

Traffic

*Produced by Bedford Falls and
Initial Entertainment Group
Directed by Steven Soderbergh
Screenplay by Stephen Gaghan
Released by Initial Entertainment Group*

theless, at the final credits, I felt curiously dissatisfied. The Coens have created a problem for themselves by invoking the *Odyssey* and then treating it as merely the occasion for light humor. Joyce got comic leverage from the epic, but he also used it to demonstrate how the past presses ineluctably on the present, shaping us in ways we only dimly perceive unless we awaken to its force in our daily lives. For the Coens, however, the past is merely a storeroom from which to filch some amusing episodes.

Case in point: the massive, torchlit Ku Klux Klan assembly Everett and his associates stumble into one night. With its white-gowned, chanting legions performing ritualistic marching routines to an incessant drumbeat, the scene is, at first, genuinely frightening. But the episode quickly descends into an Abbott-and-Costello farce with our heroes scampering about in an attempt to rescue a young black man who's the guest of honor at the evening's lynching. The scene becomes just one more in a series of weightless gags. While there's nothing wrong with

this as such, it is a bit of a letdown considering the expectations raised by the film. Not only do the Coens invoke Homer's epic, they steal from Preston Sturges's peerless 1941 film, *Sullivan's Travels*, a genuinely funny and scathing satire in which a pampered Hollywood musical director wants to make a socially conscious film entitled *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Few directors have skewered pretension and hypocrisy as cleverly as Sturges, and I couldn't help feeling a bit cheated when the Coens—who clearly admire him—didn't try to do the same. They seem to think their clever, post-modern recycling of earlier works constitutes artistic achievement in itself. It doesn't, especially when the earlier works are so much more engaging.

Intentionally or not, in his adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, director Billy Bob Thornton comes closer to the *Odyssey* than the Coens. Thornton has followed McCarthy's narrative closely, tracing the travails of John Grady Cole (Matt Damon), a young man who, after being forced to leave his beloved family ranch in Texas, finds himself wandering through Mexico in 1949. In this unfamiliar landscape, he meets physical and cultural challenges for which he has no guidebook. He must rely on his native wit and physical resilience. He soon comes under the spell of a local enchantress and is later arrested by a myopically singleminded authority. He descends into a hellish Mexican penitentiary where he learns things about himself he had never suspected and subsequently struggles to return home. Whether McCarthy designed his plot with Homer in mind, the epic parallel is there, and so is its moral weight.

In the novel, Cole and his partner, Lacey Rawlins (Henry Thomas), are presented as American innocents who, without being quite aware of it, yearn for a tradition that would nurture their inherent nobility. At the narrative's outset, Rawlins asks Cole what he believes in. Is there a God, a heaven, a hell? Cole replies, "I guess you can believe what you want to." This improvisational theology is the only spiritual legacy his American upbringing has provided him. It will be severely tested by what he learns in Mexico.

Cole wants nothing more than to con-

tinue working on his grandfather's cattle ranch. When the old man dies, however, Cole's mother quickly sells the land to oil developers and leaves for California to become an actress. She represents modern America: Rather than nurture what little tradition she's been born into, she cashes it in for quick money and vulgar fame. Cole, on the other hand, is a horseman, even instinctively so—he is a knight, though he lacks the ethos of a court. In Mexico, he comes to work on a cattle ranch that has been in the Rocha y Villareal family for over 170 years, a 27,000-acre spread as old as America and run by a family more European than Mexican. While its current owner, Don Hector, recognizes and honors the boy's natural nobility and love of the land, Cole is not ready to deal with the intricacies of a tradition he can only begin to understand. Bewitched by Hector's daughter, Alejandra (Penélope Cruz), he has no way of knowing what he's getting into. When she provocatively demands that he let her ride the stud stallion under his care, he halfheartedly objects: "You're fixin' to get me in trouble." Knowing better, she replies with a seductive smile, "You are in trouble." McCarthy has been compared with some justice to Hemingway, Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor. But here he is taking Henry James's lead: Cole is the decent, untutored American hopelessly perplexed by European subtleties.

Thornton has made a better than fair—and, at times, exceptional—adaptation of the novel. Unfortunately, he was forced to cut his original four-hour version in half. What's left is sometimes overly schematic, but it's nevertheless true to McCarthy's intentions. I'd like to see what was cut. While the book has been noted for its terse, objective style, there's a good deal of philosophic comment in the narration, especially when the highly articulate members of the Rocha family take the floor. Since this material is the least congenial to film, it's probably what Thornton was forced to cut.

Although Damon and Thomas are considerably older than the novel's 16- and 17-year-old protagonists, they successfully render their characters' amalgam of toughness and innocence. Spanish actress Penélope Cruz matches them with her portrait of a willful rich girl whose romantic scheming is undone by her youthful naiveté. Her scenes with Damon are among the film's best. While

not conventionally beautiful, she exhibits an old-world femininity that is extraordinarily alluring. For a Circe this charming, losing all might seem a small enough price.

Steven Soderbergh's clever—but finally facile—*Traffic* pursues four separate odysseys to illustrate how the illegal drug trade weaves together people from every class, race, ethnicity, and nationality, trapping them in its corrupting web. Benicio Del Toro plays a good Mexican cop who wants to clean up his city—an improbable aspiration, since he lives in Tijuana. His American counterparts are Don Cheadle and Luis Guzman, two DEA agents who enjoy their work despite its evident futility. Guzman manages to keep his spirits up with the prospect of waging a little unofficial class warfare on the side: "I have dreams about . . . busting the top people, rich people, white people." A quick montage cuts from this dream to its reality at a San Diego country club, where a very pregnant Catherine Zeta-Jones worries about cholesterol as she dines on duck à l'orange. Taking leave of her society friends, she returns home to witness her wealthy and respected husband being taken away in handcuffs. Their lifestyle, it turns out, is supported by importing drugs. At the top of the heap is Ohio State Supreme Court Judge Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas), who—despite his evident rectitude—is all too easily seduced by an opportunity provided by the drug trade. He has just accepted the president's invitation to become the next "drug czar," an appointment he clearly sees as a stepping stone to higher places. At one point, he proudly announces to his visibly impressed wife, "I'm penciled in for some face time with the president!" His petty hubris leads, with predictable dramatic logic, to an insupportable discovery: His own straight-A 16-year-old daughter is developing a crack-cocaine habit right under his officious nose.

Soderbergh drives home the point that we've lost the drug war. No surprise here; we lost it before ever began. By criminalizing drugs in 1916, America set itself up for today's nightmare. Prohibition is almost always a cure worse than the disease. Volstead's attempt to turn America dry in 1919 resulted in an unprecedented opportunity for criminals, who quickly organized themselves to keep the booze flowing to our republic's good citizens, providing themselves with enormous profits and unprecedented power.

(Think Joe Kennedy.) Contraband goods inevitably create what one of the film's prep-school druggies calls an "unbeatable market force." The more we prosecute drug dealers, the more lucrative we make their trade, encouraging others to spread the product.

In one scene, a frustrated Wakefield hectors his staff for solutions, but they can only respond with embarrassed silence. This strains belief. Have you ever met a bureaucrat who doesn't have a ten-point plan to solve every social problem? But we get the point. It's not that these folks have run out of ideas; they never had any to begin with. A few scenes later, Wakefield is finally offered a real solution in a meeting with a Mexican general who has just been appointed his country's version of drug czar. After the general details his plans to combat Mexico's drug cartels, Wakefield asks what he's doing on the treatment side. He smiles and shrugs; "addicts treat themselves; they overdose and there's one less" for the state to worry about. Wakefield manfully clenches his jaw to stifle his outrage at this arrant insensitivity. But why? However cold-hearted, the general's *laissez-faire* policy is at least half right: Those who become addicted to hard drugs must either destroy or cure themselves. It's a truism of psychiatry that no one can be cured of a mental pathology until he wants to be, and addiction is always a symptom of pathology. However well intentioned, unsolicited intervention—whether penal or therapeutic—does not work; it only exacerbates the problem.

Soderbergh is full of good intentions. He even brings Orrin Hatch, Barbara Boxer, William Weld, and other politicians on screen to impart gravitas to the proceedings. But he refrains from reaching the logical conclusion to which his narrative points. The sooner we decriminalize drugs, the sooner we'll take the profit motive out of dealing them. Without that motive, the power of gangsters to corrupt government officials will wither. Then we can turn our full attention to the fools who persist in poisoning themselves.

It's really that simple. Too bad none of our elected representatives has the nerve to say so.

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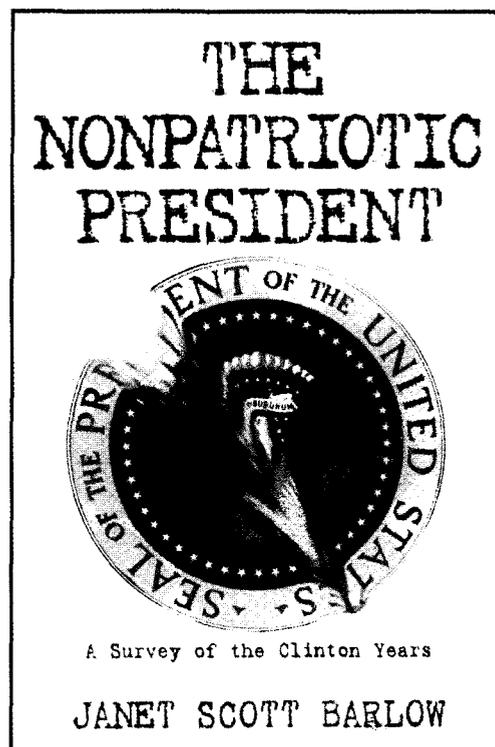


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