

Watching...

The Ballad of Buster Scruggs



Directors

Joel Coen (1954-present) and Ethan Coen (1957-present) are esteemed American movie directors with an extensive filmography. The movies for which the Coen Brothers are perhaps best known (as both writers and directors) include: *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Fargo* (1996), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). The Coens have received a litany of awards in recognition of their cinematic work. *No Country for Old Men* is their most critically well-received movie, securing its directors Academy Awards for Best Picture; Best Director; and Best Adapted Screenplay (as well as a Golden Globe in this latter category). Movies from the Coen Brother stable have usually been critical and commercial success stories, as well as cult fan favourites. In terms of style, films written, produced and directed by the two men are fairly idiosyncratic with a crop of eccentric characters, convoluted plotlines, and a fine balance of comedy and drama. Although their style is fairly distinctive, the Coen Brothers' filmography is quite an eclectic thing and difficult to categorise.

Context

In *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* the Coen Brothers return to the location of some of their most successful movies, the American West. This time, however, the Coens offer the audience not a film in the traditional sense, but rather a filmic sextet of irreverent film shorts. *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* has been described as a “cartoonish” version of the American West. Each episode follows the fortunes of caricatured figures from the Western genre, as the Coens draw heavily on well-worn tropes of the genre to thematically explore the capricious nature of the universe.

The anthology of stories begins with a meta-fictive framing device: a hard-covered green book is opened to reveal a title plate image for the story ahead. This opening (as well as the film’s title) set us up for the type of narrative storytelling to follow. These stories are presented as folk tales of the kind once transmitted orally and then collected, captured and passed down the generations to posterity. While revisionist Westerns of late (including those produced and directed by the Coens themselves) have tried to reclaim this genre from stereotypes and mythic depictions of gunslingers and cowboys, the Coens seem here to lean into their over-the-top (often silly) characterisation, confirming for the viewer that these tales are nothing but that: tales, fictions, ripping good yarns, and importantly back-constructed stories of a mythic time and place.

Structure

Episode	Actors	Synopsis
1.1 The Ballad of Buster Scruggs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tim Blake Nelson• Willie Watson• Clancy Brown	The final exploits of a singing cowboy, Buster Scruggs. A series of showdowns and shoot-outs leading up to his death.
1.2 Near Algodones	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• James Franco	Following a bank robbery, young cowboy cheats death a number of times before meeting his fate at the gallows.
1.3 Meal Ticket	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Liam Neeson	Travelling impresario and his artist go town to town hoping to make their money by reciting stories and verse. Losing money, impresario buys a chicken that can count. Chicken is only passenger of the impresario’s wagon at the episode’s end.

<p>1.4 All Gold Canyon</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tom Waits 	<p>Prospector decides to dig for gold in verdant meadow. Finally taps into a rich vein of gold. However, someone has been trailing him. Stranger shoots prospector and he feigns death, before killing the young man. Takes what he can, buries body, and leaves.</p>
<p>1.5 The Gal who Ratted</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bill Heck • Zoe Kazan • Grainger Hines 	<p>Sister and brother, Alice and Glibert Longabaugh, on way to meet man who will potentially marry Alice. Gilbert dies. The wagon leaders (Billy Knapp and Mr Arthur) assist in the burial. Billy offers to marry Alice. Separated from group, Mr Arthur and Alice encounter an Indian and prepare for worst case scenario. Mr Arthur instructs Alice to kill herself should anything happen. In the ensuing shootout, Mr Arthur is shot. Thinking Mr Arthur dead, Alice commits suicide.</p>
<p>1.6 The Mortal Remains</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jonjo O'Neill • Brendan Gleeson • Saul Rubineck • Tyne Daly 	<p>A stagecoach of passengers. Coach is carrying cargo (ie. a corpse). Passengers discourse on love and death. When one passenger demands the stagecoach stop, it is revealed that the drivers are bounty hunters. Coach arrives in Fort Morgan. Passengers dismount.</p>

The notes below refer only to the first episode in the anthology. The film anthology is currently available to watch on Netflix.

Study Notes: 'The Ballad of Buster Scruggs'



In the eponymous opening story, we accompany the titular character Scruggs as he moseys his way through a barren desert into a generic western town. Scruggs (played by actor Tim Blake Nelson) is immediately introduced as a bit of an affable fool, strumming a guitar, yodelling and hollering (murdering, even) a song astride a slowly meandering horse. There is little surprise when we note the name of the song sung by Scruggs in this arid landscape: 'Cool Water'. In this respect, the directors use the opening of this episode to intentionally situate the story within a long-since abandoned sub-genre: that of the singing cowboy.



When the singing ends, the mid-shot draws the audience in to Scruggs' confessional. Talking directly to camera (further eliciting the audience's confidence), Scruggs unfurls a Wanted poster. As he does so, the singing cowboy's own face and cognomen ('The Misanthrope') appear on it. The poster strikes us immediately as incongruous. This cordial character is wanted – dead or alive. In keeping with the characterisation up to this point, Scruggs is delightfully polite in his rebuke of the idea that he is misanthropic, before explaining his simple intention to make his way to a nearby cantina for a game of cards. In less than three minutes, the Coen

Brothers have effectively utilised a range of genre features and tropes in order to establish the subversive nature of this tale.

The scene cuts to the cantina and an establishing shot allows us to see the ramshackle nature of the saloon. The saloon is a stock locus of conflict in Western films and literature and so the audience is primed for violence. From the moment the door to the cantina swings open to reveal Scruggs, the audience tick off a range of genre features used by the directors (ie. the diegetic noise of spurs rattling as Scruggs walks in or the murmur of conversation that falls to silence when a stranger arrives; stock characters such as the no-nonsense barman or the hardened menfolk wearing belts of bullets and ponchos). Cue dramatic irony in abundance in the ensuing comic dialogue: both the disgruntled barman and the locals refuse to believe that this immaculately presented stranger is an outlaw. When the inevitable happens – Scruggs infuriates a local with his insults – the stranger is challenged to a gunfight ('Your shootin' iron work?').

Much of the humour of this scene derives from the rapidity of Scruggs' actions: his gun has been cocked and the bullet shot through the local's forehead before the man had time to draw breath after his question. Scruggs' gun has been replaced in his holster and a witty riposte levelled before his challenger has dropped to the floor dead. A rapid-fire shoot-out takes place: Scruggs' proves himself a lethal shooter. He chides himself for 'sloppy shooting' when he fails to kill one man outright. Instead of putting the man out of his misery (something the audience now understands that he is more than capable of doing) he leaves the wounded man to the prairie wolves.



From here, the scene cuts to a town – Frenchman’s Gulch. Swinging through the doors of a bustling saloon, Scroggs is apprehended by a Western equivalent of a cloakroom attendant (‘Hold on a minute there son.’) manning a counter adorned with gun belts and weaponry. Having given over his weapons, Scroggs claims to feel ‘a little naked’, but he carries on regardless. If everyone is similarly disadvantaged any fights will be fair ones, he reckons. When one man leaves a card game mid-flow, Scroggs takes his place. He looks at the cards and decides not to play, prompting the rugged older man sat opposite him to assert: ‘You seen ‘em, you play ‘em’. When the man rises from the table to reveal his fully equipped weapon belt, the shootout to follow seems, once again, inevitable. While the rapidity of the action in the first showdown created humour, the delaying tactics of the central protagonist here is what creates humour (he verbosely admonishes the older man to leave his weapons at the door as per house policy), but also dramatic tension. We know Scroggs is a match for anyone – but weaponless, how will he get out of this one? In typically absurdist Coen Brother fashion, we get an answer. Scroggs stamps on a loose plank of wood on the table, knocking his opponent’s raised arm backwards resulting in him shooting himself in the face. Absurd and brutal in equal measures.

An over the shoulder high shot from the balcony of the Saloon down onto the murder scene is set up as though God’s judgement is being cast down upon Scroggs. It is at this point that Scroggs exclaims: ‘I’m not a devious man, by nature’. A musical interlude – in which Scroggs breaks into song, accompanied by the Saloon’s pianist – works to cathartically alleviate tension in the scene. The patrons of the bar break out into a rousing rendition of ‘Surly Joe’ (a song in honour of the dead man on the saloon floor), conducted by Scroggs. Even the blood-spattered companion of the dead man can’t help but stifle a smile at the efforts of Buster Scroggs.



As the music continues in the background, a third showdown is on the horizon as Surly Joe's brother enters the fray to discover him dead. This man challenges Buster to meet him outside. In terms of characterisation, this man seems the least threatening of the three challengers that Buster has encountered so far. A betting man would not bet against Scruggs. As Scruggs walks to take up his position for the shoot-out, the director's use of a long shot flags up the increased arrogance of Scruggs: his opponent stands ready and primed, as Buster states confidently: 'I should be able to make pretty short work of this ramified old son-of-a-gun'. When Scruggs notes his opponent's hand twitch towards his gun in its holster, before a countdown has occurred, he blows the man's shooting finger clean off. Having started a job, Scruggs continues to shoot the rest of the fingers off. Scruggs' safety is secured. With one bullet left in his gun, and his opponent floundering, he turns his back on the challenger, raises a mirror, eyes his target in it, shoots and kills.



Before Buster has time to rest on his showboating laurels, elegiac music begins, signalling the entrance of a fourth challenger, a silhouetted cowboy riding into the fray. The intrigued Scruggs looks on. As the rider approaches, the audience note that he is responsible for the mouth organ music. The stranger introduces himself as a bounty hunter of sorts: 'I've been hunting you up on account of they say you're the one to beat'. As they set up for yet another shoot-out, Scruggs quips irreverently that he should go into the undertaking business, foreshadowing what is about to happen. He tells his opponent that he doesn't need a countdown and the man in black seizes the moment, firing a shot straight through Scruggs' skull. As he lies out cold on the sandy ground, the posthumous voice of Scruggs notes: 'I shoulda seen this coming. Can't be top dog forever'.



As a morality tale, the Coens explore the impact of wanton violence and lethal recklessness. Though Buster seems to be an accommodating good sport (accepting challenges to duel when he could possibly walk away) he understands the rules of the Wild West. He is never surprised by violence, or cheating, and as his final words underscore, he is fully cognisant of the fact that death is always just around the corner. As this story of inhumanity draws to a close, the angel-Scrogg ascends to heaven, presumably (hopefully) a place populated with more human sorts.