WHEREFORE ART THOU ARTISTIC TREASURE?

BY CASEY WEI

I walked away from Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri feeling perfectly ready never to think about it again, let alone write a review about it. As Oscar-feel-good film-events go, it ticked all the boxes: strong female lead, social injustice exposed, paradigms of good vs. evil complicated, an open ending (knock on wood, "Four Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri"). It is a well produced Hollywood drama, appealing to us not as film critics, but as concerned citizens with a lot of personal and collective baggage to unpack.

Tepidly paced and episodically driven, this film asks to be read intertextually; when we are first introduced to McDormand's Mildred, she is stomping upstairs into the ad agency where we find our young slithery ad-man, Red, peeking up out from his Flannery O'Connor short story collection, A *Good Man is Hard to Find*. Much of the background and principle cast, as well as the director, Martin of McDonagh, have a background in theatre, and McDormand praises his script as "literary material, like a play, like a novel, like a short story." [1]

In attempting to expose some kind of artistic treasure, I encountered many problems in the process of peeling back the conventions of this film. I don't consider this a black comedy (didn't lol once), don't believe in redemption as narratively easy or as pyrotechnically exciting as what Officer Dixon experienced by reading a letter with his headphones in while a fire engulfed the office behind him. I didn't need to see Woody Harrelson have nature sex, and I didn't experience the ensemble-ness of the much acclaimed acting. It was a pretty decent film, but nowhere as cutting or dark as it needed to be for the humorous elements to read as 'black comedy'. Though not entirely out of place, the comedy was merely incidental and neither the punchlines nor plot setups were particularly well crafted. When Mildred is paid a visit by Charlie, her ex-husband, and his girlfriend, Penelope, who is 'young enough to be his daughter,' their argument heats up almost to the point of physical violence: the perfect set-up for Penelope to innocently interrupt and ask to use the bathroom. I've been told to 'consider my empathy,' but my immediate reaction was an eye-roll to this contrived insertion of a played-out stereotype.

Everyone around me raved about the film: friends, co-workers, fellow filmmakers and artists-they all thought it was great, and this was enough cause for reconsideration, but I didn't feel like watching it again. It immediately reminded me of a less reflexive (and less comedic) cousin to Fargo (1996) or Blood Simple (1984), or A History of Violence (2005) Lite. Where was the tension in this conventional, plot-driven Hollywood film? Even the billboards themselves, black on red against the lush green backdrop, did not resonate. Am I dead inside? The one scene that did unsettle me occurs in the souvenir shop where Mildred works, when she encounters a man who is introduced as a potential key to answering the big bold question on the big red billboards. The introduction of this man about halfway through, just as the film was *really* beginning to drag, confirms with a jolt of suspense that something *needs* to and *will* happen still. Despite the literary inspirations and aspirations of the script, this master text which McDormand calls "The Bible," [2] the narrative realism which a film like this is based upon was not considered with as much gravitas as the subject matter called for, i.e. the raping and killing of a teenage girl, a systemically fucked justice system, war crimes overseas.

When a lukewarm film is so highly-praised, I can't help but brush off the acclaim as lip service to an industry where so much artistry is conceded for revenue, but like I said, it was decent. Frances McDormand's performance was strong. Her beauty has always reminded me of a horse, kind of like Julia Roberts, but with

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more bunny. Watching Three Billboards reminded me of Blood Simple, so I rewatched that and Fargo again, and I also read some Flannery O' Connor for the first time. In *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, that tension between the cartoon farm animals she evokes and the image of O' Connor' s grandma as she smiles up at The Misfit, is where the artistic treasure lies in Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri. In an interview about her debut role in Blood Simple, McDormand recalls her face when she was younger, how "there was hardly anything to latch onto, but the one thing [she' s] always been able to offer is a complexity that fills out an idea." [3] I expect that she' ll win Best Actress at the Oscars, but I hope the film doesn' t win Best Picture.

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1 "Francis [sic] McDormand Interview Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri, Premiere". Filmed October 2017. YouTube video, 9:53. Posted October 2017. https://youtu.be/-buk68ylPXk

2 Ibid.

3 "Frances McDormand on Blood Simple". Filmed 2016. YouTube video, 25:05. Posted October 2016. https://youtu.be/QZoEuOwQsdI



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Francis McDormand as Mildred in Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri (2017). Dir. Martin McDonagh. Distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures.

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