

## REEL LIFE

## Bad Guys in the Movies

Legendary family psychotherapist Virginia Satir fashioned a simple schema for psychiatric diagnoses. She felt that you could place almost any condition within one of four categories: “crazy” (schizophrenia, mood disorders with psychotic features); “sick” (anxiety, dissociative, or somatoform disorders); “bad” (personality disorders); or “dumb” (dementias, mental retardation). The baddest of the bad are people we label as having antisocial personality disorders (ASP), or those with a pattern of criminal conduct who don’t meet criteria for ASP, classified under “V codes” in DSM IV-TR as adult antisocial behavior.

In Ethan and Joel Coen’s acclaimed new film, “No Country for Old Men,” we meet Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), whose methodical, unrelenting, expressionless homicidal conduct marks him as one seriously dangerous dude: If anyone merits the cliché of being evil incarnate, Chigurh does.

**The Chase Is On**

The Coens adapted Cormac McCarthy’s novel for the screen. The plot line is simple: A major drug deal turns sour; many bodies are left at a desolate rendezvous point on the desert; a huge trove of cash goes missing. Well, we know who first discovered this scene and took the money. It was Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin), an ordinary man with extraordinary courage (or, perhaps, foolishness). Moss means to keep the dough, knowing full well that someone sooner or later will come stalking him to get it back.

Enter Chigurh, one of the nastiest killers you’ve ever seen in the movies (omitting unrealistic horror films). His methods include bare-handed strangulation and use of a high-pressure pneumatic punch. A couple of times, for sport, he offers to let a potential victim call a coin flip to determine his fate and, curiously, honors the outcome. The rest of the film involves an extended chase, a bloody cat-and-mouse game, between Moss and Chigurh, and we’re increasingly certain who will prevail.

Meanwhile, the local sheriff, Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), receives news about the drug-related killings and tries to pick up somebody’s scent to track. Bodies begin to stack up along the trail, and the signature methods (described above) and sheer volume of the killings tells veteran bounty hunter Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson) that the killer must be Chigurh. Wells informs the sheriff.

Bardem’s Chigurh is as chilling a citizen as any you hope you’ll never meet. There is a preternatural calmness and single mindedness in Chigurh’s pursuit of Moss and the money that suggest the nearly psychotic intensity of a first rate criminal psychopath, the sort of man that inspired the title for psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley’s

seminal 1941 work on such people, “The Mask of Sanity.” Of interest is the fact that Sheriff Bell’s measured, deliberate style closely parallels Chigurh’s conduct: These men appear to share in common a quiet, professional air and a sense of inevitability, even fatalism, about the courses they are following.

This film reflects the craftsmanship of the Coen brothers, who are masterful storytellers, at their very best. “No Country” is as good as “Fargo” (1996) and “The Big Lebowski” (1998), maybe better than either (though the other two are among just a handful of films I never tire of watching).

**Splendid Acting Turns**

Brolin is entirely convincing as Moss, a scared but fairly clever man on the run. Jones (Harvard graduate, fluent Spanish speaker, horseman)

takes all the time in the world to fill the role of the laconic Sheriff Bell. Jones, like fine wine, keeps getting better with age. Though his range is arguably somewhat limited—he always seems to play the world weary, decent man—Jones is among the very best actors working in film today.

Best of all is the versatile Spanish actor Bardem, whose family has been involved in acting and filmmaking from the earliest days of commercial cinema. He is now an established international superstar, following his outstanding roles in such films as “Before Night Falls,” “The Dancer Upstairs,” “Mondays in the Sun,” “The Sea Inside” and “Love in the Time of Cholera.”

All aspects of this film—the mise-en-scène, photography, editing, music—work harmoniously to create maximum suspense while at the same time providing several highly humorous moments along the way (a Coen trademark).

**Other Memorable Psychopaths**

There are dozens of American films that center on criminal psychopaths. Here are four of my favorites: Robert Mitchum as the seductive, affectless serial killer with the letters spelling “LOVE” and “HATE” tattooed on the fingers of his hands, in “The Night of the Hunter” (1955); Anthony Hopkins as the genteel cannibalistic psychiatrist, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, in “Silence of the Lambs” (1991); Peter Stormare as Gaear Grimsrud, the bored, nearly mute fellow who shoots people and grinds up his accomplice in a wood chipper as if it’s all just in a day’s work, in “Fargo” (1996); and Ben Kingsley as Don Logan, a super nasty crime boss given to sudden venomous outbursts of rage, in “Sexy Beast” (2000).

**‘Specialists’ in Psychopathy**

Several actors have made careers portraying bad guys, or at least have made such roles a significant part of a wider repertoire. In times past there were George Raft (in such films as “Scarface,” “Each Dawn I Die,” “Night After Night”); James Cagney (“The Public Enemy,” “White

Heat,” “Tribute to a Bad Man”); Vincent Price (“House of Wax,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Web”); Richard Widmark (“Kiss of Death,” “The Street With No Name,” “The Trap”); and Jack Palance (“Shane,” “Torture Garden,” “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde,” “Dracula” [1973]).

Among present day specialists at portraying evil men, two who stand out are John Malkovich (“Dangerous Liaisons,” “Of Mice and Men,” “In the Line of Fire,” “Portrait of a Lady,” “Ripley’s Game”); and Viggo Mortensen (“Prison,” “The Indian Runner,” “A History of Violence,” and “Eastern Promises”).

**Are Bad Guy Actors Actually Bad?**

One cannot help wondering whether actors repeatedly drawn to playing antisocial personalities may themselves have more than a touch of psychopathy in their

from Stanford (Calif.) University. He was a published poet and was able to sell several of his landscape paintings. He sponsored a charity golf tournament in honor of his son, Cody, also an actor, who had died of malignant melanoma at the age of 42.

John Malkovich was raised in a small farm town in Illinois. His father was a pioneering environmentalist, and his mother was a newspaper publisher. A theater major in college, he has gone on to success as an actor and as a director in both theater and film. Fluent in French, he has lived in the south of France for many years. Politically, he is an outspoken conservative libertarian who advocates the death penalty for capital crimes.

Viggo Mortensen’s father was a farm manager and businessman. In college, Mortensen majored in Spanish and also studied theater. He is a fluent speaker of



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In “No Country for Old Men,” Anton Chigurh’s (Javier Bardem) calm, single-minded pursuit of stolen money suggests the psychotic intensity of a criminal psychopath.

makeup. A survey of the men just mentioned suggests, quite to the contrary, that most have been solid citizens.

James Cagney, whose father was an Irish American bartender and amateur boxer, grew up in the rough Lower East Side of Manhattan, where he undoubtedly learned something about how to project a tough style. Yet he not only excelled in other genres, like musical comedy, but was married for 64 years, until his death, and had served as president of the Screen Actors Guild (like Ronald Reagan later on).

Vincent Price was born into an affluent St. Louis family, studied drama at Yale, and had a distinguished and highly versatile career on screen, in the theater, and on television. An amusing raconteur, Price was also a highly popular guest on TV talk shows and quiz shows. Richard Widmark studied acting in college and then taught his craft at the college level. He enjoyed a 55-year-long first marriage that ended only when his wife died.

Jack Palance was the son of Ukrainian immigrants. He worked in coal mines before launching a professional boxing career. After military duty he graduated

seven languages, a poet, photographer and painter, and he is also a peace activist.

**George Raft: An Exception**

Among these seven actors, it is only in the case of George Raft that hints emerge of the actor’s life being more or less consonant with his bad guy roles. Raft grew up in the underworld district of Hell’s Kitchen in central Manhattan. He made his early mark in show business as a dancer. He was virtually illiterate, a handicap that limited his ability to analyze screenplays, which is one reason why he may have turned down several choice roles, for example, in “High Sierra” and “The Maltese Falcon,” roles that established Humphrey Bogart’s stardom. An impeccable, elegant dresser, Raft was a close friend of several racketeers, including Bugsy Siegel. He never married. ■

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