**Knowledge Organiser Film Studies Component 1 – Varieties of Film and Filmmaking Section B – American Film Since 2005 – *No Country For Old Men***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. **Synopsis**
 | While out hunting, Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) finds the grisly aftermath of a drug deal. Though he knows better, he cannot resist the cash left behind and takes it with him. The hunter becomes the hunted when a merciless killer named Chigurh (Javier Bardem) picks up his trail. Also looking for Moss is Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), an aging lawman who reflects on a changing world and a dark secret of his own, as he tries to find and protect Moss. |
| 1. **Cast and Characters**
 |
| Ed Tom Bell | Tommy Lee Jones | Carson Wells | Woody Harrelson |
| Anton Chigurh | Javier Bardem | Carla Jean Moss | Kelly MacDonald |
| Llewelyn Moss | Josh Brolin | Loretta Bell | Tess Harper |

|  |
| --- |
| **Context** |
| **C. Institutional Context** | **1.** | Cormac McCarthy’s 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* was subject to adaptation very early on after its release. Scott Rudin, a producer for Paramount, obtained the rights to the film adaptation and suggested it to the Coen brothers as their next mainstream production. |
| **2.** | The definition of the genre is much talked about as it borrows conventions from so many other mainstream genres from past and present Hollywood. McCarthy’s story is a road movie, set in a western location, with noir characters, horror and action sequences and with darkly comic tones mixed in. It is also noted that the movie is very low on dialogue and a lot of drama is created through visuals, sound and acting from the lead characters. |
| **3.** | The film was a co-production between Miramax and Paramount Vantage and what is interesting is how these two companies are more recognised for their development of independent or art-house films for their major parent company they are a part of. Miramax, owned by the Weinstein brothers, is a subsidiary of Disney and up until its acquisition by the company, was known for taking on scripts that were not typical mainstream products. |
| **4.** | The total budget for the film was $25 million dollars and the film was filmed in New Mexico and Texas and would eventually be given an R rating in the US. Conventionally this budget, these studios and this location signals to much of Hollywood that this would be an independent film appealing to a niche audience. |
| **D. Social, Historical and Political Context** | **5.** | The film is by definition a period piece, set in 1980s Texas that considers the remote location and references key points in American politics, popular culture and history. This reflection of the 1980s was also measured against the isolated and primitive location chosen by McCarthy when he wrote his book.  |
| **6.** | The most contemporary location is when we go to the city with Harrelson’s character Carson Wells being assigned to track down Chigurh.  The metallic and futuristic glass building, including the lift, stairwell and carpets stand out against the desert, highways and tundra of New Mexico and Texas that we have been treated to up until that point.  This reflects how the cities of America were moving a lot faster into contemporary 1980’s culture against the remote areas being of a more traditional and old-fashioned style and possibly still in the 1970’s.  |
| **7.** | As the film was made in 2007 this is a post 9/11 world where the fear of the outsider was prevalent and can be seen through the character of Chigurh. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Key Scenes** |
| **E.**  Retrieving the Money (approx 42.00-50.00) | **8.** | The scene starts in a LS of Moss in the bathroom of a new room with his ear against the back wall, his paranoia and caution is at maximum levels because he is unsure of how the ‘enemies’ have tracked him. The shots of Moss use warm orange colours and the simple diegetic sounds are amplified as he uses masking tape, clips coathangers and puts together poles to retrieve the case. |
| **9.** | This is directly contrasted to the cold and grey scenes, that run parallel to this, of Anton Chigurh in the car and arriving at the motel. The subjective shots of the car hood is a recurring shot throughout the film and is seen twice in this sequence, it also adds to the conventions of this genre of ‘cat-and-mouse’.  |
| **10.** | The CU of the transponder heightens the tension alongside the diegetic bleeping sound, it is noticeable just out of focus on the car seat is a gun - subtly engaging the spectator in the tension of this sequence. The diegetic sound of the bleep continues throughout the Chigurh scenes and could almost be reflective of the heartbeat of our spectator as they fear for Moss’ life. |
| **11.** | The tracking shot of the motel doors as Chigurh arrives to the Regal (the spectator knowing that Moss is on site) entices us to keep watching as he works out Room 138 is the room he will need. The spectator continues to fear for Moss’ life as they are fully aware of his presence on site and that indeed this was the room the money was stashed in. The regular cutting between Moss preparing his tool to retrieve the money and Chigurh investigating the design of the rooms and its layout plays into the anxieties of the spectator. |
| **12.** | The CU of Moss looking down the air vent from behind the grid contrasted to Chigurh looking into the empty motel room. Then the CU of Moss removing the air vent grid is cut against Chigurh removing his shoe. The tension of the spectator is increased further as Moss struggles to reach the bag and then knowing that Chigurh is now shoeless makes us worried about each noise he might make and that he could be caught. |
| **13.** | The CU of the shoe-less Chigurh with just the air canister and gun swinging beside him demonstrates the sheer ruthlessness of the character as well as the CU of his emotionless facial expression as he approaches the door. The narrative tension at this point is palpable for the spectator and for the characters - we are suddenly lost to the location of Moss and Chigurh and potentially believe this might be the end for Moss. |
| **14.** | The silence of the scene is only disturbed by the hissing of the air in the bolt gun, taking over from the beacon that Chigurh had just turned off. The squeak of the bag against the airvent stops all the characters in their steps.  Moss remains still, as does Chigurh, making us question whether he has finally be caught up with. |
| **15.** | Chigurh bursts the door open with the bolt gun we are treated to the fastest part of the sequence, quick shot-reverse-shots as Chigurh dispatches two unknown characters who fulfil stereotypes of the Mexican antagonists also involved in the narrative.  We cut back to Moss in CU as the machine gun sound carries over the scene and we suddenly heighten the anticipation even further as we are desperately hoping that he can make it out. |
| **16.** | The only pieces of dialogue in the sequence come now as Chigurh spots a moving hand in the mirror and we find a third Mexican in the bathtub trembling at his impending death.  In a complete contrast to Chigurh’s previous killings he pulls across the shower screen before killing him. |
| **F.**  Sheriff Bell returns to the El Paso Motel (approx 01.35.00 - 01.38.00) | **17.** | The scene starts using the same iconic shot of the car hood approaching the motel where we can also see police tape across the doorway. We cut to the MCU of Sheriff Bell in the driving seat and as he pulls up to stop there is tension created as we question whether he should get out of the car or not. At this point in the sequence there is no expectation of any threat towards Bell. |
| **18.** | As Bell leaves his car the spectator suddenly becomes aware of the wildtrack of the remote El Paso neighbourhood; the traffic rumbling by in the background and the crickets and insects continuing with their lives despite the tragedy of the day. There is a slight introduction of some non-diegetic music that is high pitched and starts to add some tension to the scene and as a spectator we are suddenly aware the we might be at the very peak of the ‘cat-and-mouse’ genre and Chigurh could be nearby.  |
| **19.** | The next scene satisfies this expectation when the lock of the door takes centre frame in the shot; our knowledge of Chigurh’s previous use of this method at both Moss’ caravan and the Regal motel.  We see the lock is missing and as the silhouette of the Sheriff takes up the door we are treated to a iconographic genre convention in MLS.  The shot-reverse-shot between the low angle of Bell and then high angle of the lock increases the anxiety knowing that behind this door could be our psychopathic antagonist.  The anxiety is not reduced when we are then treated to a low angle shot of Chigurh the other side of the door.  The shot is extremely dark, with just Chigurh’s eye and the reflection of the bolt gun visible alongside the orange light of the lock socket.  The cross-cutting between Chigurh and Bell ramps up the anticipation of another potential fire fight where possibly the (new) protagonist is finally going to defeat Chigurh.  The extreme close up of the brass on the inside of the lock with the movement of Bell is a subjective POV from Chigurh as we suddenly realise that his end could be near. |
| **20.** | Alongside the spectator, Bell also realises that he may not be alone, the subtle narrative journey during the film of him discovering the weapon that Chigurh is using brings us to this point and he suddenly connects this together.  His reaction is to remove his gun from his holster and the shadow of the gun bearing down on the door handle brings us to a new anticipation of what could be happen. As Bell pushes the door open there is a juxtaposition of both relief and disappointment as Chigurh is no longer there. We feel relieved that Bell could survive the story, but disappointment that Chigurh is not going to get his comeuppance straight away.  |
| **21.** | As the camera pans around the room the shadow of the sheriff suddenly brings a strength and power to the narrative and delivers a key convention of the genre yet again.  As Bell sits back on the bed after discovering the bathroom is empty he sighs heavily, as does the spectator who could also be ready to give up on this cat-and-mouse game we have been playing with Chigurh. The character of Bell is tired and feeling the tension of the situation, this need to rest in the location potentially leaning on the meaning behind the films title and the overall ideological viewpoint of the old sheriff on the ‘modern crimes’ of 1980’s Texas.  |
| **22.** | As he sits on the bed the camera moves (through a cut) 180 degrees and he looks down straight into the camera’s new location, a shot-reverse-shot shows us an air-vent. The spectator can now make an immediate narrative link as to why Chigurh was there and then why Chigurh has run away. The very aware spectators will notice the small drag marks inside the air vent and realise the money is now on the move once again. The sequence ends on a CU of a coin with 4 screws scattered around. The coin, as previously discussed, symbolising the fate that Chigurh plays in regards to life and death, and potential further connotations of the screws symbolising the law lying around it unable to do anything. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Specialist Study Areas** |
| **K. Spectatorship** | **23.** | The Coen brothers approach to filmmaking and the varying motifs they use through their work is designed very much with the spectator in mind and ***No Country for Old Men*** does not shy away from shocking, engaging and enveloping them in this dark journey of fate and circumstance. |
| **24.** | The very first death, so soon into the movie, is one of the most violent and this is exactly how the Coen’s designed the opening impact; to shock and jolt the spectator into the extraordinary violence and emotionally cold character.  There is little time to get over this, as just a few scenes later Chigurh uses the bolt pistol on an innocent, unnamed man and again this draws the spectator to question their own guilt in knowing how dangerous this man is.  If we stick with Chigurh for a while he suddenly becomes this unpredictable psychopath that decides the fate of a station attendant on the flip of a coin. The spectator’s anxieties are never at rest, and as an active member of the audience the unease we feel for any other character that shares screen time with Bardem’s is constant even up to the two boys on bikes as they try to help him after the accident.  The spectator gets very little time to become passive as punctuated between the violence of Chigurh is the relatively innocent Llewelyn Moss and his increasingly poor choices. The spectator’s sympathies are first with Moss but are quickly transferred to Carla-Jean as we realise she is the more innocent character in the plot. |
| **25.** | With the spectator now drawn into the inevitable narrative progression the film continues to challenge and question our expectations, particularly about genre. The unresolved fight-out between our cowboy hero and out-of-place villain gives us no victor, our reliance on Bell to complete the narrative is unsatisfactorily cut short when he retires, the even absence of horses and saloon doors might upset the most traditional hunter for iconography. The genre-bending experiences of the Coen brothers is what brings the majority of the active spectators to the cinema – knowing that they will indeed be challenged by their storytelling and use of conventions so the majority would not be too disappointed. The ultimate demonstration of the active spectator comes in the final shot as we are left to not only interpret the resolution for each of our surviving characters, but also consider the overarching meaning behind the plot and how this ending stalls us in our requirement for closure to the storytelling. |
| **L. Ideology** | **26.** | **Nihilism**In its most obvious way nihilism and moral ambiguity are driven by Bell’s expectations. The opening narration develops this and therefore opens this theme up for multiple interpretations as we meet each character along the way.  Moss, Chigurh, Carla-Jean and Carson Wells are all flawed in their morals and even if we want to believe that Carla-Jean is innocent we cannot deny her actions are drawn out of her basic instinct to abide by her husband’s instructions. Moss, our protagonist for much of the film, finds his moral compass just once in the plot by deciding to return with water to the scene of the failed handover.  |
| **27.** | The moment, earlier in the narrative, where Moss decides to track the last-man-standing is the point, for the spectator, that he fails to live up to the expectations of a good citizen. It is then made worse for the audience when his past as a Vietnam veteran opens him up further for criticism regarding his choices. Chigurh could simply be classed as the most nihilistic with regards to his actions when committing the violent murders throughout the film, however, this is more complicated by the coin-tossing scene with the garage attendant.  While there is some sense of morality feeding into what he says, this is stripped away by Carla-Jean when she confronts his actions in her bedroom and calls him out on this attempt to be ‘moral’ in some way by offering the coin as a route to decide his next move. |
| **28.** | **Fate and Circumstance**These are two of the most impacting themes in the film and brought to life by Anton Chigurh and his interactions with the other characters. The film plays on the idea of people’s fate versus their free-will. Moss spends much of the narrative believing he is the master of his own destiny and this is contrasted with Chigurh meeting characters and telling them that every choice they make determines their fate and indeed their circumstance. The car-crash at the end of the narrative then rips away our belief that Chigurh himself oversees his own destiny like he has indicated throughout the plot. Moss and Wells both challenge fate and believe they can chase their freewill and avoid their own demise, whereas Bell and Carla-Jean seem to accept the fate that has been bestowed upon them. Carla-Jean doesn’t attempt to bargain with Chigurh in the same way that Wells does and Bell realises he is just not able to challenge the crimes of 1980’s America and makes his decision to step down from his role. The role of circumstance affects many of the victims of Chigurh, who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and it also affects Moss as he stumbles across the scene after finding the blood of a stray dog. The final character that is the victim of her own circumstance is Carla-Jean as it is her love for her husband that brings her to an inevitable fate.  |
| **29.** | **Pessimism**This theme is dark and runs fluidly throughout the narrative to honour and respect McCarthy’s original book that first delivered this pessimistic outlook on life. The final monologue from Bell cutting-to-black is a key signifier in this pessimistic overtone, immediately tying up the novel’s title by saying there is no room for old men in this country anymore. No happy endings are achieved in this film, not even for the psychotic Chigurh is free from the pessimism that the Coens were embedding within this film.  His final appearance, where he becomes a victim of fate in the car accident,, shows that this pessimistic world is sure to catch up with all of us. This can be answered by taking a view of some of their other work that they did not adapt from existing literature. Many of the themes and motifs are layered with this pessimism also; the **nihilistic** actions of our protagonists, the **plot twists** and the **unresolved ending**. |
| **30.** | **Consciousness**Consciousness, or rather self-consciousness, the conscience and awareness of actions stem rightly from the nihilistic theme discussed earlier.  The very decision that Moss makes when he finds the money brings our protagonists consciousness into question.  He is aware of its morally challenging circumstance, but the naivety that no-one might be looking for it, before he heads back with water, is a little ignorant to his own self-consciousness.  This is played out again when Bell is aware of his inability to challenge the difficult situation around him and the lamentations to Wendell, his deputy, throughout is an exploration of this theme even further.  Moss’ conversation with Carla-Jean as he packs her off to her mother’s place demonstrates the awareness once again and this is potentially a flaw of both our protagonists.  It would potentially be interesting to raise the question that if the characters were less self-conscious would they be able to match Chigurh for ruthless actions and ultimately survive to the end of narrative? |