
O Brother, where art thou ? Joel Coen, 2000

If there is one thing that *O brother, where art thou ?* does not lack, it is references. From the opening scene, the spectator is immersed in the context of the South of the USA during the Great Depression, and presented with a bedazzling number of picturesque elements : from the Klu Klux Klan to the real Robert Johnson, through hair gel brands and the quick spread of the radio, every detail is picturesque enough for a postcard. This surreal cruise is rocked by a powerful score - mainly composed of bluegrass music - whose success and celebrity have come to overshadow that of the movie. Moreover, other elements, clearly reminiscent from *The Odyssey*, regularly emerge from this colorful maelstrom : the disappearance of one of the characters, for example, is explained with unwavering confidence by his metamorphosis into a toad. Eventually, it is but on top of this layer of rich icons that the main story tries to surface : Everett is an escaped prisoner intent on going home to his wife, that makes two fellow convicts tag along for help and company by luring them with the story of a hidden treasure.

While such a profusion of evocations and narrations may seem like the recipe for quite the road-movie, the final result ends up giving the impression that it lacks a direction. For instance, it seems a perfectly acceptable choice not to have made any of the songs of the film put an emphasis on the dramatic nature of a given scene, unlike what would happen in a more operatic kind of musical. But they could, however, be expected to be logically inserted in the narration. In this epic, though, they all seem to be brought by pure happenstance. Likewise, none of the heroes' numerous encounters, even for the one in which Everett finds his long-sought wife, appear to be planned or inherently necessary. But is this apparent confusion enough for the story to miss its purpose ?

In fact, a second look at the movie's objectives may very well mitigate this feeling. Its title traces it as the embodiment of the fictional project of a fictional director,

the main character of Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*, whose goal was to make the perfect portrait of the South during the mid-30's. And indeed, the South that the Coen brothers depict is not simply made of caricatural Babyface Nelsons, joy-riding maniacally, guns ablaze, through remote pasture fields. It is also a place where women will not marry men unable to support them, where superstition still holds a lot of ground in people's minds, where the Klu-Klux Klan is starting to get on some people's nerves, and where people are trying, confusedly, to think about what would be best for the country's future. A lot of effort is in fact devoted to establishing some sociological truths or perceptions about the way people lived at the time, hinting at the fact that this Golden South may not only be less picturesque than envisioned, but ultimately the main character of the story.

Granted, the ironical tone leaves not doubt about the fact that it is the way the South is seen through American culture that is the matter here, rather than historical accuracy. And one must also admit that on the whole, the movie may very well be enjoyed as a simple comedy untied by any obligations towards causality or coherence. But thinking of it as a way to convey a description rather than a story eventually gives it some sense : according to the Coen brothers, the South is viewed as a place where people can be narrow-minded and angry, but good-hearted and optimistic nonetheless, a crazy realm of wonder and amazement, where things and characters never quite turn out the way you would expect them to.

It is with this in mind that I ended up understanding why I did not make so much of that movie the first time I saw it : this South was clearly foreign to me, and American culture had probably not impregnated me enough for me to see more in it than yet another comedy at the time. Once I had worked out a part of its mechanism, though, I found it to be a surprisingly rich and interesting piece of work, that I won't be remembering only for its score anymore.