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Anger, Grief, and Dark Humour: Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri as an 'Emotional Hybrid'

Tarja Laine

Abstract: This article approaches Martin McDonagh's *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) as an emotional hybrid, of which the aesthetic strategies convey and embody three inextricably intertwined affects: anger, grief, and dark humour. It argues that the emotions of the protagonists are all consuming, because these are entangled in such a way that it enlarges their personal traumas and prevents them from working through their grief and anger. It analyses anger, grief, and dark humour in the film to demonstrate that these affects are not separate, but intertwined throughout the narrative trajectory of the film in an aesthetically coherent and concise manner. The article hopes to show that this hybrid affective quality does not function as a marker of tension between different emotions. Rather, it facilitates dynamic fluctuation between these emotions, thus opening up avenues for different courses of action by the characters, which in turn are affectively recognised by the spectator. In this way the hybrid emotions function as an organising principle of the film's aesthetic structure organically from within, rather than as elements attached to the film externally. This operational logic makes *Three Billboards* a remarkable film in its affective-aesthetic orientation, both towards its own world and towards its spectator.

Keywords: *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*; anger, grief, dark humour, cinematic emotions

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (Martin McDonagh, 2017) stars Frances McDormand in an Oscar-winning performance as grief-stricken Mildred Hayes, whose teenage daughter Angela was raped and murdered in an extremely cruel way by unknown perpetrators, who got away without a trace. The three billboards in the title refer to the large, abandoned signboards along the old, unused highway leading up to Mildred's house, which she rents in order to demand publicly why the town's police chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson) has achieved nothing towards solving the heinous crime. Willoughby, who is suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer, will not be provoked by the billboards though, but his incompetent, openly racist deputy sheriff Dixon (another Oscar-winning performance by Sam Rockwell) has strongly different feelings about the situation. The triangular relationship between Mildred, Willoughby, and Dixon makes the film best categorised as a character-driven revenge drama. It lends itself particularly well to research into shifting strategies of character engagement, fluctuating between sympathy and antipathy, as well as between moral and perverse allegiance, among other approaches.[1] Another

1 Moral and perverse allegiance are notions by Murray Smith that define our emotional engagement with film characters in ethical terms. They refer to cinematic strategies that invite the spectators to become allied with a character through an evaluation of this character either as morally desirable or

rewarding approach would be to study the physical performance of the actors, and especially that of the strong female lead of the film, in order to understand how the spectator grasps the attributes and the affects of a character. As Vivian Sobchack argues, "it is the actor's lived body that makes the character intelligible, because the character's 'inner' experience is only manifest through the actor's 'outer' performance."[2]

But instead of analysing *Three Billboards* either on the basis of character engagement or acting performance, this article strikes another note. It approaches the film as an emotional hybrid, of which the aesthetic strategies convey and embody three inextricably intertwined affects: anger, grief, and dark humour. I argue that the emotions of the protagonists are all-consuming, because these are entangled in such a way that it enlarges their personal traumas and prevents them from working through their grief and anger. All three protagonists remain highly damaged characters, who are able to exit the narrative either through suicide (Willoughby) or through an open-ended revenge mission (Mildred and Dixon), which does not really bode well for them, regardless the rather mellow tone of the ending. My analysis starts with anger, then moves on to grief, and finally to dark humour in a way which hopefully demonstrates that these affects are not separate, but intertwined throughout the narrative trajectory of the film in an aesthetically coherent and concise manner. Furthermore, I hope to show that this hybrid affective quality does not function as a marker of tension between different emotions. Rather, it facilitates dynamic fluctuation between these emotions, thus opening up avenues for different courses of action by the characters, which in turn are affectively recognised by the spectator. In this way the hybrid emotions function as an organising principle of the film's aesthetic structure organically from within, rather than as elements attached to the film externally.

Anger

In her *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum tells us that "anger is sometimes justified and right. It is an appropriate response to injustice and serious wrongdoing."[3] The scene in which Mildred is interviewed by the regional television news reports at the location of the billboards is an example of such an appropriate response. It both acknowledges that serious wrongdoing has taken place, and addresses it in a way that combats injustice. The scene starts with a circular pan that frames Mildred within an extreme long shot in such a way that two of the three billboards stay behind her in a diagonal line. Mildred stands as firmly before the camera

as amorally fascinating. Smith 1995, p. 142-156; Smith 1999, p. 225-233.

2 Sobchack 2012, p. 434.

3 Nussbaum 2001, p. 394.

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as the billboards are founded in the ground, thus turning into a living embodiment of the message that the billboards communicate. The billboards themselves show a bright red background with the message written in a heavy, black uppercase font with an in-your-face effect. The scene is crosscut to Dixon watching the live transmission with his mother from his living room, while the diegetic, simultaneous voice-over by Mildred recounts the dreadful events of her daughter's death in a remarkably calm and composed fashion, which ties the scenes together.

The outwardly calm affective quality of Mildred's voice-over, both in conflict both with her inner reality and with the content of the story she is recounting, is significant in many ways. First, the voice-over makes her author of a narrative in a situation she hardly controls. Her "cool anger" functions as "a way of regaining control or asserting dignity in a situation of helplessness."[4] Secondly, the voice-over assumes the function of what Michel Chion has termed "acousmatization", leaving us only with the sound to imagine what has happened at a crucial moment in the story.[5] In her *Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman has pointed out that especially in classical Hollywood cinema, where men speak and women are spoken of, the female voice is hardly ever heard in an acousmatized form.[6] Thus, the saliency of Mildred's voice-over in this scene functions as a powerful reclaiming of female voice, enunciating the story with direct effect on Dixon as well as on Willoughby, who also is watching. And in the third place, the voice-over articulates moral conscience, effectively putting the blame for the unsolved crime on Willoughby and his associates, who consequently feel guilty after being addressed by Mildred in this way. Bernard Williams has proposed that guilt is rooted in the sense of hearing, as in listening to the voice of judgment[7], which in the interview scene results in Willoughby's being emotionally upset. This is clear from the shot following Mildred's television interview, which shows Willoughby seeking solace from his horses, accompanied by the melancholy guitar tune that functions as a musical motif in the film, signifying loss.

In one crosscut shot to Dixon's house there is a close-up of his television set with Mildred looking directly at the camera—against the explicit instructions given earlier by the television crew—while accusing the local police of being "too busy going around torturing black folks" instead of spending their time solving crimes. The provocation works, which is evident

4 Nussbaum 2016, p. 47.

5 Chion 2009, p. 465. At some point of the film we see a glance of a forensic photo in Angela's case file, depicting her burned body. The picture of the body is shown only very briefly and partially, as though this kind of heinously violated corpse cannot be shown. Therefore, it also stands for horror and abjection in Julia Kristeva's sense, the collapse of meaning in a state between life and death, good and evil. Kristeva 1982, p. 19.

6 Silverman 1988, p. 75-76.

7 Williams 1993, p. 89.

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from the reaction shots of both Dixon and Willoughby. Mildred's anger conveyed in the interview scene demonstrates that this emotion does not only include pain caused by serious injustice, but also a desire for the wrongdoer's true suffering for causing it. Throughout *Three Billboards* the focus of Mildred's anger is on the wrongful act committed to her daughter, which is an appropriate response. But since the person who committed the crime is untraceable, the target of her anger is Willoughby and his subordinates by proxy, which makes things more complicated as regards appropriateness. Furthermore, Mildred's anger clearly takes what Nussbaum calls the "road of payback". According to her later work on *Anger and Forgiveness*, anger would qualify as "always normatively problematic", since it implies that payback, imagined or not, somehow cancels pain and makes good for wrongdoing. The idea of payback explains why we sometimes experience "intense aesthetic pleasure [in fictional] narratives in which the [wrongdoer] suffers, purportedly balancing the horrible act that occurred."[8] At least in the world of fiction, we can still witness what Nussbaum calls restoring the "cosmic balance" by the suffering of wrongdoers, which could explain the recent popularity of "revenge films" such as the *John Wick* franchise (2014-).

In *Three Billboards* there is no such cosmic balance though. Even if the focus of Mildred's anger is both rational and appropriate, its target is irrational and inappropriate, since it is too self-contained, too much saturated by her personal trauma, and almost entirely motivated by revenge. For Nussbaum revenge is an "especially unsatisfactory, costly way to effect the punishment of offenders, one that usually simply ensures that the exchange of damages will perpetuate itself without limit."[9] In *Three Billboards*, the whole narrative is driven by such an exchange of damages, resulting from the offended parties repeatedly seeking payback from one another. First Dixon arrests Mildred's friend Denise (Amanda Warren) for the possession of two marihuana cigarettes without a possibility for bail hearing. Then Willoughby anonymously donates five thousand dollars for the purpose of keeping Mildred's billboards up for another month, right before he commits suicide. This results in an upsurge of antagonism against her amongst the townspeople. Finally, Mildred launches a nightly arson attack on the police station after her billboards have been destroyed by fire, unaware of the fact that Dixon is still inside. To the melody of the traditional Celtic tune "The Last Rose of Summer", sung by American soprano Renée Fleming, the darkly lit scene starts out with Dixon breaking and entering into the unoccupied station. He is in search of the letter that Willoughby wrote him as a personal suicide note, which he then finds next to Angela Hayes' file. At the same time we witness Mildred crossing the street and entering the building opposite the station, hesitatingly preparing her throwing of Molotov cocktails.

8 Nussbaum 2016, p. 25.

9 Nussbaum 2001, p. 396.

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Visually the scene is dominated by crosscuts between the action in the two locations, which are simultaneously separated and connected, but it is the soundtrack and especially the music that makes this scene interesting. First of all, the tune—which we are already familiar with from the opening sequence of the film—seems to emerge somewhere between the diegesis and the nondiegesis. To the audience it is unclear whether Dixon is listening to the same song through his headphones, which prevents him from hearing the telephone call placed by Mildred to ensure that the building is empty of people. The high volume sound dominates the soundscape, thus conveying that we would not pay attention to the ringing either, were it not for the red light indicator flashing the incoming call on the telephone. Yet the same song is on the soundtrack in the crosscuts to Mildred, signifying that the song might have diegetic status after all.

Secondly, in the same scene Willoughby's voice-over narrating the contents of his suicide note is diegetically ambivalent as well, since it occurs from beyond the event of his death. Then we witness the station catching fire, which Dixon does not notice until he reaches the end of the letter simultaneously with one of Mildred's Molotov cocktails breaking a window, which throws Dixon back on the ground because of the impact of flames. The sense of urgency in the crosscut scene accompanied by the layered soundscape epitomizes the extent to which Mildred and Dixon's personal traumas are intertwined, showing their anger and grief to be connected somehow. Willoughby's letter has revealed to us that Dixon suffers from his own trauma. This originates from the loss of his father, which results in an unhealthy relationship with his manipulative mother, and culminates in his sensed inability to take control of his own life, his own emotions.

Therefore, the act of arson by which Mildred aims at the pain of the offender (the police) in order to compensate for her own pain is hardly successful, because it is based on her obsessive fixation on the suffering of the other, which merely deepens involvement in her own ongoing, unbridled anger. Furthermore, the torched police station does not remove her suffering, but contributes to her feelings of guilt about her daughter's death. At approximately the thirty-minute mark of the film Mildred is outside her daughter's room. A children's red sign on the door says 'danger', now signifying that it could be dangerous for Mildred to enter the room and be confronted by her own emotions, her own guilt. Then, without turning on the lights, she goes in and sits on her daughter's bed, surrounded by rock posters, while by now familiar, melancholy guitar motif plays on the soundtrack. Then her daughter's voice shouting "mom" serves as a sound bridge linking the past with the present. Next, we witness a flashback scene where they are in the middle of a fight about the daughter borrowing the family car, which ends with the following, upsetting exchange:

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Angela: I will walk! And you know what else? I hope I get raped on the way!
Mildred: Yeah, well, I hope you get raped on the way too!

After this flashback, we gaze across Mildred's shoulder into the room, while she is in the doorway, an image that clashes graphically with the shot just before the flashback, in which Mildred was on the bed (figure 1 and 2). Again, there is doubt about the diegetic status of the image: did Mildred actually enter the room or did she only do so in her imagination? In any case, the scene is full of self-inflicted pain, which for Nussbaum is the result of guilt and anger directed at the self, the result of a wrongful act that one thinks one has caused.[10] The flashback scene functions as the explanation of the violent quality of Mildred's anger, suggesting that it is saturated by guilt.

Figure 1: The shot right before the flashback (screen capture).

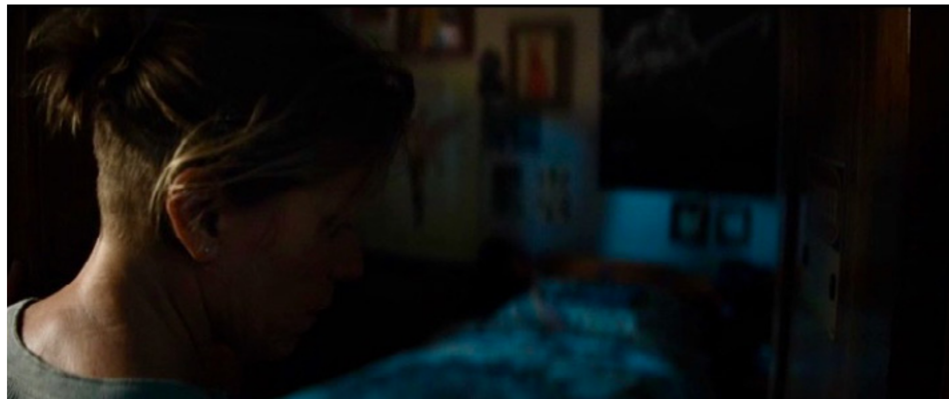

Figure 2: The shot right after the flashback (screen capture).

10 Nussbaum 2016, p. 128.

This means that Mildred's desire for punishment is not only a desire for cosmic balance but also for "punishment by proxy", as if punishing the perpetrators would fulfil the punishment that Mildred feels she deserves herself. According to Nussbaum, the self-inflicted pain that accompanies anger at self is a form of payback, the intentionality of which is to cancel out the wrongful act. But this "retributive wish" does not make any sense, insofar as payback does not undo whatever wrongful damage one has caused.[11] In *Three Billboards*, Mildred's retributive wish is not only directed at the unknown perpetrators and the inefficient police officers, but also at herself, caused by the events that are revealed to us in the said flashback. Mildred experiences guilt for the wrongful act that has been committed by someone else and wishes for this wrongdoer's suffering, hoping that such suffering would cancel out her own pain. In the absence of any recognizable wrongdoer, Mildred wishes for the suffering of secondary wrongdoers, which explains why she is so eager to take matters into her own hands. This does not result in redemption though, but inflicts even more unproductive hostility and suffering onto herself. Mildred's emotionally charged facial expression as she watches Dixon almost burning alive during her arson attack, testifies to a woman imprisoned within her own anger, pain, and guilt. In addition, Dixon's burn wounds draw a parallel between him and her daughter Angela, whose body was also burned after her ghastly rape and murder.

Yet at a certain point in this zero-sum game of self/other directed anger and guilt, Mildred's desire for payback becomes a desire shared by Dixon, and the film ends with Mildred and Dixon getting into a car and heading towards Idaho, acting on their silent agreement to kill a suspect. This turns out to be some passer-through, whom earlier in the film we witnessed threatening Mildred in the gift shop where she works. It is the same stranger Dixon provoked into a fight in order to obtain his DNA sample, after eavesdropping on him during a sinister conversation in a saloon. The three billboards watch over them as they drive towards the rising sun behind the green hills, accompanied by a bittersweet Americana song. The mood of this ending is strangely hopeful, epitomizing comradeship between the two former enemies Mildred and Dixon, which gives new purpose to their lives. This purpose is the reason Dixon does not commit suicide in a previous scene, in which his handling of a shotgun strongly suggests such intentions (figure 3).

11 Nussbaum 2016, p. 129.

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Figure 3: Suicidal thoughts (screen capture).

Their new purpose in life seems to express desire not only for payback, but also desire for dignitary punishment of the person who has offended them. Nussbaum calls this the "road of status" as it is based on inappropriate and narcissistic desire for dignitary punishment. Mildred and Dixon's mission to kill a conceivable, but impossible killer is not intended to undo their shared pain, but to take away the dignity of the offender in order to boost their own. For what had happened to Mildred in the gift shop and to Dixon in the saloon scene, is not merely psychological and physical violence, but constitutes violation of their dignity as well. The way in which the offender is framed in low angle both when threatening Mildred and assaulting Dixon conveys this sense of humiliation that is inherent to both scenes. Thus, the revenge pact that Mildred and Dixon agree on at the end of *Three Billboards* can be seen as triggered by status-focused anger that follows injured self-esteem, and as motivated by an attempt to retrieve personal dignity, which would heal the wounded ego.

At the same time, the ending offers what Rick Altman has termed "narrative crossroads" of two storyline paths, each representing a different type of pleasure for the spectator: morally sanctioned pleasure and generic pleasure that departs from moral norms.[12] In *Three Billboards* the latter might include story elements as: the gift shop offender turning out to be Angela's murderer after all, and Mildred getting her revenge with Dixon's help. The morally sanctioned path of narrative development would include Mildred and Dixon overcoming their desire for revenge and seeking therapy, perhaps. However, it seems safe to assume that such anti-climax would have left the spectators brimming with disappointment. Yet the ending of *Three Billboards* fails to be an ending proper, since it leaves the spectator without any narrative resolution. It is impossible to ascertain what the ensuing actions of the two characters will be, while they remain angry and morally confused. We are left to hope that things

12 Altman 1999, p. 145-152.

will go well for both of them, but this is a form of hope against hope, since hardly any aesthetic elements throughout the film are oriented towards a 'happy end'. In this context Yvette Bíro argues that the ending of a film often "has the charge to sum up the whole".[13] I think that the final scenes of *Three Billboards* deliberately refuse to sum up the previous elements of the film, which partly explains why the film stays with us for a long time after it has actually finished.

Grief

With "The Last Rose of Summer" on the soundtrack, *Three Billboards* opens with a black screen on which the production/direction credits appear. The very first shot of the film, which is an establishing shot the dilapidated billboards in a misty field, evokes a melancholy mood. This mood is enhanced by a second shot from the opposite perspective, in which the camera is positioned within the frame of the closest billboard looking out over at the other two further away (figure 4). The image is simultaneously deep and shallow, with all the planes in the image in focus, while the scenery appears flatten because of the fog. The total opening, all in all eight establishing shots of the field with the billboards from different perspectives, functions as a prologue to the film. Or rather, an overture, which in cinema is used as a strategy to set the mood of the film before, during, or instead of the opening credits. Examples abound with such prominent textbook titles as *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulesco, 1953), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) and *Manhattan* (Woody Allen, 1979). Some establishing shots emphasize the skeleton silhouette of the billboards surrounded by high grass. Sun-bleached panels still attached to the frame show parts of slogans meant to entice passers-through to visit the imaginary town of Ebbing ("worth stopping for"). Another shot draws closer, showing a panel with the face of a baby. The final overture shot covers a larger area, with the farthest billboard hardly visible due to the extreme distance and the foggy mist. The overture is cut to a black screen while the title of the film fades in and out and then the story starts unfolding from the very same location, the billboards, now bathing in bright sunlight, as we notice a car approaching. In this overture, the song "The Last Rose of Summer" that contains such lines as "left blooming alone" while "all her lovely companions are faded and gone" refers by association to the dilapidated billboards "blooming alone" in high grass. The billboards thus clearly function as emotion metaphor for (the memory of) Angela. In other words, the billboards are a headstone for Angela, metaphorically replacing or doubling her deceased body, which explains why Mildred places flowers underneath the billboards as a sign of remembrance.

13 Bíro 2008, p. 204.

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Figure 4: A frame within a frame (screen capture).

Therefore, this cinematic overture does not merely illustrate the title of the film, but it establishes the cinematic moor, or rather it functions to "prepare the stage for story comprehension and spectator involvement", as Thomas Elsaesser put this.[14] Regardless of the centrality of anger in the film's narrative, the overture is not about anger but about grief, which suggests that this is the most important emotion as regards "understanding how [the film] wants to be read and how it needs to be understood".[15] Nussbaum has defined grief as repeatedly experienced affective frustration, thoroughly intertwined with the grieving person's bodily and cognitive fabric. It is this reverberating, repetitive logic of grief that is embedded in the overture of *Three Billboards*, providing the film with an affective quality that directly affects the spectator. One important element to achieve this is Carter Burwell's atmospheric, haunting, delicate score. It reoccurs arranged for piano, clarinet, and mandolin in the scene with the deer, starting off as a sound bridge from the previous scene of Willoughby and family by the lake. A shot of the lake scenery with its surrounding hills dissolves into a shot of the field with the billboards and Mildred about to place baskets of flowers underneath them. The minor-key melody is slow, intimate, and harmoniously attuned to Mildred's sadness and loneliness, as she is arranging the flowers, which are colour-matched to the intense, fire engine red background of the billboards. Suddenly as if from nowhere a deer appears in the scene, and an astonished Mildred greets the animal with affection, before plunging into an emotional monologue, while the unperturbed animal continues its grazing. The scene ends with a sobbing Mildred shot from behind, dissolving into the twilight scenery of an eerie sunset. All the elements in the scene—the score, the deer, the flowers, and the landscape, as well as Frances McDormand's performance—combine to communicate the depth of her grief, but simultaneously our realization dawns that ultimately her was with the police will prove useless, and nobody's arrest will ever take away her emotional damage.

Landscape plays an important part in the film, especially the field with the billboards, epitomizing John Wiley's idea that places are not merely reminiscent of the past, but that they form a continuum between the past and the present in which (traumatic) memories are continuously stored.[16] There seems to be an allegorical relationship between this landscape and Mildred's inner feelings, when she moves around in it. This means that the exterior, physical landscape conveys the significance of her interior, affective landscape in so much as that it becomes a shared "tangible territory", as Giuliana Bruno describes this.[17] First there is the misty, fog-filled valley of the overture sequence reflecting Mildred's trauma of loss without resolution, and evoking a sense of being immersed in cold, opaque, and static matter, which is what grief would feel like. Denise Riley writes that grief is experienced as "freezing of time" functioning to "erect a shield against the reality of death."[18] It is this idea that is embodied in the opening scenes full of thick fog. There is also the same valley in dim evening light, after all the vivid colours of nature have vanished with the last light of day. Gloom prevails, except for the bright red glow emitted by the billboards, epitomizing Mildred's affective landscape, in which anger penetrates her grief (figure 5). Then there is the nightly scenery with the billboards in flames, an all-consuming destruction referring to the gap in Mildred's sense of self.[19] Finally, there are numerous close-ups of Mildred's face, which consequently becomes a landscape in itself: full of life when enraged, but barren and defeated when in grief.[20]

14 Elsaesser 2012, p. 114.

15 Elsaesser 2012, p. 115.

16 Wiley 2007, p. 173.

17 Bruno 2002, p. 207.

18 Riley 2012, p. 1-2.

19 The scene with the flaming billboards also evokes an association with the Ku Klux Klan's cross burning practice, intended primarily to intimidate and terrorize people of colour.

20 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have made this association between face and landscape in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*: "The face is a surface: facial traits, lines, wrinkles. [...] The face is a map. [...] The face has a correlate of great importance: the landscape." Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 170.

Figure 5: A billboard in a dim evening light (screen capture).

There seems to be an inherent paradox in the experience of grief that manifests itself in dichotomies. Donald Gustafson argues that grief is conditioned by a "counter-belief desire", which involves belief that a loved one is dead and the (irrational) desire that this may not be the case.[21] Laura Tanner speaks of grief as entrapment in the urgent bodily experience of pain on the one hand, and a sense of bodily separation from the world in which one is located on the other. As one simultaneously lacks the agency to participate in this same world, she calls this experience "intimate detachment".[22] And Riley describes grief as an altered condition of life that is experienced as arrested, frozen time. To her grief is a feeling of being cut off from the flow of time, resulting from an act of dissociation that shields one from the reality of the death of a loved one. Writing about the death of her own child, she writes how she experienced this painful event so intensely that she sensed that part of her died instantly: "So you are both partly dead, and yet more alive. You are cut down, and yet you burn in life."[23] Grief involves knowing and not knowing that the loved one is dead, a sense of sameness with and separation from.

This sense of sameness with and separation from her daughter Angela is the motivation for Mildred's actions. It also shows why her anger is thoroughly intertwined with her grief, so much so that there will be no solution for this deadlock within the course of the narrative.

Mildred's anger, expressed in and through the billboards, is her way of being with Angela, even though the very same billboards signify Mildred's eternal separation from her. In *Three Billboards* Mildred is under the illusion that she needs her anger to preserve the love for her daughter, while at the same time this anger prevents her from working through

21 Gustafson 1989, p. 457.

22 Tanner 2007, p. 243.

23 Riley 2012, p. 14.

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her grief. This is why her grief is pathological, enhanced by her feelings of guilt. Nussbaum writes that a grieving person turning to anger "may function psychically as a way of restoring the lost person or object. In such cases, grief can be deflected into an unusual intense anger, in which all the energy of love and loss is turned toward persecution."[24] The recurring element of the billboards, with their aggressive red background and confronting black font, functions as a visible manifestation of Mildred's obsessive anger that keeps her imprisoned in her excessive grief.

Actually, apart from the billboards, red as a colour motif is frequently used throughout the film. It noticeably appears as the colour of numerous props in the advertising agency, which is managed by a man by the name of "Red" Welby (Caleb Landry Jones). Red is also the colour of Mildred's t-shirt under her coveralls, as of the garment her daughter was wearing on the night of the murder. There is red in schoolgirls' backpacks, coffee mugs, cornflake packages, picnic clothes, telephones, and other everyday objects. The gerberas that Mildred plants under the billboards are of the same bright red as the carnations on the table where which Willoughby writes his suicide note. Mildred's name itself contains the letter group "red" its etymological origin signifying "mild strength". In addition there are various forms of red blood in the film: blood caused by illness, blood resulting from violence, blood as evidence, and family bloodlines.

It is important to notice that by using both blood and the colour red the film pays direct homage to Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), the thriller that Dixon and his mother are watching at some point in the film. In Roeg's film, colour symbolism is used as a cue for the emotions of a mourning couple working through grief after their daughter's death. Even though used in this way in cinema, the colour red is often understood to signify anger and aggression, in *Three Billboards* it also indicates pain brought about by the loss of a loved one. In this context Nussbaum (2001) describes grief as rapid feelings of pain and tumult "coloured by the kinetic properties of the bloodstream" (45). Indeed, in many images in *Three Billboards* red colour areas stand out in a way that indicates sudden moments of pain. This is brought home to us by the movement of this colour, its unique kinetic properties, resulting from a combination of the lowest frequency and the longest wavelength within the visible spectrum. Yet, the colour red is noticeably missing from the final shots of the film, suggesting perhaps that the protagonists' revenge mission functions as a means to work through grief. But as I hope to have shown, when all is said and told this is not a plausible interpretation due to the open-ended nature of the final scene.

24 Nussbaum 2016, p. 47.

Dark Humour

Regardless of the saliency of grief and anger, *Three Billboards* does not show an overload of negative emotion. This is due to the elements of dark humour that occur throughout the film. Even though at first glance humour seem to would undermine the gloomy and serious subject matter, here it does not detract but contributes to the coherence of the film. This type of humour is no detached, added-on ingredient, but it functions organically from within, interacting with the other affective elements. Yet, this coherence is not based on the intimate relation between horror and humour as conceived by Noel Carroll for instance.[25] Rather, it is based on discrepancy, incongruity, and a-synchronicity between two affects, which mutually enhances positive and negative emotions. In the context of horror-comedy, Carroll writes that even though pain and death can be elements of joking, in the comedy genre "we are not supposed to dwell upon them, especially in terms of their moral or human weight or consequences." While in horror the negative emotion "disappears when the comic frame causes the burden of moral concern for life [...] to evaporate."[26] By contrast, I argue that in *Three Billboards* negative emotions and comic elements do not cancel each other out, but reinforce each other in a way that results in a coherent whole. How does the film achieve this?

Already in the scenes immediately following the opening overture, there is a comic undercurrent. At first the music functions as a vehicle for the grief-stricken mood from the opening shots, when the soprano reaches the lines "to reflect back her blushes" and the film cuts to an interior shot showing Mildred's eyes reflected in the rear-view mirror of her car. But then the music fades out as Mildred passes the dilapidated billboards, only to stop the car in order to take a closer look at the one with still intact advertising panels showing part of a baby. A reaction shot expresses Mildred getting an idea that is likely going to be outside the ordinary, while a track starts off from Burwell's original score, entitled "Mildred Goes to War." This is a track that one reviewer accurately described as a "mix of ironic Americana and sarcastic darkness that doesn't announce anything good."[27] There is also a medium close-up that shows the rusty brass name plate of "Ebbing Advertisement Company", which is the same name on a sign that the following scene begins with, shot from behind a glass door. The camera tilts downwards to an out-of-focus Mildred resolutely walking in slow motion towards this glass door to the rhythm of clapping hands in the score of her very own marching music, the Ebbing Police Department building ominously looming in the background. The next shot is taken over Red Welby's shoulder, who is reading a book with his feet on the table. The reaction shot reveals that the book is Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1953). The book covers most of his face so that only his cautious eyes are visible, as he peers from behind the book at the approaching combatant (figure 6). The scene exemplifies how easily grief can be transformed into anger, and a reflection on one's loss into a desire for vengeance. But the scene also epitomizes dark humour, based on its cinematic mood conveying impending conflict, even though the opening does not explicitly create the narrative expectation of 'trouble on its way'.

25 Carroll 1999, p. 147.

26 Carroll 1999, p. 157-158.

27 Manduteanu 2017.

Figure 6: Trouble on its way (screen capture).

In other scenes dark humour is created by the overtly provocative, morally inappropriate dialogue, which encroaches on good taste. There is the exchange between Mildred and Father Montgomery (Nick Searcy), who at some point calls on her not to offer priestly solace, but to convince Mildred to get rid of her billboards. Without hesitation Mildred reacts with a lengthy monologue, in which she compares the Catholic Church to LA street gangs, against which injunctions were obtained by the Los Angeles City Attorney in the 1980s, stating that:

> *Father, that whole type of situation is kinda like your Church boys, ain't it? You've got your colors, you've got your clubhouse, you're, for want of a better word, a gang. And if you're upstairs smoking a pipe and reading a bible while one of your fellow gang members is downstairs fucking an altar boy then, Father, just like those Crips, and just like those Bloods, you're culpable. Cos you joined the gang, man. And I don't care if you never did shit or you never saw shit or you never heard shit. You joined the gang. You're culpable. And when a person is culpable to altar-boy-fucking, or any kinda boy-fucking, I know you guys didn't really narrow that down, then they kinda forfeit the right to come into my house and say anything about me, or my life, or my daughter, or my billboards. So, why don't you just finish your tea there, Father, and get the fuck outta my kitchen.*

During the monologue, which lasts for two minutes and ten seconds, the camera mostly stays with Mildred, framing her either in medium shot or in close up, but nevertheless there are cuts to a number of reaction shots with Father Montgomery and Mildred's son Robbie (Lucas Hedges) who is witnessing the scene. The scene empathically lacks musical accompaniment, and its emotional impact relies heavily on Frances McDormand's performance, which within just two minutes comprises an affective gamut that runs from casual through sarcastic and contemptuous to aggression and even hatred. There are also Father Montgomery's facial expressions, which progress from quizzical to approving, then to anger and even shame. After Mildred has turned around and walked out of the kitchen, the scene ends with a profile shot of a flabbergasted Father out of focus in the foreground, and the obviously proud Robbie in focus in the background, supplying comic relief with his line: "But thanks for coming anyway, father." The scene is full of Mildred's pain, but it is also saturated by dark humour based on carnivalesque rebellion against, or feelings of cynical superiority towards (the hypocrisy of) the Catholic Church, mocking and ridiculing the authority of the clergy.

After Mildred has been arrested for drilling a hole in the local dentist's thumb (another authority figure) with his own equipment, she finds herself in the questioning room at the police station under Dixon's suspicious gaze. Wryly, she then asks him in a casual tone how the "nigger-torturing business" is going. Caught off guard, Dixon defensively protests that "it's 'persons of colour' -torturing business these days, if you want to know." When next Willoughby has dismissed Dixon, he explains to Mildred almost apologetically: "If you got rid of every cop with vaguely racist leanings then you'd have three cops left and all o' them are gonna hate the fags so what are ya gonna do, y'know?" Obviously, the use of the words 'nigger' and 'fags' in the scene is disconcerting and offensive, especially given the Midwestern setting of the film. In his discussion of the scene, Tony McKenna points out that "the racism [TL adds: and homophobia] here is handled too lightly—when the acts it refers to are so genuinely horrific and have a real resonance in the historical context in question."[28] The film has been critiqued by many commentators for neutralising through light irony political and social controversies concerning race and sexual orientation, not only in this particular scene, but in general throughout film. Even though the analysis of such controversy is beyond the scope of this article, I offer as an argument that the scene with the quoted upsetting word exchange is also darkly comical, not in spite of, but because of its political incorrectness. Here, dark humour results from a perverse contrast between the intuitive ethical aversion experienced by the spectators—which parallels Dixon being suddenly full of moralist fervour—and the bland, cheery factuality with which Mildred utters the

28 McKenna 2020, p. 184.

n-word. As a result there is a connection between moral awareness and humour in the scene, which opens the possibility of perverse delight in the very thing that intuitively clashes with our basic moral feelings. In his discussion of Jonathan Swift's satire, Shane Herron (2016) explains this phenomenon as follows:

> [People] possess a faculty of rational choice or will, guided by an intuitive sense of right and wrong, and yet not only do they still act like Yahoos, but they seem to display a perverse delight in using reason to twist and distort their basic moral sense [...] for no reason than the illicit thrill of doing wrong.[29]

Therefore, the police station scene is darkly comical, because it addresses our ethical intuition, but invites us to respond in a way that distorts this intuition. This is related to what Murray Smith (1999) has coined "perverse allegiance" that "takes as its object not only depicted actions, but also what we take to be the accepted and responsible moral response to these actions [...] the delight it evokes [being] partly founded on the disapproval of the strict moralist."[30]

While the Father Montgomery scene and the scene at the police station combine dark humour with the emotion of anger, the scene with the slippers has grief as a counter-emotion for laughter. This scene follows the one with the burning billboards, and it starts with a soulful guitar ballad, which is a variation of the 'loss' theme on the soundtrack, while the camera tracks in on Mildred lying on bed in her room. The camera moves to a close-up from low angle as she sits up on the edge of the bed, not only directing our attention to her weary expression, but also to the red butterflies that abundantly decorate the wallpaper in the room. The next shot is from behind Mildred as she ruefully whispers: "I'll crucify the motherfuckers", the mirror to her left reflecting the butterfly motif as she reflects on her loss. We share her POV as, amused at her own action, she becomes aware of the light pink bunny slippers she is wearing, complete with pompon noses and beady eyes, positioned in such a way that they return our gaze when shot from floor height. Twisting her feet, she then starts her private puppet performance, with the bunny on her right foot asking the left one in a deep voice: "Who you gonna crucify? The motherfuckers?" To which the bunny on the left foot answers in a high-pitched voice: "Yeah, I'm gonna crucify the motherfuckers" (figure 7).

29 Herron 2016, p. 424.

30 Smith 1999, p. 232.

Figure 7: "Who you gonna crucify?" (Screen capture)

In this scene, dark humour aligns negative and the positive emotions not only providing Mildred with a remedy from her anger and grief, but also enabling her to contemplate with a clearer head what her ensuing actions will be. This is in stark contrast to a previous scene, in which the hot-headed Dixon reacts to the news of Willoughby's death by assaulting Welby and throwing him out of a window. Dark humour renders the scene with the slippers a defining moment that opens roads to multiple possibilities concerning payback or redemption. Even though Mildred ends up making a choice that is both ethically mistaken and problematic, her choice is measured and deliberate, and both she herself and the spectator know this to be so. This interplay between emotions in *Three Billboards* shows that choosing a right course of action is a complex affair that involves more than the 'cold deliberations' associated with 'reason', or the 'hot instincts' that are associated with 'emotion'. The humorous undercurrent is there not only to enable insight into affects and decision-making, but also to tie the complex emotions together so that they form an organic whole. This operational logic makes *Three Billboards* a remarkable film in its affective-aesthetic orientation, both towards its own world and towards its spectator.

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