

**G. Maglione (2018) Film Review: Martin McDonagh (dir.) (2018) 'Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri'. Fox Searchlight Pictures: Los Angeles, California, USA. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* (accepted August 2018).**

*'Anger begets anger'*

Mildred Hayes

*'Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri'* by Martin McDonagh, was released in 2018, receiving prestigious accolades for both the screenplay, direction and acting. It stars Frances McDormand, Woody Harrelson, Sam Rockwell as well as Caleb Landry Jones, John Hawkes, and Peter Dinklage in supporting roles.

The movie's plot consists of a grotesque story of humanity shattered by an unspeakable crime, self-sustaining rage and grief, dramatised by southern gothic photography and Irish music. It conveys images of excessive destruction (which often elicit comic effects) and possible redemption (which trigger moral reflection) cast against a motionless natural landscape of the Midwest US. Mildred Hayes (McDormand) is outraged that no arrests have yet been made in relation to the rape and murder of her daughter seven months ago. She publicly challenges the local police, led by a terminally ill chief Willoughby (Harrelson) and his no-good deputy Dixon (Rockwell), by renting three billboards before the town and by displaying explicit accusations against their lack of initiative. This sets in motion the development of dramatic events which appear to transform (some) characters' moral standing, alongside yielding further moral outrage and producing a final, perhaps-cathartic alliance between Mildred and police officer Dixon in their quest for justice-as-revenge.

Some of the ideas artistically transfigured by 'Three billboards' 'echo academic criminology, while others bring to bear ethical, philosophical and psychological perspectives beyond the scope of academic research' (Rafter, 2007: 403). From this perspective, there are a number of themes worthy of exploration.

Non-ideal victims and 'fearless speech'. As Nils Christie wrote the ideal victim is 'a person or category of individuals, who, when hit by crime, most readily are given the complete and

legitimate status of being a victim' (Christie, 1986: 18). Mildred would certainly have the "right" to claim such a status since she exists as the indirect target of an "ideal" crime – a sexual violence that led to the death of an innocent young woman. However, she completely and continuously defies the ideal victim's image. Mildred never acts as a passive, disempowered victim, playing instead the role of a fiercely combative, reckless heroine whose look transfigures her 'nothing-to-lose' mode. This non-ideal agonistic victim does not simply demand to be heard, she creates her audience, she plays out her rage spectacularly against an apparently lifeless universe. Mildred is the embodiment of 'fearless speech' (Foucault, 2001). She speaks truth to power, endangering herself and exposing her own life, by trying to hold both the police and the community accountable for what has happened to her daughter. Mildred 'chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy' (Foucault, 2001: 20). As a consequence, she is met with the hostility by a community whose normative expectations (of how a victim should behave) and moral vulnerability (represented by the denial of Mildred's drama) are refused and displayed. Ebbing blames Mildred for her reactions and for the destiny of shame she inflicted upon the terminally ill chief Willoughby. This lifeless town becomes community around the expulsion of this non-ideal victim, an "alien other" who does not passively accept her destiny, daring to shake the polity's moral foundations.

Mourning and moral outrage. Mildred's mourning is 'a negative relationship to the absent [daughter]' (Han, 2018: 32), fuelled by rage and generating further rage. This "excessive" passion blinds, destroys empathy, and begets parallel conflicts. Mildred's moral outrage 'propagates itself by degrees [...] in its perfection and paroxysm [engenders] a chain of reaction of vengeance' (Han, 2018: 32). The movie is shot and acted in such a way that the audience perceives an alternation between short emotionally flat periods, during which actors appear as emotionally numbed by pain - the 'quiet before the storm' - and long emotionally expressive moments characterised by aestheticised violence, whose absurdity is astonishing. The disillusioned irony which pervades the movie complicates those moments of emotional detachment and those scenes of engagement with raw emotions. The only characters untouched by anger are Willoughby - a paradigm of grace and moral perfection - and James (Dinklage), romantically involved with Mildred, who appears as being beyond

good and evil. There is no moral journey undertaken by Mildred, as she remains loyal to her anger and rage which are the expressions of her mourning.

Punishment and violence. There is not space for punishment, as legalised violence, in Mildred's quest for justice. Punishment 'rationalizes revenge and inhibits the avalanche-like surge that makes it so destructive' (Han, 2018: 15), it is an alternative to private violence as response to wrongdoing, shifting the focus from people's power to people's guilt. Punishment is controlled violence, an objective action which (supposedly) aims to 'prevent the uncontrollable surging of violence since, unlike the system of revenge, it is designed not to produce but rather to prevent violence' (Han, 2018: 15). Punishment is the end of Willoughby's mission. He is mediation and self-control. Mildred, instead, compulsively consumes her own rage, in order to satisfy her immediate and uncompromising urges of "negative" justice. This makes her life precarious, in Judith Butler's words, since she lives the ethical impossibility of embracing that type of 'suffering at a distance' which makes any 'ethical encounter possible' (Butler, 2012: 134). Her quest for justice, in fact, does not produce ethical encounters, rather it propels viral violence. Willoughby's life, conversely, is vulnerable, that is, replete of dignifying acceptance of his destiny and as such setting off Dixon's moral journey.

Justice, revenge and redemption. The construction(s) of justice in this film ties with the characteristic manner in which victims, crime and criminality are shaped within it. Here justice is an ongoing process more than an outcome. Justice *is* Dixon's moral journey, his process of subjective redemption sealed by forging a new alliance with Mildred. What galvanises this process is Dixon's realisation, thanks to Willoughby's posthumous words, of his moral worth. This changes Dixon's attitudes and dispositions, from a screw-up (homophobic and racist) cop to a self-sacrificing hero. At this point Dixon encounters the broken woman and her outrage, beyond badges and guns. However, such a moral journey is only incipient and far from being fully realised. Nothing is said and no clues are given regarding his attitude toward 'people-of-colour'. Additionally, his redemption has as final goal the hunting for another possible offender, with the intent of killing him. An a-moral redemption as final stage of a moral journey. Conversely, Mildred's quest does not contemplate any twist or turn. She does not engage with any transformative process. Neither closure nor healing are reached. Nevertheless, this character ostensibly captures

the viewer's sympathy due to her excessiveness, reckless dedication to her cause and human-all-too-human passions which generate the "failing" beauty of this anti-heroine.

Absent fault-lines. The 'people-of-color' allegedly tortured by Dixon are a faceless instrument of Mildred's denunciation of the police's inactivity (more than moral failure). This has generated some critical backlash, widely documented in multiple reviews of this movie. White people's supposed moral journeys apparently use the invisible victims of Dixon's racist violence, who have no moral standing, no presence. What makes this absence more visible is the fact that the movie is set in Missouri, where dramatic episodes of police brutality against people of color and the unrest sparked by this, echoed globally throughout new and old media in 2014. However, these allegations appear only partially substantiated. People of color do feature in the movie playing agentic roles - this is the case of both Jerome (the billboards' guy) and of Mildred's colleague, who engage in practices of resistance against the police and stand by the bereaved mother. Clearly, this is not a movie about post-Ferguson police-minorities relationships and in general race is a unexplored fault line. Whilst this is consistent with the artist's (McDonagh) freedom of expression, it does leave the aftertaste of a missing opportunity to say something about those tragic issues.

Overall, this convincingly acted and wisely shot movie, reminds those professionally interested in crime and punishment of how the appreciation of the tragic complexity of human wrongdoing may be somehow limited by any 'will to system', i.e. by any attempt to encapsulate the world in discrete categories, creating rigid hierarchies which remove chaos and produce an appearance of order. 'There billboards' challenges the orthodox criminological '*partage du sensible*' (Rancière, 2000) which produces flat accounts of rational, deprived or depraved social actors, fixed distinctions between victims and offenders, all-too-neat justice narratives and comforting readings of human goodness. The movie's non-realistic characters, in fact, are vehicles of human-all-too-human passions beyond binary divisions (inclusion/exclusion, inside/outside) and unquestioned moral grids (good/bad, right/wrong). 'There billboards' does not dish out any moral lesson; it rather generates a tragic look on human life and bereavement in particular, which elicits a sympathetic *verstehen*, whereby violence is viral, redemption is imagined and hope a daily task. Its dynamic force and power to frame crime within the human universe can perhaps

inspire an acceptance of excess, multiplicity and contradiction as conditions for a truly critical criminological imagination.

### **Reference List**

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