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Joshua Matthews
Dordt College, joshua.matthews@dordt.edu

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Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (Movie Review)

Abstract
"'Three Billboards' is in no way a crime movie. It is instead a profound movie with a deep insight into the human heart."

Posting about one of the 2018 Golden Globes Best Motion Picture Drama nominees from In All Things - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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“Three Billboards” Review

Starring: Frances McDormand, Woody Harrelson, Sam Rockwell, Peter Dinklage, Lucas Hedges, Caleb Landry Jones
Directors: Martin McDonagh
Screenplay: Martin McDonagh
Music: Carter Burwell

They got the oddly plain title of this movie, every word of it, just right.

They also made one of the best films of the year. You might even find this to be one of the best of the decade, especially if you—like me—are a Flannery O’Connor admirer.

Admittedly, halfway through “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri,” the film did not seem so great. The movie’s jokes, arising from a sense of humor odder and darker than the Coen Brothers, were falling flat at the screening I attended. The dialogue also seemed too crass. As a lifelong Midwesterner, I’ve met very few people in Middle America who so willingly and frequently say “f—k” in public. Yet in this movie, every small-town Missourian speaks that way.

But when, early on, I spotted one character reading “A Good Man is Hard to Find”—O’Connor’s famous short-story collection—I began watching this movie through the lenses of the great Catholic southern writer. For racism mixed with possibilities for change and reconciliation. For ordinary dialogue laced with theological profundities.

These conventions are all here, everywhere.

“The Three Billboards” turned for me halfway through the movie, with the delivery of one of its many theologically-charged gut-punches. (It conveys so many of these that even the most careful, unempathetic viewer ought to be stunned or softened by one of them, eventually.)

This particular gut-punch happened for me when Bill Willoughby (Woody Harrelson), Ebbing’s police chief, has to decide whether he would rather live in unbearable pain for months or commit suicide. In this case, Willoughby’s pancreatic cancer causes him to spit up blood on Mildred Hayes, a troublemaker who has already given him enough grief. The blood is a sign of
his disgust with her actions, but it’s also a sign of his humanity and mortality, as she realizes.

What has Hayes done? She (Frances McDormand) has harassed Willoughby—or perhaps inspired him—by putting up advertisements on three billboards near her home. Her billboards simply ask why Chief Willoughby hasn’t continued to investigate the rape and murder of Hayes’ daughter, whose case has remained unsolved for seven months. The billboards are on a road that almost no one travels, and yet their confrontational messages cause a stir in Ebbing.

Hayes’ pain, advertised on these three signs, becomes Willoughby’s pain. And then Willoughby’s becomes everyone’s in town. For her billboards, Hayes is hated by a number of townspeople, who do not appreciate her attack on the kindly, dying Willoughby.

One of these angry townspeople is Jason Dixon (Sam Rockwell), a white police officer with a history of violence against blacks. Dixon is angry at the advertiser who let Hayes put up her billboards, and he’s angry in general because he has been forced to move in with his simple-minded mother. He, like Hayes, seeks some measure of revenge for injustices done to people close to him. Thus, Dixon begins harassing Hayes, and then her friends.

Meanwhile, the billboards isolate Hayes and cause trouble with her son (Lucas Hayes) and ex-husband (John Hawkes). Despite keeping a calm outward appearance, she rages internally. She lashes out at a Catholic priest over the Church’s pederasty scandals. She attacks high school students who throw food at her car. At one point, she is told that “anger begets greater anger.” This is a wise saying, though the source—Hayes’ ex-husband’s 19-year-old girlfriend, who does not know the difference between polo and polio—may be too distracting for the saying to have any potent meaning for her.

Nevertheless, the phrase fits. Hayes will always strike back if she is struck. Why? Eventually, we find out that Hayes’ last words to her daughter may be one source of her anger. During a petty argument about a curfew, Hayes struck out in frustration at her daughter with the words “I hope you get raped.” Hayes never sees her daughter after that. Does Hayes blame herself for her daughter’s murder? Does she project her guilt onto Willoughby, as well as onto the entire Ebbing police department?

“Three Billboards” is in no way a crime movie. The killing of Hayes’ daughter is a pretense for the drama and bleak humor that surround the film’s theological complexity.

Consider the billboards. They become loaded symbols, picking up new meanings with each scene. At first, they are faded and meaningless places that no one cares about. Later, after Hayes puts up her signs, they turn into symbols of police injustice, of fiery rage, of sacrificial offerings, and even of the Holy Trinity.

Writer-director Martin McDonagh (“In Bruges,” “Seven Psychopaths”) echoes the spirit of Flannery O’Connor everywhere, from moments of bitter rage that allow for later moments of remarkable forgiveness and grace, to moments of acceptance that carry the potential for exploding into violence and vengeance.
I think that this is one of the points of setting the movie in a Midwestern town in Middle America, where everyone always seems so nice and welcoming. We rage and we suffer here too, mostly internally. But who are we, really? Perhaps closer to the characters in this movie than we would like to think.

And what do we do when some heinous act, something horrific and impossible to imagine, happens to us or near us? What if we could neither receive justice nor find satisfaction for our vengeful desires? Mildred Hayes and Jason Dixon and everyone else in Ebbing, Missouri ought to feel very familiar to us.

“Three Billboards” will be compared to the Coen Brothers’ oeuvre, merely because it will be labeled “black humor” and because it stars Frances McDormand, who is best known for her role in “Fargo.” However, while I think that, artistically, “Three Billboards” may be on the same continent as “Fargo,” it is also about as far from it as Afghanistan is from Japan.

The reason why is that McDonagh makes the Coen Brothers seem somewhat nihilistic, which perhaps they are. He has perfectly cast, and nearly perfectly written, a movie that ought to accompany readings of O’Connor, if not the New Testament. (I suspect that even the jokes that fell flat in this movie were meant to do so. They may not be mistakes in tone.)

Who is going to see a movie titled “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri”? I am sure that the movie’s marketers were not happy with it. It’s a title that, in its seeming inelegance, says that the movie does not want to be advertised as a product.

And perhaps that is because it is not a product. It is like the three billboards within the film. Although they could just be just boards for advertising, Hayes turns them into something far more than that.

By the arrival of the movie’s conclusion, we realize what has happened at the three billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri. We know what they are, and we care.