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Film Discussion Group
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Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (dir. Martin McDonagh, 2017)

On Camera

Mildred Hayes: Frances McDormand: *Fargo* (96); Oscar, Tony, and Emmy winner
Chief Willoughby: Woody Harrelson: Worked with McDonagh on *Seven Psychopaths* (12)
Dixon, hothead officer: Sam Rockwell: Frequent McDonagh collaborator; *Conviction* (10)
Red Welby, ad seller: Caleb Landry Jones: *Get Out* (17); Dafoe's son in *Florida Project* (17)
Robbie, Mildred's son: Lucas Hedges: *Manchester by the Sea* (16); drama kid in *Lady Bird* (17)
Charlie, Mildred's ex: John Hawkes: Oscar nominee for *Winter's Bone* (10); *The Sessions* (12)
Penelope, Charlie's girl: Samara Weaving: Mostly TV, including the just-released *SMILF* (17)
Dixon's mother: Sandy Martin: Longtime theatre and TV vet; Second City alumna
James, Mildred's suitor: Peter Dinklage: *The Station Agent* (03); *Game of Thrones* (11-17)
Abercrombie, new chief: Clarke Peters: TV's *The Corner* (00), *The Wire* (02-08), *Treme* (10-13)
Denise, Mildred's pal: Amanda Warren: *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* (17); *The Leftovers* (TV 14)
Anne, Willoughby's wife: Abbie Cornish: the beautiful *Bright Star* (09); *Seven Psychopaths* (12)
The Desk Sergeant: Zeljko Ivanek: longtime McDonagh collaborator, on stage and in film
Possible suspect: Brendan Sexton III: Teen criminal in *Kids* (95), so somewhat typecast

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Martin McDonagh: Oscar winner, principally known as a Broadway playwright
Cinematography: Ben Davis: *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (12); lots of superhero movies
Original Score: Carter Burwell: all of McDonagh's films; *Fargo* (96) and other Coen movies
Art Direction: Inbal Weinberg: *Frozen River* (08); *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (12)
Film Editing: John Gregory: *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (94); several Mike Leigh movies
Costume Design: Melissa Toth: *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (95); *Manchester by the Sea* (16)

Also directed by Martin McDonagh...

Six Shooter (2004) – McDonagh's first foray into film won the Oscar for Best Live Action Short:
you can watch it for free at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9w9BJXeL4E>

In Bruges (2008) – Colin Farrell won a Golden Globe for Best Actor in this violent comedy/drama
about a suicidally depressed hitman; McDonagh was nominated for an Oscar for the script

Seven Psychopaths (2012) – Gleefully shocking action comedy about a kidnapped Shih Tzu;
despite a star-heavy cast (Walken, Farrell, Harrelson, etc.), this was a commercial misfire

If you enjoyed *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*...

Wild River (1960) – An older woman refuses to cede her farm to TVA authorities building a dam

Silkwood (1983) – Another story about a flawed woman taking a public stand against authorities

Dogville (2003) – Not for everyone, but a powerful parable about small-town cruelty and revenge

North Country (2005) – McDormand and Harrelson also appeared in this anti-harassment drama

The Architect (2006) – Little-seen Viola Davis film about a resident protesting a shoddy tenement

Chi-Raq (2015) – Women in South Chicago refuse to have sex with men until gun violence stops

Facts about *Three Billboards* you may appreciate...

McDonagh was inspired to write the script a decade ago, recalling a series of billboards similar to Mildred's he saw during a bus trip through the U.S. South around 2000. After conceiving the idea of an aggrieved mother as the billboards' author—and noting a chance for a rare female lead in one of his screenplays—he finished writing it around 2009, with McDormand firmly in mind. He sent it to her around the time *Seven Psychopaths* premiered, and she loved it.

McDormand's one qualm had to do with age: at 58, she felt too old to have a 16-year-old son and 18-year-old daughter, especially since women in Mildred's station often have kids quite young. She didn't want to distort Mildred's story, or appear unwilling to take parts her own age.

McDonagh told the *Austin Chronicle* that he chose Missouri as his setting because it was one of the Border States in the Civil War, where clashes between racism and justice were heightened.

Having gone out of his way to hire a troupe of actors who hail from the theater world, as McDonagh also does, he was surprised when McDormand pushed against the idea of any rehearsal time. She felt strongly that the antagonism the audience needed to feel between Mildred and everyone else would suffer if the actors playing the parts had more time to bond.

McDormand cites John Wayne as the key influence on her performance, seizing a rare opportunity to play a woman on screen that stoic and resolute. Similarly, Carter Burwell says his score was inspired by the Western genre, though he also included some Baptist church-music motifs.

The production designer got so used to the billboards in her sketches and models that she forgot how upsetting they would be for residents of the area where they were filming. "Raped While Dying" spurred many calls of protest. Otherwise the production enjoyed great relations with the surrounding town, including at the antique store they turned into the film's police station.

Three Billboards has had a big run at festivals. It premiered at Venice in September, taking Best Screenplay (while *The Shape of Water* claimed Best Film). A week later, it surprised a lot of people by beating hundreds of films for the People's Choice Award in Toronto, won in the past by such popular and Oscar favorites as *Amélie*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The King's Speech*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, *The Imitation Game*, and *Room*. It was also supposed to show at Austin's Fantastic Fest, but McDonagh and Fox Searchlight pulled it after journalists revealed that the festival was secretly employing film writers who had been fired elsewhere for sexual assault.

Broad conversation topics...

Tone: On stage and film, McDonagh typically blends elements of tragic drama with extremely black comedy, often spiked with depictions of brutal violence. This tone can be hard to absorb, especially if you aren't prepared. (The Golden Globes, which separate their movie awards into Drama and Comedy/Musical categories, hesitated where to put *Three Billboards*, but ended up in Drama.) Do you think the film would have made the same points or registered the same way without the intensity of its violence, both in language and in behavior? Did you find yourself laughing? Did you wish you weren't? Had you experienced McDonagh's work before?

Mildred: Though Frances McDormand has played several indelible roles, folks are already noting that she may wind up being remembered (and Oscared) for playing a disarmingly decent cop in *Fargo* and an imperious critic of cops in *Three Billboards*. Some have discussed Mildred as a kind of modern-day Antigone, protesting heartless and immoral authorities while seeking justice for a dead relative. Unquestionably, Mildred and McDormand have been front-and-center of the film's marketing, even though the movie is in many ways an ensemble piece, and even reviewers that are hard on *Three Billboards* tend to distinguish the actress for praise. How much did your response to Mildred or McDormand shape your feelings about the entire film?

The Men: How does *Three Billboards* read differently if we imagine Chief Willoughby or Dixon as the main character, or at least compare their journeys to Mildred's? In the first case, how do Willoughby's letters compare to Mildred's billboards? Both are targeted to specific recipients but also shake up Ebbing at large. Both convey some deeply held convictions by their authors, but both gestures put the writers' families in extremely painful and vulnerable positions. What do you make of Willoughby's decisions? As for Dixon, he arguably has the biggest "journey" of all the characters, from stupid and violent antagonist to someone attempting to seek justice. Some viewers have been dismayed by his arc, as though the film is working too hard to redeem a vitriolic racist and rube. Others see the possibility of redeeming lost souls like Dixon as the most important moral idea in the script. Which of these positions sounds more right to you?

#MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter: McDonagh hatched this idea a decade ago and finished a script by 2012 or 2013, a year or two before Officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown in the street in Ferguson, Missouri, prompting protests against racist policing that drew global attention. By all accounts, McDonagh made few if any changes to the screenplay in the wake of these events; nor did he reconfigure the story in response to the federal campaigns against sexual assault that began around 2011, or certainly in response to the more recent #MeToo campaigns. Does *Three Billboards* feel timely to you in the way it aligns with or comments upon the issues of sexual violence or racist policing, or does it feel out of sync with the public discourse?

Anywhere, Anytime, USA: The production designer notes how hard it was to find an American small town that was "neither bustling nor broken," visually and economically, and could occupy the kind of "time warp" McDonagh wanted, which would detach the story from any specific era. (They eventually settled in Sylva, North Carolina.) But what are the pros and cons of placing this story in a kind of abstract space, both in terms of a vague "middle class" setting that the filmmakers could not find in the present U.S., and without any particular historical period? Did the fictional "Ebbing, Missouri" feel like a real town to you? Did it matter?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Music: The song Renée Fleming sings over the opening shots is an operatic adaptation of the poem “The Last Rose of Summer,” written by Thomas Moore in 1805. The lyrics are worth pondering in relation to Mildred’s standpoint but also to the evolution of the story:

'Tis the last rose of summer, / Left blooming alone; / All her lovely companions / Are faded and gone; / No flower of her kindred, / No rosebud is nigh, / To reflect back her blushes, / Or give sigh for sigh.

I'll not leave thee, thou lone one! / To pine on the stem; / Since the lovely are sleeping, / Go, sleep thou with them. / Thus kindly I scatter, / Thy leaves o'er the bed, / Where thy mates of the garden / Lie scentless and dead.

So soon may I follow, / When friendships decay, / And from Love's shining circle / The gems drop away. / When true hearts lie withered, / And fond ones are flown, / Oh! who would inhabit / This bleak world alone?

Hair: The opening scene where Mildred conceives of her plan is maybe the only time we see her with her hair down and loose; that razored hair on the back of her neck and the severe way she keeps her hair pinned up and short ever after – ready for “action” – is not where she starts. (To connect this point with the last one, the transition where Mildred adopts her mechanic’s outfit and does her hair up for battle is also when the music gets loud and percussive, *sans* lyrics.)

Space: Early script conversations stress how Drinkwater Road, where the billboards sit, is stranded in an obscure area; Red Welby, who manages the ad space, doesn’t at first recall they exist. As the film proceeds, all the characters spend so much time around the billboards that they feel central to the town. Only later do we discover that they are literally what Mildred sees from her front yard—which also means she is *always* looking at the spot where her daughter died.

Cinematography: When Dixon makes his first phone call to Chief Willoughby after discovering the billboards, the shots of Dixon are suffused with a scarlet light—possibly reflecting the light flashing from his police car, but also poetically suggesting that the red paint of the billboards is almost glowing. As the film unfolds, there is often inexplicable red light shining in the frames. The color also resurfaces elsewhere—for example, the painted trim around Mildred’s store.

Music: Another key song in *Three Billboards* is “Buckskin Stallion Blues,” which we hear sung by its original artist, Townes Van Zandt, and later again as covered by a female artist. Lyrics:

I heard her sing in tongues of silver / I heard her cry on a summer storm / I loved her, but she did not know it / So I don't think about her anymore / Now she's gone, and I can't believe it / So I don't think about her anymore.

If three and four was seven only / Where would that leave one and two? / If love can be and still be lonely / Where does that leave me and you? / Time there was, and time there will be / Where does that leave me and you?

If I had a buckskin stallion / I'd tame him down and ride away. / If I had a flyin' schooner / I'd sail into the light of day / If I had your love forever / Sail into the light of day.

Pretty songs and pretty places / Places that I've never seen / Pretty songs and pretty faces / Tell me what their laughter means / Some look like they'll cry forever / Tell me what their laughter means.

If I had a buckskin stallion / I'd tame him down and ride away. / If I had a golden galleon / I'd sail into the light of day / If I had your love forever / Sail into the light of day.

Religion: What did you make of the scene where Mildred dresses down the priest who visits her home, in a bravura monologue that seems written and shot to solicit cheers from the audience? Why, in your mind, did the film want to go so far out of its way to chastise the church? How did this moment in Mildred's characterization compare to, say, her assault on the dentist?

Penelope: Sometimes the jarring range in the film's tone gets crystallized in a specific hairpin turn: for example, when Charlie's sudden assault of his ex-wife, bringing a knife to her throat and slamming her against a doorway, gets interrupted by his teenage girlfriend's silly dialogue about needing to go to the bathroom and her comically callow reflections on working with disabled horses. How did you react to moments like this or to Penelope's character as a whole?

Denise: As Mildred approaches the shop where she learns her black friend and coworker Denise has been arrested, the score reverts to that loud, thumping, Western-inspired motif that accompanied her on the way to rent the billboards. This is "serious business" music, yet the movie treats Denise's arrest fairly lightly: she leaves a post-it note with a sad face to announce her imprisonment and she is all giggles when she later gets released, despite everything we have heard about the lethal racism of the Ebbing cops. How do these mixed signals compute?

Cinematography: For a movie that rarely calls attention to its photography it's all the more abrupt when it changes character to film Dixon's assault on Red Welby as one elaborate, unbroken shot—continuing without edits all the way from Dixon leaving the police station through his breaking into Red's office, beating him, throwing him out the window, punching his coworker, and assaulting him again in the street. You may have been horrified enough by the action not to notice the ornate filmmaking, but why make such a big, grandiose gesture *here*?

James: As with many people in the film, we might debate the extent to which *Billboards* uses the Peter Dinklage character and specifically his small stature as a butt of sarcasm—but he also has a rare moment in the script of challenging Mildred on her own snide attitude, rebuking her for presuming she's a better "catch" than he is. In general, the film works very hard to keep us on Mildred's side, all the way from script choices to low camera angles that ask us to literally "look up" to her, and editing that privileges her reactions to what other people say. How did you feel when James challenges her, or about the film's overall casting of Mildred as heroine?

Finale: Growing out of that question, how do you interpret the end of the film? Do you think Mildred and Dixon are likely to carry out the plan they are entertaining? What is the script saying about cycles of violence and its chosen targets? Why must they leave Ebbing at last?