

# The Map is Not the Country: Cartography in Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men*

John Bruns

“He got a city map at the quickstop and spread it out on the seat of the cruiser as he drank coffee from a styrofoam cup.”

Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*

The above line is taken from a scene in McCarthy's novel just moments before Sheriff Ed Tom Bell pays a visit to Llewellyn Moss's wife to let her know her husband is in trouble with “some very bad people.” As he sits in his cruiser, Bell traces the line of his route with a highlighter, refolds the map, and lays it down on the seat next to him. In the next paragraph, he is already knocking at Carla Jean Moss's door. There are several things worth noting about this innocuous passage from an otherwise nocuous novel. One might begin by noting that the juxtaposition of these two images—Bell reading a map, Bell arriving at his destination—produces an interval of movement. Call this juxtaposition a textbook example of continuity-style editing. The temporal relation is wholly unambiguous: Bell looks at the map so he can figure out how to get to Carla Jean's home. But why not begin the chapter with Bell already at the doorstep? After all, one can hardly imagine a reader asking, incredulously, “just how does Sheriff Bell know where Carla Jean's house is?” If it were deemed necessary to remind readers of how we navigate our environment there would be, in the average novel, a superabundance of instances when a character consults a directory, reads a map, asks a stranger for directions, inputs

data into a GPS system, looks for street names, deciphers traffic signs, Googles, etc. The novel no more abides directionless-ness than the cinema.

It is more likely that the reader will take the city map not simply as an object to be *used* (it doubtless serves its function), but an object to be *contemplated* as well. More than this, the reader can link the map with other objects—the yellow marker, the styrofoam cup, the quickstop—which seem to embody a sort of topography of cheapness. Indeed, it seems as if the moment we share with Bell in his cruiser has no value whatsoever; the scene functions like a Deleuzean time-image. That is, rather than understand the scene as a small but necessary step to Carla Jean's door, a link in the chain of events, one may understand it as a pure optical image, in which the sensory-motor schemata is brought to a halt and all images and sounds present themselves as themselves, in their commonness. The idle chatter Bell hears over his shortwave radio adds further to the sense that this brief scene suggests its ordinariness and nothing more.

What prompts these wayward reflections is the map in Bell's cruiser. Seemingly inexpressive and making no other appearance in the novel, the map nevertheless is one of the novel's more important images would be more appropriate. We encounter other maps on two occasions—each used by the character Llewelyn Moss. In fact, the first map we encounter in the novel comes when Moss decides to return to the site of the bungled drug deal in order to give water to a man who is bleeding to death. Moss is sitting in his truck, parked at a filling station. As Bell will do later in the novel, Moss unfolds his survey map, lays it out on the seat next to him, and studies it. And, again as Bell will, he traces a line on the map, then another. Then he studies the map once more. Moments later, Moss will again sit contemplative in his truck, with a map to his right: "When he came back to the truck he pried the plastic cover from the dome light and took the bulb out and put it in the ashtray. He sat with the flashlight and studied the map again. When next he stopped he just shut off the engine and sat with the window open. He sat there for a long time" (26). As one wonders why Bell consults a map, one wonders why Moss—whom we are told has "a good memory for country"—should preoccupy himself in this manner (26). It is as if the map serves to draw attention—ours, the characters within a novel or film—to the fictional terrain it both occupies and represents. Put simply, the map

is arresting. As Tom Conley has argued, a map does not just help us move, it helps us reflect—“about being, identity, space, and location” (*Cartographic Cinema* 208).

In this paper, I wish to answer a call, made by Conley, for continued inquiry about maps in films “where we enjoy gaining and losing our bearings” (213). What will be discussed in this paper is the abstract cognitive exercise that is viewing Joel and Ethan Coen’s adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* (2007). I am moved to do so not simply because Conley himself claims that the geography in the Coen brothers’ film prompts only “incidental reflection on the nature of cinema” (“Border Incidence” 113). I believe it prompts more—perhaps much more—than incidental reflection on the nature of cinema. I am further moved to undertake the study of a map in a movie because Conley has put forth a conceptual approach to cinema that is not only bold and original, but surprisingly inviting. Writes Conley:

Other films and other maps might be grist for continued inquiry along similar axes. Where are all the maps in Fritz Lang’s cinema, from *M* (1931) to *Moonfleet* (1955)? Why do we find a glaring absence of a map in the same director’s claustrophobic Western, *Rancho Notorious* (1952)? Why not study Bonaparte’s vision of a map of Italy on the face of Joséphine in the pyrotechnic finale of Abel Gance’s *Napolean* (1927)? What about the map of Hiroshima at the flashback at the beginning of Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras’s *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959)? What has it do with the map of the Ganges at the end of Duras’s *India-Song* (1975)? Why has nothing been said about the projection of North and South America on whose surface Cameron Diaz traces an itinerary with her finger in *Gangs of New York*? (*Cartographic Cinema* 212-213).

And the list goes on—in Conley’s book and in its readers’ minds as well. I for one can ask why the map that Bruno draws in *Strangers on a Train* (1951)—a map that is meant to direct Guy to Bruno’s father’s bedroom—leads Guy no further than a few steps from the top of the stairs?<sup>1</sup> And what about the scene in *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1957) when James Stewart measures the distance across the Atlantic by placing his hands, one after the other, on a map of the United States, and along the wall?

The maps that figure in McCarthy's novel do not appear in the Coens' film. Still, maps do abound in the latter, and therefore prompt this present study of a film that is remarkable not just for its geography, but the ways in which the spectator is by turns located and dislocated within it. For instance, critics have been preoccupied—justifiably so—with the puzzling sequence which occurs late in the film, when Sheriff Bell enters a motel room in which Anton Chigurh is and is not hiding. However, this scene is only one of many dozens in which spectators are asked to contend with multiple shifting figures within a sometimes unstable topographic field. Chasing, stalking, detecting, observing, sideswiping, and colliding, these figures map a cinematic landscape that is by turns consistent and lacunary. Not just killers and police, but a welter of figures (automobiles, a bag of money, a quarter, a dog, and so on) register space as effectively as they disturb it. The principal figure in this enterprise is Anton Chigurh, whose own movements—his sudden appearances, disappearances and reappearances—thwart the spectator's efforts, as well as those of other characters in the film, to hold a stable and controlling viewpoint. Like the reincarnation of Hitchcock's Mrs. Danvers, he undermines the power granted to those who claim to command space—rural, urban, and domestic.

I invoke the figure of Mrs. Danvers not to draw attention to any physical resemblance to Anton Chigurh (there is indeed a likeness, both of physical attributes and of a certain tone and mood), but to a resemblance in physical movement. How they locate and relocate themselves is a tactical determination, one meant to catch unawares those who presume to lay claim to territory (both the gas station owner and the second Mrs. De winter married into their property—the source of the anxiety of their proprietorship, an anxiety that both Mrs. Danvers and Chigurh play upon). But neither Mrs. Danvers nor Chigurh should be mistaken for the figure each is often said to be: ghost. First of all, they are very much alive, very much embodied—“look at that fuckin' bone,” says the boy after Chigurh's car accident. Neither Danvers nor Chigurh move through walls. Their appearances and disappearances may seem ghostly, but in neither film is there, save for one offhand remark from Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, any suggestion of a phantasmagoria. Indeed, it is their corporeality that makes them so, well, *creepy*. Ghosts keep their distance. Danvers and Chigurh are unnervingly close (Chigurh's choice of weapon requires proximity). Perhaps even more unnervingly, there is no space they cannot, do not,

occupy. If I am not mistaken, there are only a handful of spaces in the Coen brothers' film that Chigurh does *not* occupy: Ellis's trailer, Sheriff Bell's home, and his office, and the diner. But who is to say that Chigurh could not, if he needed to, occupy these spaces? And who is to say he cannot occupy spaces he *doesn't* occupy, such as the room in the Desert Sands Motor Hotel in El Paso? Cartographer is the title Chigurh deserves most of all—and though “goddamn homicidal lunatic” is the title given to him by the sheriff of El Paso, I will show it is one that quite aptly suggests Chigurh's formidable cartographic skill. And it is the mapping impulse of the film *No Country for Old Men*, and of the characters within the film, that I would like to discuss. The Coens' map games in *No Country for Old Men* differentiate their film from more general and well-established forms of disorientation—including, importantly, films that go much further in disrupting our bearings, but in a way that loses some of the special interest of a productive engagement with maps.

Building on his work formidable work in the field of cartography, specifically *The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France* (1996), Conley begins *Cartographic Cinema* by suggesting how the cinema and cartography are “strangely coextensive” as “each medium can be defined as a form of ... ‘locational imaging,’” a process by which subjects—spectators, travelers—are located in the places the medium represents for them (1-2). “It is possible to suggest,” says Conley, “that in its first shots a film establishes a geography with which every spectator is asked to contend” (2). To make sense of a film's “fictional territory” is to know where you are and where you are going (it is commonplace to say of a technically or narratively incoherent film, “it totally lost me”). The cinema's “‘global positioning’ potential,” as Conley calls it, reassures us that no matter how complex the plot, no matter how unfamiliar the topography, a film will (or should) effortlessly guide us—with the aid of smooth transitions of its editing—through its own labyrinthine unfolding (209).

Yet the knowledge of our exact location within the visual landscape of *No Country for Old Men* is not always secure, despite the abundance of maps we encounter in our immobile journey as spectators. Writing in the *New Yorker* shortly after its release, Nora Ephron ridiculed the film's lack of clarity and coherence by way of a back-and-forth between a husband and wife who, having just returned

from a screening of the Coens' film, speak of gained and lost bearings: "Maybe if we look in the book we'll be able to figure it out, she said. Maybe we'll find out what happened at the motel, he said. Why did it skip forward like that?" and "I can't believe you didn't know Josh Brolin died, she said. Well I didn't. He was lying there in the parking lot. I didn't see him lying in the parking lot. Well I didn't see him either, but then his wife turned up and Tommy Lee Jones looked sad, so you knew he was dead." And so on. But the cinema's cartographic impulse is not simply to ensure that the spectator successfully navigates a film's fictional territory. For Conley, as it is for André Bazin (to whom Conley is indebted), what can be called cartographic in the cinematic effect is the potential to encourage critical reflection. In one of his many efforts to help us appreciate the deep focus technique of *Citizen Kane*, distinguishing Welles's films from those typical of the Classical Hollywood style, Bazin says "[t]he cutting of the camera can be compared to the compulsory movement of one's head, and the change of shot to the refocusing of one's crystalline lens, as if it were inescapably coupled to the lens of the camera...The story is thus reconstituted on the screen along *a melodic visual line* that closely follows all the sinuosities of the action. Oh, Minotaur, here you will find Ariadne's thread: it is the editor's scissors" (233-234). Bazin wants the entire image-fact all at once, not in little bits and pieces; shooting in depth allows the filmmaker to preserve the unity of the image in space and time. To behold an image from *Citizen Kane* is to behold a map—"a map to the degree it is at once a geography, a totality, and a form liable to contain topographies or places in the image that can be called localities with specific characters and historical traits...the eyes scan and move about the image as they might the surface of a relief map" (*Cartographic Cinema* 20). Conley's point, however, is that to contemplate a map is to contemplate *dislocation*, to contemplate one's quite arbitrary position in the world. This is Bazin's point as well as about *Citizen Kane*: that Welles, though his stylistic choice of what Bazin terms the "sequence-shot" (*plan-séquence*), encourages the viewer to scan the image like a map and, in doing so, confront the fundamental ambiguity of reality.<sup>2</sup> Thus, paradoxically, to apprehend the cinema as a map is to submit oneself to the potential of the cinema to estrange you from your sense of location.

Indeed, it is the *appearance* of maps in a film that enhances this potential. Maps in films do more than simply lead us through narrative

space (we began the film in Cairo, now we are in Istanbul); maps “can lead us toward productive, critical, even creative speculation” about ourselves as subjects within a particular historical or ideological articulation of space (Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* 3). Put another way, a map in a film both places and *displaces* us. That is, when we see a map in a film our awareness of not being in two places at once becomes heightened—an awareness that causes a cognitive rift that prompts us to contemplate a film’s spatial configurations. The presence of a map establishes the geography of a film’s narrative (as does the regional map of Rome hanging on the wall of the office of Bergmann, the head of the Gestapo, in Rossellini’s *Roma: città aperta*). But rather than “firmly set spectators in a passive condition in which they let the storyline guide the cognition of the images, the map brings forward the stake of what it means to read and see in detail, topographically, at once with focus and with a haptic gaze” (Conley, “*The 39 Steps* and the Mental Map of Classical Cinema” 143).

Gilles Deleuze (to whom Conley is also indebted) finds a similar thoughtfulness in the cinema’s cartographic impulse. In his discussion of Alain Resnais, Deleuze remarks that the filmmaker’s insistence on a “complete biography of his characters” requires “a detailed cartography of the places they go to and their itineraries, an establishment of diagrams in a true sense” (117). The maps and diagrams Resnais draws do more than tell us, say, how old each character is; their purpose is much more integral: “The maps appear, at first, as descriptions of objects, places and landscapes: series of objects are used as witnesses from *Van Gogh*, to *Muriel* and to *My American Uncle*. But these objects are above all functional, and function in Resnais is not the simple use of the object but the mental function or level of thought which corresponds to it” (117). The mobilization of the viewer’s gaze is encouraged all the more by the appearance of a map in the image, it becomes “a point of departure for an interpretive itinerary” (*Cartographic Cinema* 208). According to Conley,

[w]hen a cartographic shape is taken as a point of departure, it becomes a model, a patron, or even a road map from which transverse readings can be plotted...[i]t lifts the viewer from the grip of the moving image and thus allows our gaze to mobilize its faculties. At times it looks into what might be assumed to be the unconscious register of cinema... In it voices and visual signs, moving about, tend

not to be where they are always thought to be. Maps give shape to other forms that unsettle or make canny things uncanny (208).

A map in a film, one might say, transcends its status as a peripheral object. The plaques in the shape of Texas that Sheriff Bell's office wall have a facticity that no other objects in view have—not even the little American flags on Bell's desk. Ostensibly there to add a bit of realism to the décor, these objects, and their cartographic counterparts, actually have the effect of denaturalizing the film—and not just for those spectators who live in Texas. Seeing a map of Texas, or even the shape of Texas, enhances the discomfiting sense that we are there and not there, in Texas, in the film. The sense of being located/dislocated, there and not there, moored and unmoored, is precisely what *No Country for Old Men* aspires to invoke.

At least three maps are visible in *No Country for Old Men*. One is the map of Texas whose occurrence and re-occurrence (sometimes simply as a shape) asserts over and again where we are in the geographical sense. Its appearance makes one wonder, paradoxically, why in fact it matters we are in Texas, why this particular narrative unfolds only in Texas (as if the film fears we might assume we are in Kansas). One answer is that Texas *means* something, or more precisely it means something for this particular film. Texas is no country for the old men in the film: Sheriff Bell, his friend Ellis, and the sheriff of El Paso, who ask and are asked the same series of questions: “what’s it mean” and “what’s it leadin’ to?” The map of Texas is prominent in scenes with Sheriff Bell, whom we then closely associate with Texas—its shape, its borders, and even its history. One of Conley's hypotheses is that “the occurrence of a map in a film is unique to its own context. Some general patterns can be observed by in general it might be said: *to each film its map...To each its own... points of stress that plot its relations with space, history, and being*” (5). Conley gives an example: “Classical Westerns and war films tend to celebrate the logistical virtues of mapping. Topographical charts on the walls of briefing rooms or cavalry outposts signal that western science and military hardware will defeat local knowledge, or perhaps vice-versa” (5). *No Country for Old Men*, if taken to be a western of sorts (which, one might add, is how one describes most westerns these days—a western “of sorts”), it would seem the map of Texas makes us keenly aware of these defeats. Sheriff Bell is a law man as much as



a cowboy—the love child of Ransom Stoddard and Tom Doniphon. The most prominent display of his commitment to upholding the law in a lawless country comes at precisely the moment when the largest, most prominent map of Texas appears. Ed asks his secretary Molly to remind him what one of his deputies says about truth and justice. She replies, “We dedicate ourselves daily anew, or something like that,” to which Bell adds, “I think I’m goin’ to commence dedicatin’ myself twice daily. It may come to three times before it’s over.” As Bell asserts his commitment to a good cause, in fact triples down on this commitment, he steps forward, in the direction of Molly, and stops in front of a map of Texas on the wall behind him (fig. 1). The map is not obscured but superimposed with Bell, who is its double. He glances to his right, and in a point of view shot we see a pickup truck pulling into the road. In its bed there is a poorly secured tarp flapping in the wind. The next shot is another point of view shot, this time from inside Bell’s police car. He is behind the pickup truck. He pulls the truck over and reprimands the driver, whom he knows, for not carefully securing the tarp that covers (or fails to completely cover) the bodies retrieved from the valley, the carnage of local knowledge.



Fig. 1

The other time we see Bell and a map together in the same shot is at the diner (fig. 2). This is the scene, in which Bell reads a story (not a headline, but a story buried within a page or two of the weather) about the couple in California who rent rooms to old people, only to torture and kill them, then bury them in their backyard. That the story is told with a meteorological map of the country in view (the only map of the country—not “a” country but the United States—we see in the film) would, if Conley’s argument serves us well, heighten

our awareness of the film's history, and the history of its form, its filmmakers. The Coen brothers understand we will never get our bearings on the world. If our relation of the world is scientific at all, it is, at best, probabilistic—like meteorology. Bell's reaction to the story, and his reaction to the Deputy's reaction, seems apiece with the Coens' worldview. In a sense, Bell *is* reading the weather report.



fig. 2

This fleeting moment, a glimpse of map of the United States, gives us pause, as does my next map (fig. 3), which is not visible but is nevertheless conjured in the spectator's mind. Bell drives to the trailer of an old friend, Ellis, once a sheriff himself. Inside, Ellis tells the story of Uncle Mac, gunned down on his own porch over in Hudspeth County, El Paso County's neighbor to the east. The two counties form the outer reach of the panhandle, untouched above or below by any other Texas county and in that regard are unique and uniquely exposed. The map called to mind here brings us to a second map, which appears early in the film, a map of the Regal Motor Motel (fig. 4). It is the film's first map, and the one most carefully studied. Nevertheless, it is a map not likely to be given special consideration by Conley, who focuses overwhelmingly on topographical maps (of cities and countries) as well as atlases and globes—all of which may be considered objects of artistic display—and does not take into account small maps and maps of interior spaces. The choice Conley makes—large maps over small ones, maps of exterior locales over those of interior locales (such as Bruno's map in *Strangers on a Train*), —may have something to do with the films he chooses, something more, perhaps, to do with the cartographers whose films he chooses to study. As I noted at the outset

of this essay, a road map is about as fine and elevating as a yellow marker or a styrofoam cup. Most of us assume that the only thing at a quickstop that will trigger a heightened sense of reflection is a can of energy drink. Yet small maps are just as interesting and thought-provoking as their larger, grander counterparts—perhaps more so because they correspond most closely to the constant mental mapping of routine spatial navigation. And as I imply at the outset of this essay, the road maps used by both Moss and Bell do seem to be the patrons of their quiet states of reflection. I am inclined to think, then, that the map of the Regal Motor Motel would be a welcome object of scrutiny in Conley’s larger argument, not just because the motel room is a prominent space in *No Country for Old Men*, but in many a Coen brothers film if we include similar spaces such as remote cabins (as in *Fargo*) and rooms in boarding houses (as in *Barton Fink*). And when Barton tells Charlie, “the life of the mind, there’s no road map for that territory,” we can assume that Barton fails to grasp the idea that the activity of mapping *is* the life of the mind (and could it be that Larry’s brother Arthur—who spends much of *A Serious Man* in the Jolly Roger Motel—is onto something with his Mentaculus, a probability map of the universe?).<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 3

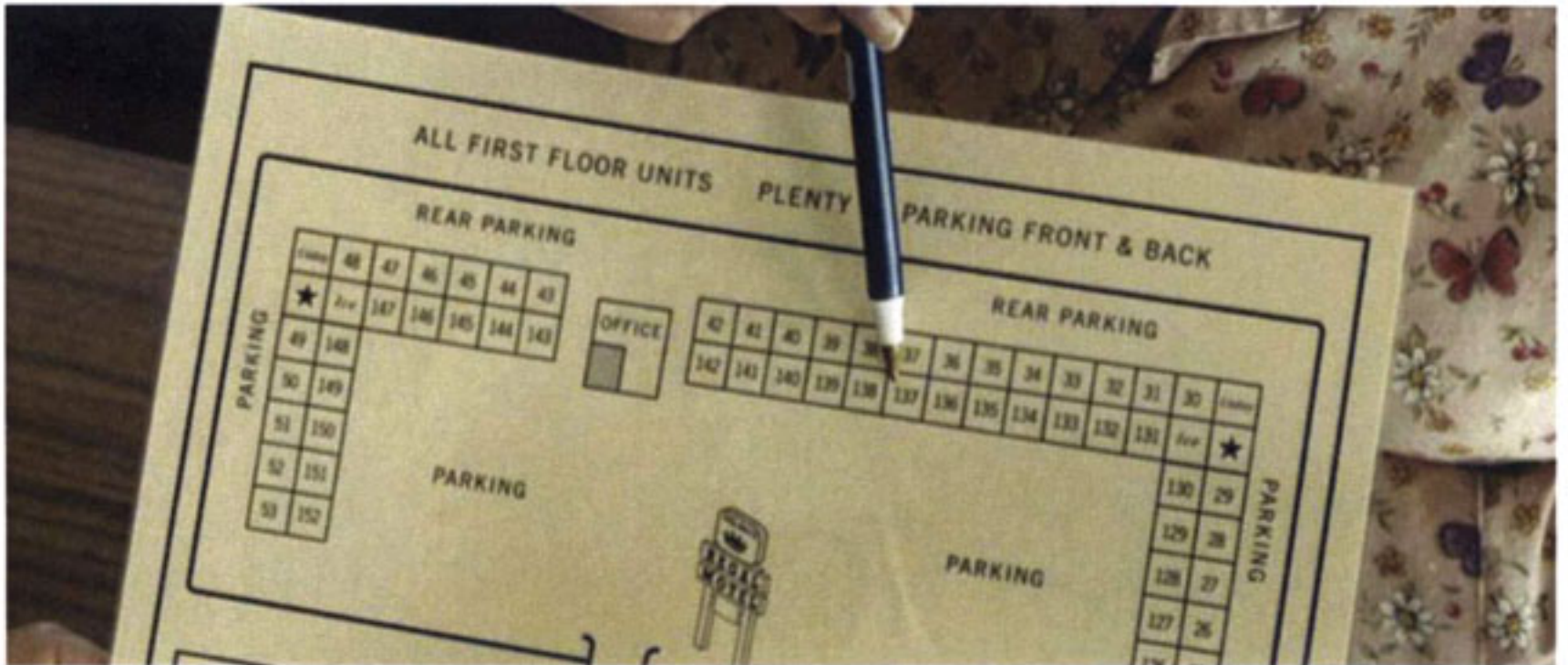


Fig. 4

As noted earlier, the Regal Motor Motel map—the first in the film—is given special attention. It is shown to Moss and Chigurh once each, but twice to us—the obvious point being that the map is as much for our benefit as it is for theirs, though for different reasons. Moss, we know, is now in room #38, directly behind #138. What connects the two rooms is the ventilation shaft, where the satchel of money is stashed. Chigurh, led to the Regal Motor Motel by a transponder, now stands before the front desk clerk. In the screenplay, he frowns at the room rate sheet. In the film, he is frowning at the map of rooms. What follows is a remarkable display of mental mapping on Chigurh’s part. In the next shot, we see him open the door of his motel room. He turns on the light, glances around the room, turns off the light, and closes the door. Just as the door is about to click shut, he kicks it in. Why he has not chosen a room closer, or even adjacent to #138 now becomes clear. He walks to the bathroom, then to the closet, places his hands on its walls. Chigurh is getting a feel for the topography, right down to the thickness of the walls—too thin to stop the bullets from his 12-gauge—and whether or not a door, when kicked in, will swing shut. He is staging his own theatre of cruelty.

This final act of this piece of theatre is at the Desert Sands Motor Hotel, in El Paso, where Moss is gunned down. We see him lying on the floor, covered in blood. Bell is too late, and would probably never go back were it not for the words of the sheriff of El Paso which remind Bell of what the killer—“that goddamn homicidal lunatic” the El Paso sheriff calls him—left behind him at the Eagle Hotel. “Just beyond everything,” he says. “He shoots the desk clerk one day, walks right back the next and shoots a retired Army colonel.”

The scene where Bell returns to the Desert Sands Motor Hotel, which immediately precedes the scene where Bell visits Ellis in his trailer, puzzles in two ways. One, Chigurh seems to be inside the room, hiding against the wall to the right of the door (in two separate shots his face is made visible from the light that appears through the hole in the knob—a hole we assume punched by Chigurh’s cattle prod). But when Bell opens the door, it goes flush against the wall where we were led to believe Chigurh was standing. Bell goes to the bathroom and, with an extreme close-up of a painted window lock, we are given sufficient evidence that Chigurh did not make a hasty escape through it. Two, it is unclear who, if anyone, now has the satchel of money. Bell sits on the edge of the bed, exasperated. He turns his head down and to the left. Two point of view shots show us what he sees: first, a vent in which the satchel could not possibly fit, though the scratches suggest otherwise, which leads one to think Chigurh had deduced that Moss had removed the smaller, circular face, in order for the satchel to fit, and yet one wonders why Chigurh bothered to put it back in place if he was going to leave the other objects on the floor: four screws and a dime, which we see in the second point of view shot. Perhaps Chigurh’s work was interrupted by Bell’s arrival; but Chigurh doesn’t appear to be in the room after all. What Bell hoped to find in the room is unclear. Is it Chigurh? If so, then we can assume one of two things: either Bell expects to make an arrest, or he expects to be shot and killed like Carson Wells. Or perhaps Bell has returned to this motel room just to make some sense of it all, to do some mapping of his own. But Bell’s other double, Chigurh, is (as always) one step ahead him.<sup>4</sup> Chigurh has already mapped this room.

Thus two cinematic cartographies overlap in a single space: Bell’s, inherited from the Classical Hollywood style, and Chigurh’s, which owes more to dissimulation and cruelty. The maps associated with the former throughout the film have suggested that Sheriff Bell’s mapping impulse is one of locational control.<sup>5</sup> Nothing within Bell’s field of perception could be one thing or another; everything will be what it appears to be. He spreads the world out flat before him so that nothing can hide beneath appearances. There can be no dissimulation.<sup>6</sup> Consider our introduction to Bell; it is the scene in which he and his deputy Wendell arrive at the scene of a burning Ford sedan. “Does that look about like a ’77 Ford to you, Wendell?” To which Wendell replies, “It could be.” Bell clarifies: “I’d say it is, no doubt in my mind.” And

when Wendell hazards a guess as to whom the sedan belongs (“The old boy shot on the highway?”), Bell treats us to a nifty little sequence cut in the classical style: “Yessir, his vehicle. Man killed Lamar’s deputy, took his car, killed that man on the highway, swapped for his car, and now here it is and he’s swapped again for god knows what.” Bell may not have given us, in Conely’s words “a *tour de force* of locational imaging,” but it does have its charm (87). Wendell, not unimpressed, says: “That very linear, Sheriff.” This is indeed a compliment, and a well-deserved one. “Well. Old age flattens a man,” says Bell. This phrase, a fine example of Bell’s laconicism (his preferred mode of discourse), describes Bell perfectly: a well-used map.

But this is no country for old maps. The relentless and sinister Anton Chigurh, whose steps Bell can only retrace, competes for control through dissimulation.<sup>7</sup> He gains access to concealed space, breaches boundaries of domestic space, and inhabits what appears to all as disembodied space. He violates all conventions, including those of Classical Hollywood cinema. He continues, even after repeated viewings of the Coens’ film, to leave unsettled the question, “where am I?” Locational imaging and dissimulation, the mapping impulses of Bell and Chigurh respectively, are opposed but overlapped. Taken together, these different yet coextensive cartographies enable us to grasp the complex modes of decipherment required for the Coen brothers’ film, to negotiate two maps at once, both constituting the same space, but in different registers. In a memorable line, taken from the book, Bell says to Ellis, “I feel overmatched.” Bell could just as well say, “I feel overmapped.”

## Conclusion

After the discovery of Moss’s body, an exasperated El Paso sheriff asks Bell, “What’s it mean? What’s it leadin’ to?” It so happens these are questions we expect a map will answer: in a remarkable dissolve (fig. 5, 6, and 7), the four screws and the dime on the floor of the room at the Desert Sands Motor Hotel point the way, becoming a path that leads directly to Ellis’s home—the brown shag carpet becoming the rough and dusty Texas ground, the screws and dime becoming the angled road Sheriff Bell’s truck now follows.<sup>8</sup> For a moment, the film visually presents two cartographic impulses in a single image: objects of an act of disassembling and dissimulation, superimposed with the image of Bell, taking the direct route to Ellis,

whom Bell hopes will communicate something of the nature of the real world. It is possible to read the scene in Ellis's home as the scene in which Bell speaks of, and accepts, his defeat. But I think the scene expresses matters more specifically than this. Ellis welcomes Bell by saying that he heard Bell driving up in his truck. Sensing Ellis is having fun with him, Bell says, "how'd you know it was my truck?" to which Ellis responds, "I deduced it, when you walked in." This exchange is a reprise of the exchange between Bell and Wendell, described above, when the former says he knows a '77 Ford sedan when he sees it. But the certainty that comes with seeing things as they are comes at a high price, as things make their surface appearance only after it is too late. The images in Bell's cartography are not objects but events of annihilation. When Bell asks Ellis "how you been?" Ellis answers, "you're lookin' at it"—as if to say, "how I *was* don't matter no more, but you know for certain what you're looking at *now*." So what Bell acknowledges at Ellis's house, and then shares with his wife in the film's final scene, is that the certainty his cartographic impulse has purchased is cadaverous—meaning, his map is always a reconstitution of a world already gone.<sup>9</sup>

This is but one of many moments in which *No Country for Old Men* can be seen blazing its own trails. What is perhaps needed now is a full-scale expedition through the cinematic landscapes of each Coen brothers film. At the close of the present essay, however, I will linger briefly with *No Country for Old Men* to consider the problem of the ideological content of its spatial productions, a problem that emerges specifically in terms of territorial borders. Borders or limits are never enforced without violence—as when Chigurh pulls the shower curtain across the Mexican whom he then shoots. Paradoxically, borders and limits are never imposed without transgression—as when Llewelyn sends the bag of money through the walls of the motel, from room 138 to room 38, proving that borders can be crossed, if not without ease, then certainly with resourcefulness, inventiveness, and labor. Yet these mutual concepts, the violent enforcement of borders/the trespassing of borders, are unstable and mixed—like weather systems. Chigurh kills his boss (an unnamed character played by Stephen Root) because he hired Mexicans to do Chigurh's job ("You pick the one right tool" insists Chigurh). But Chigurh himself is of dubious ethnic origin. He dresses in black less because of any generic imperative than because of his lack of allegiance; he wears no colors. Even such a cursory analysis

will perhaps suggest, finally, why I do not entirely agree with Tom Conley's claim that while geographical boundaries figure prominently in its narrative, *No Country for Old Men* only incidentally reflects on the limits of cinema itself. I believe that the film's reflection about the limits of cinema is more than incidental—much more, perhaps, than its reflection about territorial borders. By bringing the film's mapping impulse and the actual maps that can be found in the diegesis, I hope I have hit upon what is so unsettling about the cinematic landscape of the film, which I argue never entirely coheres. My sense is that one's unease watching the Coen brothers' film stems not only from the film's thematic content, but also from its spatial incoherence—or, to put it differently, from its willing refusal to render a neutral space into which some thematic content may be deposited. The cinema of Joel and Ethan Coen is no country for anyone, old or otherwise, who seeks coherence and comfort.



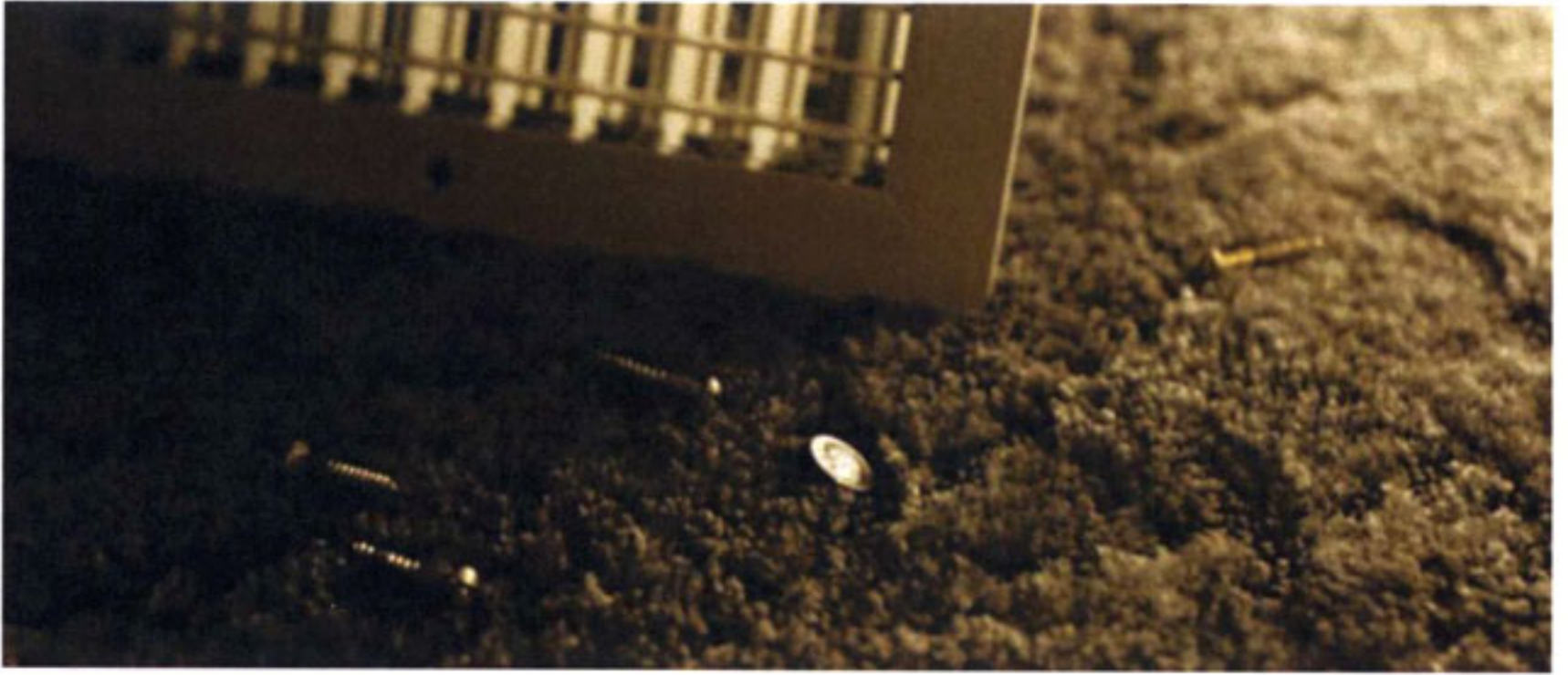


fig. 5

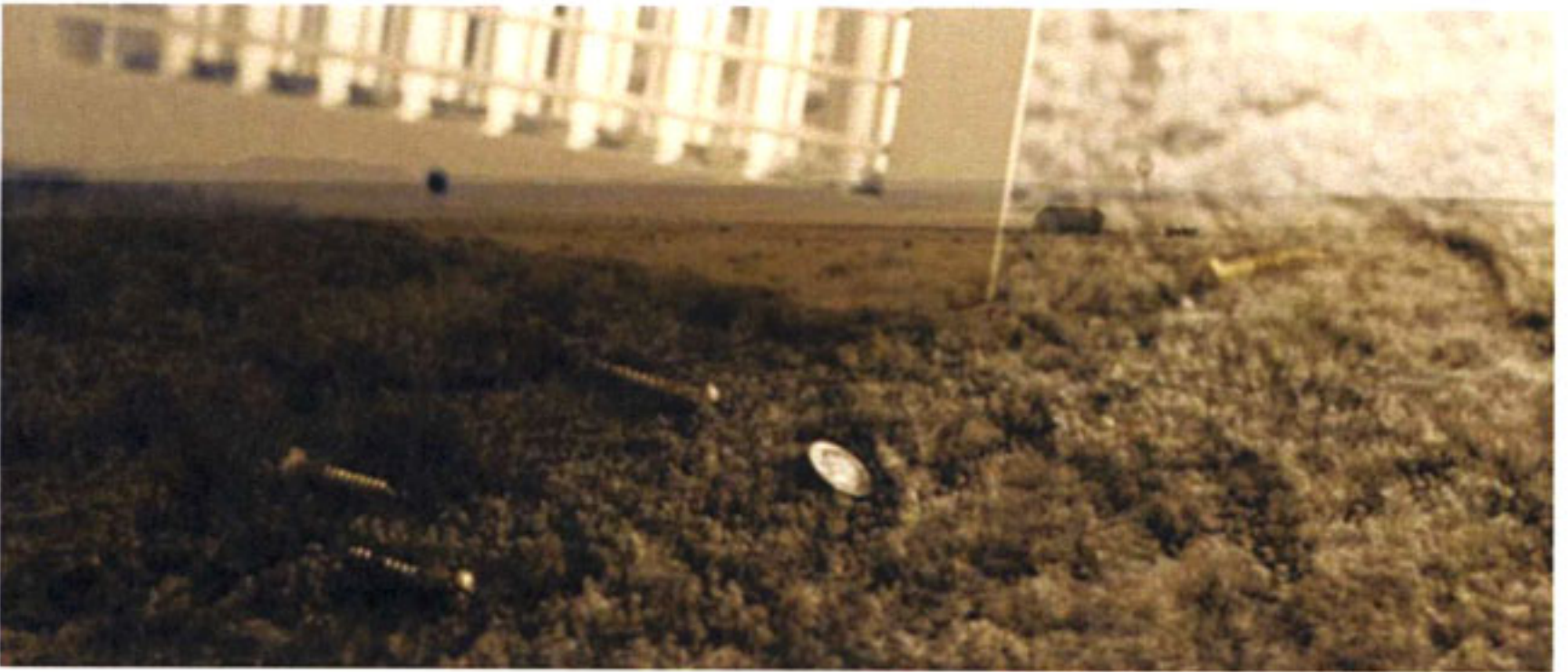


fig. 6



fig. 7

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For possible answers to this question see Ned Schantz, “Hospitality and the Unsettled Viewer: Hitchcock’s Shadow Scenes” in *Camera Obscura*, 25.1 73 (2010): 1-25. Schantz considers whether we can know for certain Guy’s real purpose for entering Bruno’s father’s bedroom. Suspicious of the cover story the film presents us—that Guy has come to warn Bruno’s father, not kill him—Schantz identifies four other “shadow scenes” that, although not expressed in the film, haunt the diegesis of this non-event. I thank Ned Schantz for being so generous with his insightful suggestions throughout the writing of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> For a lengthy discussion of the influence of cartography on Bazin’s conception of the cinema, see Ludovic Cortade, “Cinema Across Fault Lines: Bazin and the French School of Geography. *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory & Its Afterlife*. Ed. Dudley Andrew with Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (Cambridge, MA: Oxford U. Press, 2011), 13-31.

<sup>3</sup> There are few Coen brothers films that do not make full use of transient spaces. *Blood Simple*, which is the Coens’ first but not their only visit to the plains of Texas, opens with Abby and Ray driving through the rain to a motel to make love. Just prior to this scene—the opening of the film—Visser’s voice-over tells us that in Russia, “they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else,” but in Texas, “you’re on your own.” Surely this is an ambitious claim Visser makes for Soviet Russia, and perhaps an even more ambitious one for maps. Yet the claim is suggestive of the relation between a cartographic impulse in the Coen brothers and the prominence in their films of shabby, interior spaces. And it is a relation that I don’t think is oppositional, as Visser suggests. Being on one’s own, wayward and transient, only heightens the activity of mapping; further, it heightens the awareness that mapping is, in essence, a transitory activity. As Giuliana Bruno notes, the map has always been a moving image (273).

<sup>4</sup> See Joan Mellen, “Spiraling Downward: American in *Days of Heaven*, *In the Valley of Elah*, and *No Country for Old Men*,” *Film Quarterly*, 61.3 (2008), 31.

<sup>6</sup> Used by cartographers, the term “locational control” is, writes Conley, “pivotal and decisive in the historical parabola that David Buisseret draws in *The Mapmaker’s Quest* (2003). The author argues that the

advent of cartography in the early modern age brought with it a new sense of location and a sense of place in the world. It initially takes the shape of topography but is ultimately tied to those agencies—cinema included—that seek to locate their objects in the places they represent for them” (215). Conley uses the term throughout *Cartographic Cinema* but most compellingly in a chapter on Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta*.

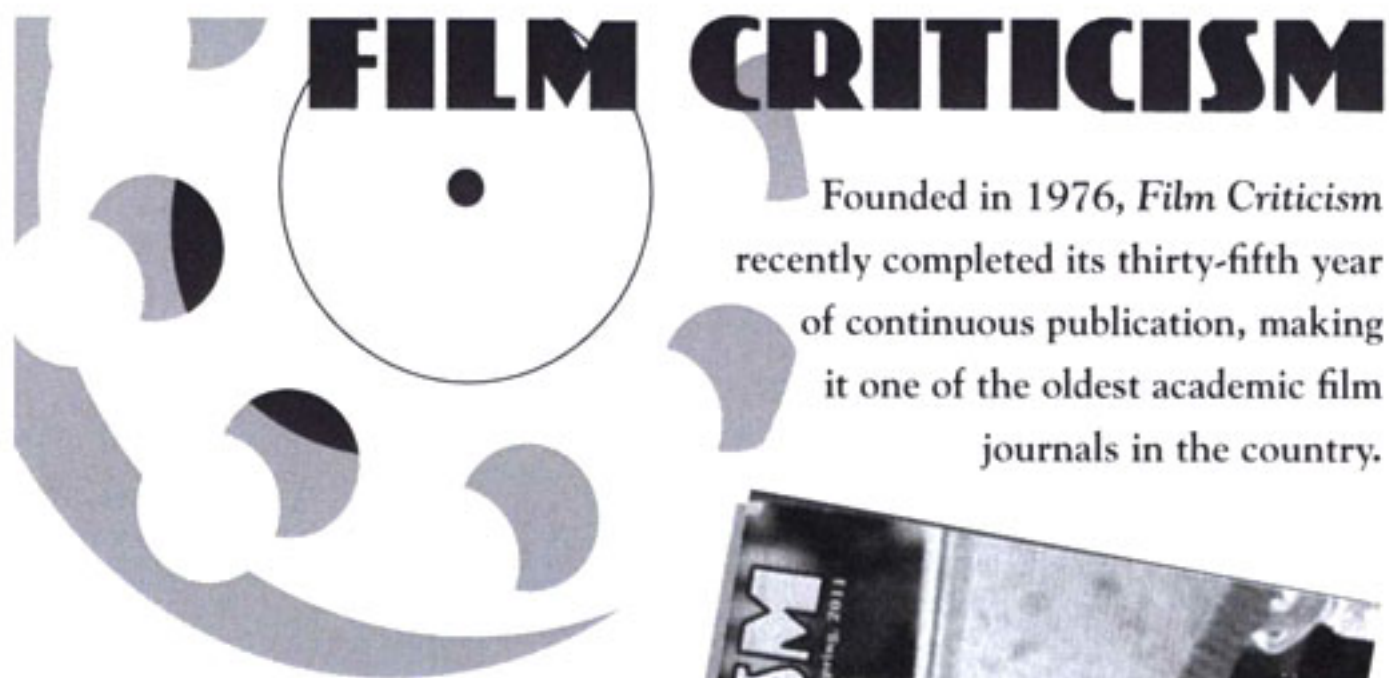
<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Bell expresses outrage when he sees bodies being transported by flatbed truck are not sufficiently hidden from view. One would assume Bell’s outrage is due to a lapse in locational control—these are murders he neither prevented nor can account for. But he is outraged because the bodies are visible (this is not to say Bell demands dissimulation; rather, he demands that things be—and stay—in their proper place) and, further, that the driver could not see the obvious.

<sup>7</sup> The idea of competing cartographic impulses is taken from the chapter in Conley’s *Cartographic Cinema* in which he discusses Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta*: “Surely in this film a mapping impulse is clear, but so also are the contradictions that figure in the quest for power that seems to be a defining quality of the modern map...*Roma città aperta*, in which the loathsome sight of torture is excruciating, can be understood cartographically, as a staging of the yoking of locational imaging to terror” (65). But whereas Conley sees the two impulses as irreducible to “good” and “bad,” that “[t]he antithesis is suggested in order to be called into question,” I argue that in the Manichean world of *No Country for Old Men* this relation is indeed oppositional (74). Though they are not without their missteps or small failures, Bell and Chigurh stand in stark contrast to one another. It is true that the film establishes explicit links between the two men, links that would seem to call into question the antithesis. But the ferocity of Chigurh’s impulses suggests all too well that he has no interest in such questioning (“They always say that” says Chigurh).

<sup>8</sup> Joan Mellen briefly notes this same dissolve and suggests, perhaps unknowingly, its mapping function: “Near the end of *No Country for Old Men* a slow, elegiac dissolve brings Sheriff Bell to his uncle Ellis (Barry Corbin), an old-time law man [emphasis added]” (31).

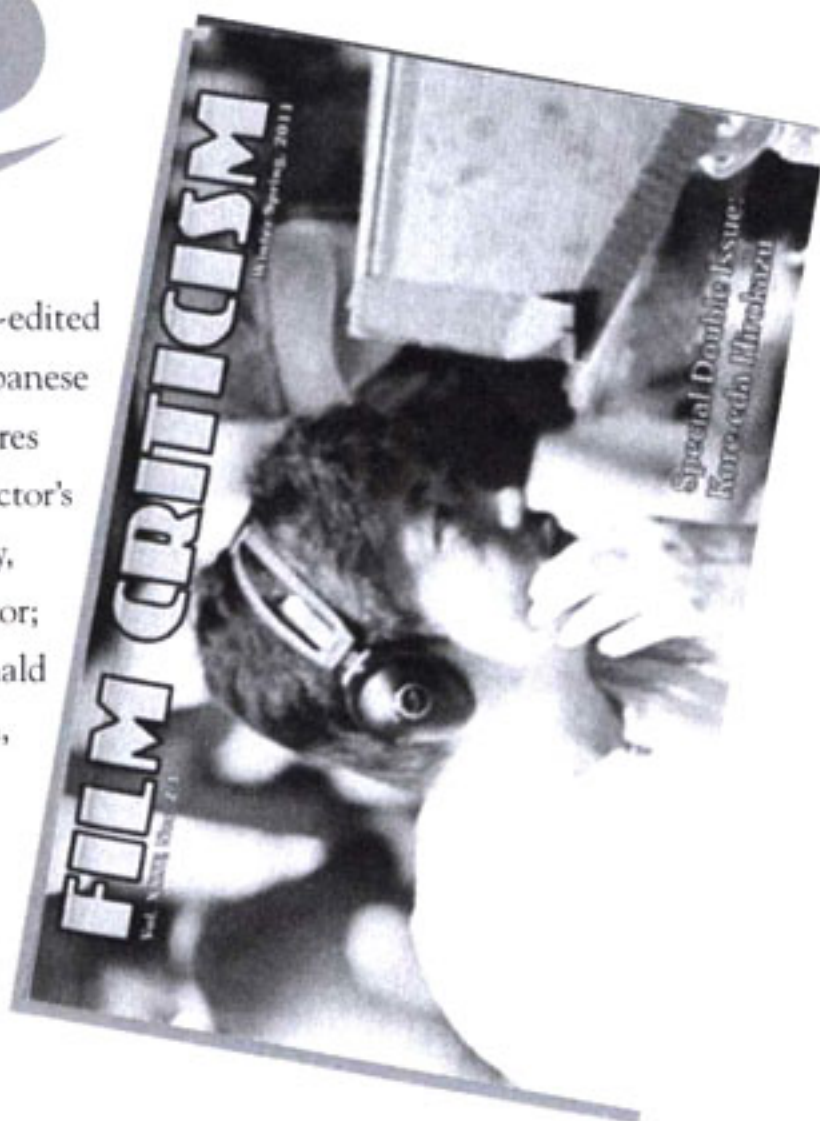
<sup>9</sup> The idea of the image as cadaver comes from Levinas and is developed by Maurice Blanchot in an essay entitled “Two Versions

of the Imaginary.” Blanchot writes, “we can always recapture the image and make it serve the world’s truth. But in that case we reverse the relation which is proper to it. The image becomes the object’s aftermath, that which comes later, which is left over and allows us to have the object at our command where there is nothing left of it. This is a formidable resource, reason’s fecund power. Practical life and the accomplishment of true tasks require this reversal” (260).



Founded in 1976, *Film Criticism* recently completed its thirty-fifth year of continuous publication, making it one of the oldest academic film journals in the country.

Our most recent double-issue, guest-edited by Arthur Noletti, Jr., highlights Japanese director Kore-eda Hirozaku. It features comprehensive coverage of the director’s works, filmography and bibliography, and a new interview with the director; plus articles by such scholars as Donald Richie, David Desser, Linda Ehrlich, Alexander Jacoby, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano and Arthur Noletti, Jr. 194 pp.



**Subscribe Today and Receive this Issue Free!**

go to:

[filmcriticism.allegHENY.edu/subscribe.htm](http://filmcriticism.allegHENY.edu/subscribe.htm)

**Rates for 1 year / 3 issues:**

Individual: \$25  
Institutional: \$30  
Foreign: \$40

**SPECIAL OFFER**

**Rates for 2 years / 6 issues:**

Individual: \$40  
Institutional: \$50  
Foreign: \$60