

Beata Zawadka

University of Szczecin

ORCID: 0000-0001-9964-3898

**“Things Have Moved on in the South,” Or the Art of Forgiveness
as in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*
by Martin McDonagh (2017)**

“Watching [Martin McDonagh’s 2017 production *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*] “is like having your funny bone struck repeatedly, expertly and very much too hard by a karate super-black-belt capable of bringing a rhino to its knees with a single punch behind the ear” – wrote the *Guardian* film critic Peter Bradshaw in his 2018 review of this film (Bradshaw, 2018). Claiming *Three Billboards...*, the story of violence and its aftermath, as basically a shockingly ‘funny’ film may seem shocking in itself. Yet, shattering audiences’ emotional patterns is precisely what the film is after. Its protagonist, Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormant), disconsolate after the violent death of her daughter Angela (Kathryn Newton) and disappointed with the local police’s minimal efforts to find the perpetrator resolves to give vent to her feelings. She therefore places them, in the form of an accusation directed at Ebbing’s police chief (Woody Harrelson), on the three billboards that she rents at an unfrequented road near her Missouri home. Her private affects, being thus made into regional news, in consequence restructures the deep-seated emotional patterns on which not only Mildred’s hometown but implicitly, the South itself hinges. The billboards are cinematically construed also as a backlash against the non-volatile way we, the audience of the film participate in (southern) culture.

This article is going to demonstrate two things: first, how the film construes its backlash against the southern affective pattern, the least discussed aspect of the southern culture so far, and second, how such a backlash works on cinema audiences. ‘Backlash’ is a term which we tend to identify with a strong *negative* reaction to a situation or a process of e.g. social change. However, I believe *Three Billboards...* makes its backlash operative also in *redemption quest* terms, that is, in Sam Girgus’s words, as “the ethical engagement with the other rather than the triumph of the self.” Understood as the reinvention of its “ontological identity” relation with us, South-watchers, into the relation of “ethical subjectivity” (Girgus: 5), the film’s backlash will eventually allow for the re-embodiment of the region – still considered, due to its slave past, to be one of global culture’s blackest sheep – also in respect of forgiveness rather than sole cruelty, blame, and punishment.

In my view, the feelings to redeem will be, primarily, empathy and disgust. As the two most prominent affective components of the grotesque, an aesthetic category with which the South has been majorly identified, empathy and disgust are indicative, as is now the grotesque, both of the southern affective stasis and the southern affective alterity and change. Moreover, assuming that they bespeak the South’s affective pattern *as* grotesque, then the empathy and disgust as in *Three Billboards...* can be further ‘redeemed’ as markers of the region’s affectivity seen in accordance with what McCullers scholar, Sarah Gleeson-White, discussing southern grotesque in her article “Revisiting Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers,” believes to be a “body in flux, in a constant process of reformation and reemergence: [of] becoming (110)”. This ‘live’ perception of what has come to denote the ‘typical’ southern affect seems to me to be a perfect springboard to further reconceptualising the region’s affective *status quo* as ‘forgiveness in the making.’

Demarcating southern affectivity in the above mentioned way seems also historically justified. The processes transforming the U.S. South from a close-knit antebellum community to a modern society are claimed by Röttger-Rössler and Slaby to have changed its premodern, “high affective” status to one that is temporarily currently depicted as “affect neutral”. Yet, identified as not so much erasers of affect and emotion from the entire southern sociality but rather as forces that have complicated the ‘high’ southern feeling, the same processes allow for this

feeling to come through, at present, as incongruous, unique, even outlandish; *ergo*, 'grotesque.' Such 'crippling' identification of the southern affect on one hand indeed allows for its, commonly agreed on, empathy-disgust appropriation in Boolean terms; hence, for endowing the South with an 'ontological identity'. On the other hand, the neutralisation of the southern grotesque affect so that it performs as a clear-cut, precise, and easily recognisable regional norm suggests that this norm's global success or failure will depend, as Alan Spiegel claims it does with reference to grotesque characters, not so much on "whether or not [audiences at all] incorporate [... it] into [their lives] but on how well [they] recreate [...] and individualize [... its...] traits" (Spiegel: 428).

This subjective (and ethical) orchestration of the empathy-disgust pattern on which the southern feeling hinges suggests, I believe, the pattern itself as performative of a complex affective practice rather than of a ready-made affective norm. The redeeming quality of such a practice looms in the film's establishing, as early as its pre-credit sequence, the eponymous billboards as its chief iconography. The latter's amenability to an exploration of the southern normative affective identity as the mentioned 'forgiveness in the making' is particularly visible in an unkempt way the billboards emerge for us from the fog. I mean that, in the beginning, the camera rarely shows the three of them at once; the viewer of this sequence only glimpses at the billboard portions of the portions of the texts such as: 'ebb,' 'chance,' 'of your life,' 'worth stopping for' underwriting what is also portions of faded images which once must have been one aesthetic and substantive advertised whole (Fig. 1).

Perceived as embodiments of the local (southern) past, the billboards speak to us as abject and amorphous, and hence, either a disgust-, or empathy-evoking, constructions. Yet, it is exactly in the sorry, unfixed character of the construction that Mildred, driving along Drinkwater Road back home, sees, virtually, a "chance of [her] life" and immediately acts on it. In so doing, she thus appropriates the billboards and, by extension, the affectively grotesque-patterned southern past, as a banner of her own contemporaneous feelings. This suggests that, fragmented and affectively trivialised as it seems at present, the South's past (and myth) is nevertheless capable of promising its new configurations in terms of becoming, for, like the grotesque which it underwrites, it can resist the strictures of its own limits.



Figure 1. Opening scene of *Three Billboards*...

Source: YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1V-G4KkYHI>).

Such resistance, I would argue, the film redeems with reference to the community of the fictitious southern town of Ebbing, Missouri whose first reactions to Mildred's pain are shown as circumscribed precisely along the empathy-disgust line, a point I will return to later. It is primarily against these limited (or *small-town*, local; hence, southern) reactions that the film sets up and also redeems the grotesque trope of gigantism in the form of the billboards *as* transformed into Mildred's own affective manifesto (Fig. 2).

Neither very high, nor very large, the billboards, with their unicolour – red – background boards and the limited information in black, showcasing how determined Mildred is to act upon her feelings, are, aesthetically, a minimalist creation. This creation, however, filmed as it is through low-angle shots suggestive of dominance or power, puts Mildred's affective declaration in a monumental perspective. Combined with the thus more eye-catching contrast of the colours of red and black, such a perspective additionally gives both Mildred's declared suffering and the communal reaction to it (in the form of empathy/disgust) the air of the ominous, for it situates the southern (affective) myth in the shadow of violence and death. Understood, however, as the violation of an existing emotional convention in order for this convention to 'die' (i.e. be transformed), Mildred's putting the 'gigantic' (or bird's eye) perspective on the southern (affective) myth in which the convention originates

bespeaks an act of love, identified in the South as much as elsewhere with the workings of femininity.



Figure 2. Mildred interviewed next to her billboards

Source: zpopk.pl (<https://zpopk.pl/trzy-billboardy.html>).

No wonder, then, that, as soon as the billboards are up and their content, i.e. the southern (affective) myth, can no longer be neutralised into the performance of either empathy, or disgust, their temporary owner – Mildred – is the first one to be blamed for it. It is therefore the reluctance to submit her and her community’s feelings to the affective southern norm (as suggested by the look and content of the billboards) that posits Mildred as a liminal equivalent of “her” billboards with regard to her own community; in other words, as its ‘freak.’ Thus, the quality of ‘freakiness’ is, as Spiegel demonstrated (428–429), what makes Mildred – and, by extension, the southern femininity that she embodies – yet another grotesque trope that the film employs to provide complications to the existing southern emotional patterns.

That *Three Billboards...* redeems southern femininity – and, by extension, the whole region which, for long has been conceived of in the feminine terms of ‘Dixie’ – as an affective category in need of its own description and experience, while at the same time highlighting its specific affective constraints is probably best visible in the ‘grotesque’ way the film creates a connection between Mildred’s character and its costume: the overalls (Fig. 2). Typically used by a person in work settings, a pair of overalls primarily spells protection and

hence, the sense of security as well as uniformity, thus suggesting these three qualities as the affective nodal points of southern culture. ‘Worn’ daily, as an only outfit – which is Mildred’s case – overalls as much flaunt the affective contents they embody as the southern emotional limits as they challenge them. Thus posing as an inconclusive expression of the local normative affective identity, Mildred’s (and the South’s) ‘overalls’ are ‘freakish’ in that they metamorphose the already mentioned, allegedly “innocent” southern pattern of empathy and disgust into a vehicle for the region’s (cultural) justice.

In her article “Revisiting Southern Grotesque...” Sarah Gleeson-White agrees with Mab Segrest’s opinion on the grotesque being dangerously entangled with both racism and patriarchy in the South (112). Both scholars believe that this is so because the two mentioned categories to a large degree depend on creating a label of the Other (Segrest: 27, Gleeson-White: 112). However, concentrating on the limits of these categories, Segrest as well as Gleeson-White tend to overlook how creative a challenge the “Other prerequisite” (and, implicitly, the grotesque) might be for the normative (affective) politics that the institutions such as racism and patriarchy bank on. *Three Billboards...* offers us a hint on this by way of juxtaposing, as sites of ‘creativity’ and ‘constraint,’ respectively, the advertising agency owning the billboards which Mildred rents and the police station. Situated in Ebbing’s main street in the same “opposing” way creativity and constraints appear in culture, these two institutions thus presage the structural arrangement of the southern (affective) norm as contradiction-antagonised; hence, capable of redeeming itself as the film’s yet another grotesque trope.

One of the efficient means to show this is the fact of *Three Billboards...* narrationally relying on the face offs Mildred has with white men, therefore also with the patriarchal (affective) norms of the southern institutions they embody. Be it the character of Fat Dentist (medicine), Mildred’s own son and ex-husband (family), her priest (religion), local car dealer (economy), owner of the Ebbing ad agency (media), even a servicemen-like looking stranger in her store (the military) – all these men’s reaction to Mildred’s affective ‘coming out’ is to threaten it.¹ In an attempt to violently de-antagonise the southern emotional

¹ Accordingly, the “Fat Dentist” (Jerry Winsett) files a complaint against Mildred to the police, Robbie, her son (Lucas Hedges) uses violent language at his mom and slams the door, the priest, Father Montgomery (Nick Searcy) suggests a possibility of excommunication,

context (so as to protect its safety and uniformity and make it 'loving' again), these men thus seem to confirm the double (affective) standard as patriarchy's chief organisational principle.

Yet, demonstrating as (affectively) antagonised within, the southern patriarchy also becomes liminal, which, in turn, allows us to redeem its double standard as an 'other' – or grotesque – embodiment of dynamism and active potential inherent in the southern culture. That the patriarchal double standard has hybrid lineaments can be seen in the non-formulaic reactions to Mildred's hard-edged affect of two representatives of town police: Chief Willoughby and his deputy, Jason Dixon (Sam Rockwell). Namely, after the billboards appear, Willoughby, an alleged paragon of common sense and decency and a man whose professional and life opportunities have run down (he is unable to close the case of Mildred's daughter for the lack of evidence and he has pancreatic cancer), chooses to express his desperation by withdrawing himself entirely from the picture (he commits suicide). This way he thus endows his feelings with the visibility of Mildred's advertised discontent; a similarity which suggests Willoughby is an extension of feminine affect and hence an 'other' within the southern patriarchal ranks.

Ironically, Willoughby's public acknowledgment of his helplessness spurs Dixon to step up to the plate. A vessel for unabashed intolerance and chaos, Dixon chooses to express his own desperation about the impossibility of changing things in a 'decent' way by bringing violence to the table. Accordingly, the film shows how, on hearing the news of Willoughby's death, Dixon crosses the street, smashes the glass door to the ad agency where he throws its

while Mildred's abusive ex husband, Charlie (John Hawkes) is virtually at her throat and blaming her for their daughter's death. James (Peter Dinklage) who is sweet on Mildred but whose affect she does not reciprocate, seems to be helpful and understanding at first; for example, he provides Abercrombie (Clarke Peters), Willoughby's replacement, with an alibi for Mildred after he witnesses her setting fire to the police station in order to retaliate for burning the billboards or hold the ladder for her when the new billboards are restored. Yet, in a restaurant when he learns Mildred agreed to go out with him out of pity, he offends her and leaves angrily. The stranger who comes to Mildred's shop (Brendan Sexton III) who looks like an ex-soldier throws one of the figurines she sells at her and threatens her verbally. Last but not least, Red Welby (Caleb Landry Jones), manager of the creative agency who enabled the vocalisation of Mildred's affect eventually changes the conditions of their contract thus threatening (unsuccessfully though) her economic stability.

manager, Red Welby, out of the window only to return to the street so as to beat him senseless. The sequence is made in the form a long take, a shot whose extended lasting time seems to warn us of the danger of accepting the familiar (shot length) uncritically. Used in *Three Billboards...* to apparently highlight the extent of Dixon's violent ways, long take therefore immediately shows us as well how extensive his helplessness is. This helplessness, triggering his disappearance from the public view (he is dismissed from work by his new – African American – chief) makes Dixon as much Willoughby's direct emotional double as he is his late boss's direct emotional antithesis, which – indirectly – connects him also to Mildred. Thus, affectively, Dixon both poses in and attests to the (southern) patriarchal narrative of *Three Billboards...* as 'otherness in a long take;' hence, as the mentioned system 'in-the-making.'

It is this plastic configuration of southernness, or else, its still unsettled identity, so to say, which pushes the very boundaries of viewers' affective understanding of the South. One way the film does that is by using violence also to blow out its 'small town' stage design of Ebbing. Created in the likeness of a monotonous southern locality, with its main street where all major town institutions neighbour one another and are thus intertwined, the film structure of Ebbing actually resembles more the enclosed space of a plantation than any contemporary urban concept. The impression that we watch another typical antebellum story of captivity rather than a post-southern production is additionally reinforced by the 'open-ended,' as it were, character of violent acts² perpetrated so as to "free" various affective burdens of the inhabitants of Ebbing, a place whose very name suggests to us that awaiting any change of things southern is in vain. However, we can also read such acts as the region's resolution to no longer endure the stifling affective frames of the plantation tradition. Then, their 'open-endedness,' additionally highlighted by the grammatically 'continuous' form of the place name of Ebbing, will receive a chance

² As e.g. mentioned before, Chief Willoughby's suicide spurs Dixon's demolition of the advertising agency and the beating of Welby, which, in turn, provokes Mildred's arson attack at the police station to be retaliated with the burning of the billboards themselves by an unknown offender later on etc. Even in its final scene, the film does not resolve whether Mildred and Dixon, driving together to confront the military-looking stranger (who, as they falsely believed, was a suspect in Angela's case), are going to act on the feelings this man's actions provoked.

to be transition from its demarcation as a ‘claustrophobic southern pattern’ to one that marks a ‘site of crisis.’

Thus redeemed in accordance with what Gleeson-White calls the grotesque trope of ‘the unfinished’ (117), the southern affect eventually begins to be approachable in tune with Flannery O’Connor’s famous observation that “anything that comes out of the South is [...] grotesque [...] unless it is grotesque, in which case it is [...] realistic...” (O’Connor, loc. 372). It is therefore within its realistic proclivity that the southern grotesque affect allows room for the film’s redemptive, or forgiveness-bound, reception. In the film’s context, an early tell that the southern empathy-disgust pattern works in a realistic way is the scene in which Mildred shows up in the billboard company for the first time to find its manager reading Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Filmed with the objective camera first (which reveals to us the ‘insides’ of the book Red is reading) to be immediately followed by a subjective shot of Mildred entering the office (in which case we learn about the ‘outside’ demarcators of Red’s reading), O’Connor’s grotesque story therefore seems to hint to us that the realism of the typical southern affective mode springs from its being a many-sided take on the world. It is precisely this glimpse of O’Connor that also becomes our glimpse of light – our redemption – when it comes to the realisation that, at present, while watching films, southernness is hardly one – ‘good’ – culture to find.

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Summary

Martin McDonagh's 2017 film entitled *Three Billboards*.. has been critically hailed as the film "about vengeance, violence and the acceptance of death," controversial mainly "for its handling of racial themes" and considered "empty of emotional intelligence" as well as "devoid of any remotely honest observation of the society it purports to serve." How come, then, that yet another embodiment of the U.S. South as culture's "bad guy," has managed to win so many accolades, including Oscar nominations (7) and Oscar awards (3) as well as e.g. 4 Golden Globe awards or 5 BAFTA awards? My paper attempts to approach this question by claiming that the film successfully "advertises," much as its titular billboards do, and on all levels of its cultural production, contemporary southernness as the art of forgiveness. I am curious to see if and how such a vision of the South lets the region off the hook as culture's aberration.

Keywords: film studies, affective studies, performative studies, American South, forgiveness

Słowa kluczowe: filmoznawstwo, studia afektywne, performatyka, Południe amerykańskie, wybaczenie