

Ronald Bergan, *The Coen  
Brothers*, pp. 76-80.

## LANDSCAPES

*An opening voice-over plays against dissolving Texas landscapes—broad, bare, and lifeless.*

**VOICE-OVER:** The world is full of complainers. But the fact is, nothing comes with a guarantee. I don't care if you're the Pope of Rome, President of the United States, or even Man of the Year—something can always go wrong. And go ahead, complain, tell your problems to your neighbor, ask for help—watch him fly.

Now in Russia, they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else—that's the theory, anyway. But what I know about is Texas . . .

## CUT TO:

### ROAD NIGHT

*We are rushing down a rain-swept country road, listening to the rhythmic swish of tires on wet asphalt.*

And down here . . . you're on your own.

## 24 Be Prepared

THE COENS started with the premise of a murder story/thriller set in Texas and worked from there. In the autumn of 1982, eight months after the trailer was shot and shown, the brothers had their money and arrived in Austin, Texas, to make *Blood Simple* on an eight-week shooting schedule. There was a tendency for the Coens, coming from the icy Midwest, to choose warm climes for their shoots: Texas, Arizona, Louisiana (*Miller's Crossing*), Los Angeles (*Barton Fink*, *The Big Lebowski*), and Mississippi (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*)—the frozen exception being *Fargo*, which was consciously at the opposite extreme.

"But what I know about is Texas," says the voice-over of the detec-

tive at the opening of *Blood Simple*. However, the Coens didn't know Texas, nor Arizona, nor Louisiana, nor Mississippi. Texas was chosen for *Blood Simple* because, "the weather's good. It seemed like the right setting for a passion murder story. And people have strong feelings about Texas, which we thought we could play off of. And again your classic *film noir* has a real urban feel, and we wanted something different."

The less familiar rural Texas landscape is used very effectively and, paradoxically, although the film is set in the wide open spaces, a claustrophobic atmosphere is created. Like *Raising Arizona* and *Fargo*, it concentrates on a small community, with only a few houses and a bar. There does not seem to be a world outside.

For the Neon Boot bar, where a great deal of the action takes place, the Coens benefited from being granted free use of a mainly disused bar. "The only thing was, they opened it up at weekends for swinging singles nights, so we had to keep moving our stuff out." On the first day of shooting, which happened to be in the bar, Joel was so green that the assistant director had to tell him to yell "Action!" instead of "OK" when he was ready to shoot.

ONE OF the challenges of shooting a \$1.5 million movie was to make it look ten times that amount. For the Coens the only effective way to bring the low-budget film in on budget was to pre-plan everything, so every scene was meticulously storyboarded, a process that was to be an essential element in their film-making henceforth. "We storyboard our films like Hitchcock. There's very little improvisation, because we're chicken basically. Pre-production is cheap compared to standing around the set with a crew, scratching your head and saying things like, 'What would it look like if we put the camera over here?'"

The other reason, besides economics, that *Blood Simple* was storyboarded was the intricate nature of the plot. Certain visual elements repeat themselves in ironic visual ways. Devices such as match cuts, sound overlaps and dissolves are all cheap and easy to do if they are thought about ahead of time.

To help them draw the storyboards, they got three local people from Austin. "It was weird. One guy would do storyboards. Another guy would do floor plans. And a woman was there who seemed a sort

of secretarial help. We'd sit there with three people. It was odd. It was very quiet. They were perfectly nice. But you'd sit there and describe the shot and they would stare at you, pencils poised. They treated us like royals. And the storyboards were square and stiff."

Ethan, Joel, and Barry Sonnenfeld storyboarded the whole film together. At the beginning of every day, the three of them and the first assistant director, Deborah Reinisch, would have breakfast at Denny's in Austin—the Grand Slam special—and go through the day's shots and talk about the lighting. (A Denny's is where the anarchists confer in *The Big Lebowski*.) It was in Austin that they saw a sinister hotel across the street from where they were staying which became known to them as 'The Hotel Across the Street. They discovered that its stationery was blazoned with the logo: "The Hotel for a Day or a Lifetime," a slogan they used for the Hotel Earle, the rundown Los Angeles hotel in *Barton Fink*.

On the set, according to Joel, "We'd put it all together and look through the viewfinder. Barry might have an idea, or Ethan would come up with something different, and we'd try it. We had the freedom to do that, because we had done so much advance work." Sonnenfeld added: "Also we'd try to torture each other. For example, I didn't allow smoking, which meant that only one of them would be on the set at any given time, because the other one was off having a cigarette."

## 25 *Black and White in Colour*

"WHEN PEOPLE call *Blood Simple* a *film noir* they're correct to the extent that we like the same kind of stories that the people who made those movies liked," Ethan commented. "We tried to emulate the source that those movies came from rather than the movies themselves." Joel added: "It utilizes movie conventions to tell the story. In

that sense it's about other movies—but no more so than any other film that uses the medium in a way that's aware that there's a history of movies behind it. For us it was amusing to frame the whole movie with this redneck detective's views on life. We thought it was funny but it also relates directly to the story. It was not our intention to make an art film but an entertaining B-movie."

The greatest *films noirs*, those of the 1940s, were shot in black-and-white. When black-and-white films were almost entirely phased out in the 1960s, much of the atmosphere of the genre was lost. There were some directors, frustrated at being forced to use color, who tried to suggest monochrome by the way color and shadows were used. The Coens, like other directors of the time, had no choice.

"There was a big practical consideration. Since we were doing the movie independently, and without a distributor, we were a little leery of making a black-and-white movie," commented Joel. "But we never really considered that a sacrifice. We wanted to keep the movie dark and we didn't want it to be colorful in the *Touch of Mink* sort of way."

According to Sonnenfeld: "What we talked about early on was having the elements of color in frame by sources of light, at least as much as possible, like with the neon and the Bud lights, so that the rest of the frame would be dark. That way it would be colorful but not garish. Joel, Ethan and I felt strongly that we wanted our blacks to be rich, with no milk quality. I think we were afraid that to shoot the film in black-and-white would make it look too 'independent,' too low budget." Actually, with the yellow light, and the khaki-colored Texas landscapes, *Blood Simple* is more of a *film jaune* than a *film noir*.

"We also used the lighting as a psychological tool," explained Sonnenfeld. "For the film to be effective, the film had to be dark and contrasty. The lighting itself became a character. The evil detective, in a bright bathroom, starts shooting bullets through a wall into a dark adjoining apartment where our heroine was hiding. As each bullet slams through the common wall light streaks through the darkened apartment at all kinds of crazy angles. By the time the detective runs out of bullets, the darkened room is sliced up into 30 tubes of light bleeding out of the six bullet holes."

THE BROTHERS decided early on that they wanted to move the

camera around a lot, and "when the camera wasn't moving, we sometimes would dolly or raise or lower lights during the shot, so there was always some kind of apparent movement," Sonnenfeld explained. When they filmed the tracking shot along the bar and the camera hops over a passed-out drunk, Joel said, "No. It's too self-conscious." Ethan replied: "The whole movie is self-conscious."

There is an odd low, subjective tracking shot which sweeps across the lawn toward Marty trying to rape Abby. It seems to be from the German shepherd dog's POV. (There is a similar dog's eye view in *Raising Arizona*.) It was achieved by having two grips racing the camera along the ground at full speed, approaching Abby and Marty. Owing to the extreme wide-angle lens, in a matter of a couple of seconds, the camera moves from an extreme wide shot into a super close-up of Abby as she bends back and breaks Marty's fingers. "In effect, all the shaking is smoothed out by the time the shakes reach the middle of the 12-foot shakicam, and the camera seems to float," explained Sonnenfeld. "I would run behind the camera, not looking through the viewfinder, but still getting a sense of level and angle."