

Afterword

The Creator: Male and Female: Russell's *Joy* and Chandor's *A Most Violent Year*

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Russell's *Joy*¹

Joy is really two films, or perhaps a film which emerges from another film in which it is cocooned, and with which the better half seems to have little in common. The one that emerges is as fresh and compelling a portrait of the American businessman, or in this case businesswoman, as I can imagine. She is presented to us with all of the affection and honor which other movies lavish on poets or soldiers. Given how rarely Hollywood honors the "bourgeois virtues," this is an outstanding achievement, whatever the film's other flaws.

Those flaws mainly take the form of extraneous matter, in particular director David O. Russell's ineffectual efforts at screwball comedy and supporting characters who, however faithfully rendered, are tangential and distracting. Against such a background, Jennifer Lawrence's portrayal of Joy leaps out like a *bas relief* sculpture. The *New York Times*'s A. O. Scott puts it well: the supporting characters seem like "grotesques who might have wandered out of a Roald Dahl novel."² But Joy herself is different. She is shown to us as a small miracle: the kind of miracle that happens every day in a magical land of opportunity and vision. What gives the movie its power is this energy, this certain slant of light that gives not death, but life. It is the magic of creation, and it is to Russell's credit that he doesn't just mention it or dramatize it, but gives it to us with all of the lyricism of which he is capable.

¹ *Joy*, directed by David O. Russell (Fox 2000 Pictures, 2015). A slightly different version of a review of this film, entitled "The *Joy* of Creation," appears on Timothy Sandefur's blog *Freespace*, January 5, 2016, accessed online at: <http://sandefur.typepad.com/freespace/2016/01/the-joy-of-creation.html>.

² A. O. Scott, "Review: Jennifer Lawrence as a Modern-Day Cinderella in 'Joy'," *New York Times*, December 24, 2015, accessed online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/25/movies/review-jennifer-lawrence-as-a-modern-day-cinderella-in-joy.html?_r=0.

Joy makes an interesting comparison with another of the exceedingly rare instances in which Hollywood has chosen to celebrate the businessman, 1954's *Executive Suite*,³ except that Jennifer Lawrence's character is . . . well, perhaps the best word is feminine. In the earlier movie, the main character is Don Walling (William Holden), the vice-president of a furniture company who believes so strongly in the integrity of his products that he strives to rescue the firm from the owner's blasé heirs. He's driven by his vision of the ultimate product, as something that, in an effective masculine metaphor, he can be proud to have his name on (a line from Walling's climactic speech). Joy, on the other hand, is a creator, and she strives to build a life—to create a new thing that, without her, would not exist at all. This fact is beautifully underscored by one scene without dialogue, in which Lawrence peers through a Christmas display window over which artificial snow is falling. We sense that here is a wholly artificial, man-made (woman-made) world, now available to us, exclusively on account of the perseverance and vision of this unique individual. The owner of that store, like Lawrence's character, has created a space for joy.

That is the singular feeling that gives so much light to the best parts of *Joy*. In its most powerful sequence, Lawrence's character meets with QVC executive Neil Walker (Bradley Cooper) who explains to her in passionate detail just how massive an opportunity the meeting really offers her as an unknown entrepreneur. If her newly invented mop is accepted for sale on the shopping channel, she stands to sell 50,000 units and to become an overnight success. It will be only the beginning of her hard work, but it will be the first motion toward the new world she dreams of. Such a scene might have proven fairly ordinary, except that David Russell films it with a loving, almost lyrical quality, and does not let up. Russell has said that the film is about “living a fairy tale,” and the movie gives to moments like this a fairy-tale feeling, that sweeps Joy and the audience along with a gentle but unmistakable power. Most movies can do this only with giant CGI armies arrayed for battle or musclemen screaming “We are Spartans!” Others must always smuggle in some element of snarky self-betrayal under the badge of “irony.” Not here. This film gives us its miracle straight. With sincerity comes vulnerability, which is why so many directors are afraid of it. But only with sincerity do we see true beauty. That Russell gives us so much sincerity in a movie about a woman who invented a mop is a testament of its own kind.

But of course it's not about the mop. It's about the creator. In one scene, we see Joy taking command of a small but devoted group of workers, offering them jobs and opportunities they would not otherwise have had. In others, we see Joy confronting the corrupt contractors who conspire to rob her of her creation and the jealous and meddling family members who try to sabotage her efforts. Throughout it all, Joy is driven by an energy that seems

³ *Executive Suite*, directed by Robert Wise (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1954).

to come from nowhere except from her own creativity, and that creativity is the only real energy in her world. Almost everything else in the movie depends upon it, or sits like a vulture waiting to feed off its morbidity. Only Joy creates. She alone gives life to lifeless things.

Here, of course, one thinks of Ayn Rand, who sarcastically nicknamed one of her characters, a banker, “Midas.”⁴ John Chamberlain was one of the few critics to spot Rand’s irony. The Midas of legend was cursed because everything he touched turned to lifeless gold. But the banker, the creator, the entrepreneur, the capitalist, do the opposite: they have the “faculty for changing un sentient metal into glorious growth.”⁵ When we speak of wealth creation, we should always keep in mind that we mean that phrase with the utmost literalness. The wealth creator does not merely rearrange raw materials and sell the result at a markup. She makes something unique that never existed at all before her. She does what in a physicist’s sense is impossible: true creation *ex nihilo*. That such a thing ever occurs is, compared to most of humanity’s violent and meaningless history, a mind-boggling fact. That such things are *the source of all progress* is simply staggering. That we have a culture and a nation in which such things are not merely possible, but rewarded, is too precious a thing to let go unsaid. In America, said Alexis de Tocqueville, all honest callings are honorable.⁶ I have seen too few films that celebrate this seemingly humble fact as it deserves. Without it, life would be bleakness itself.

If life is a kind of fire, a special state of matter that creates itself out of a lifeless background, then we see the circle come to completion in the concluding scene, when Joy, now wealthy and sophisticated, listens to a product pitch from a young and idealistic inventor and her husband. “I know how it feels,” she tells them, when they are overjoyed at her approval. She does, indeed, as few others could. She is not Cinderella, who waited for someone else to take her off to a better life. She is, at least in this respect, the author of her own fairy tale.

Joy is not a philosophical film, and as I’ve said, it includes clumsy comedic elements that distract from the pearl at its center. Jennifer Lawrence’s character, however, is rendered in such good faith, with so much undisguised admiration, with such an unashamed appeal to the values of freedom and opportunity, that it stands out like a torch. It makes you long for a world in which everyone saw and celebrated this little miracle: this joy of creation.

⁴ In Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957).

⁵ John Chamberlain, “A Reviewer’s Notebook: *Atlas Shrugged*,” *The Freeman* 12 (December 1957), p. 56.

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1840), chap. 18.

Chandor's *A Most Violent Year*⁷

J. C. Chandor's *A Most Violent Year*, on the other hand, has the gritty look of a mobster flick: gunshots, hired goons, secretive meetings in Italian restaurants and barbershops. It isn't one, though, notwithstanding the presence of one or two Mafiosi. The film is actually a portrait of a man's devotion to his own integrity, which is ultimately a function of his pride. If *Joy* is self-consciously feminine, Chandor's movie is thoroughly masculine. As masculine as *Moby Dick*. As masculine as *The Godfather*. In everything from its spare set design and plain-color costuming, to the single-mindedness of its characterization and the precision of its dialogue, *A Most Violent Year* has a minimalist feeling not unlike Chandor's previous film, the ingenious allegory *All Is Lost*. But where that movie drew its elegant, almost dialogue-free drama out of a simple man-against-nature premise, this film features the interpersonal conflict between businessman Abel Morales (Oscar Isaac) and those who seek to compromise his business' success—sometimes in the name of “helping.”

Morales is the owner of a small heating oil company trying to break into the Manhattan market and poised at the brink of a major deal: if he can buy an expensive riverside facility to land and store oil, he will ensure his firm's survival and success. But the deal must be closed in a month, and in the meantime, he is vulnerable on two other fronts: hijackers are seizing his trucks and stealing his oil, on the one hand, and on the other, a crusading assistant district attorney (David Oyelowo)—who has done nothing to stop the robberies—is bringing unspecified charges against him for financial wrongdoing. His business partners, including his wife (Jessica Chastain) and attorney (Albert Brooks) mean well, but their attempts to aid him typically involve even more wrongdoing, as when Brooks's character agrees on the quiet to let the company's drivers illegally carry guns. A single shootout could destroy the firm.

Morales—whose surname means “moral,” and whose namesake was the first person murdered out of envy—is a prime practitioner of Aristotelian virtue without realizing it:

“You should know that I have always taken the path that is most right,” he tells the assistant D.A.

“Most right?” the lawyer asks.

“The result is never in question for me. Just what path do you take to get there? And there is always one that is most right.”

⁷ *A Most Violent Year*, directed by J. C. Chandor (FilmNation Entertainment, 2014).

As with Aristotle, Morales's virtue is almost entirely self-regarding. In scene after scene, he explains his motivations, not in terms of either greed or self-sacrifice, but of self-esteem. He cannot imagine how his enemies could degrade themselves by stooping to the tactics they employ. "These men are cowards," he tells one of his drivers, who is badly beaten by the robbers. "They're too weak to make a living or even fight with their own hands. And too stupid to think of anything else to do." These lines might seem cloying in an age in which insincere politicians mouth similar words almost weekly, after the latest terrorist rampage. But Morales actually means it, and it's clear that he's right. For him, business success is the public projection of his innermost self—of the self he cherishes and cannot stand to see disfigured. Through his loyalty to that vision, he provides a comfortable home for his wife and children as well as a living for his employees—but even these are not his principal aims. Compromise or lawbreaking would accomplish those goals more easily than the long route of honest, hard work. But winning is not actually winning if it is done the wrong way. When his wife offers what she thinks is a solution to their financial problems—but which is actually illegal—Morales explodes at her. He cannot stand to be contaminated by wrong. "I'm going to get this done and it's not gonna be as a cheat!" he exclaims.

This explains why the film sounds in the register of gangster movies like *The Godfather*, which have long been seen as American cinema's most direct meditations on masculinity. Such films typically emphasize themes of initiative, loyalty, and *omertà*: pursuing one's goals, protecting one's family, and paying one's dues. Not that such things are in any sense off-limits to women, but put together, they represent that unadorned, possessive, and obsessive version of practical wisdom that the Romans called *virtus*—from *vir*, or manliness—and which we today call masculinity.⁸ It was because Don Corleone embodies such classical virtues as *auctoritas*, *constantia*, *dignitas*, *disciplina*, *gravitas*, and so forth, that Mario Puzo said his novel was really about "the American Dream."⁹ The criminal plots were in a sense only romantic adjuncts to his depiction of these gifts. And so Abel Morales, struggling in *A Most Violent Year* to keep the criminals at bay, is no less a study in classical masculinity than are the Corleones. More so, in that, unlike Michael Corleone, Abel manages to resist being "pulled back in" to the life of crime. This he accomplishes solely through his self-esteem.

Chandor's film does not pretend that such confidence comes without a price. Oscar Issac plays the role with an intense, almost Mephistophelian, dignity that enables the viewer to grasp how hard it can be to resist the pressure to compromise on the most essential things—and just how crucial

⁸ Classically speaking, the female counterpart to *virtus* was honor; contemporary English has strangely swapped these words, so that today men have honor and women virtue.

⁹ Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969).

that resistance really is. To recur again to Ayn Rand, “To sell your soul is the easiest thing in the world If I asked you to keep your soul—would you understand why that’s much harder?”¹⁰ By the end of the film, it is not even clear whether Abel’s marriage will survive the strain.

Chandor conveys a hint of what’s at stake in one scene in which Abel instructs his young salesmen on the little techniques for closing deals with new customers. His theme: know your worth so you can carry yourself with dignity, and carry yourself with dignity so you can inspire confidence. If the customer offers coffee or tea, he advises, take the tea; if he offers water or lemonade, take the lemonade. When the boys chuckle, Morales quiets them. This is not funny. Choosing the fancier option emphasizes the fact that quality, not price, is your selling point:

“I’m only interested in this company growing, and when it doesn’t, it’s not very funny to me at all. These people work very hard for their money. These other guys are ripping them off and treating them poorly because they don’t know. So when you look them in the eye you have to believe that we are better. And we are. You’ll never do something as hard as looking someone straight in the eye and telling them the truth.”

A Most Violent Year looks the viewer straight in the eye and tells them the truth.

¹⁰ Spoken by Howard Roark, in Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Signet, 1993), p. 577.

