

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
May 2015

A Most Violent Year (dir. J.C. Chandor, 2014)

On Camera

Abel Morales Oscar Isaac: *Drive* (11), *Inside Llewyn Davis* (13), current *Ex Machina* (14)
Anna Morales Jessica Chastain: *The Tree of Life* (11), *The Help* (11), *Zero Dark Thirty* (12)
Andrew (lawyer) Albert Brooks: *Lost in America* (85), *Broadcast News* (87), *Drive* (11)
Julian (driver) Elyes Gabel: quick in *World War Z* (13) and *Interstellar* (14), much UK TV
Luisa (his wife) Catalina Sandino Moreno: *Maria Full of Grace* (04), *Fast Food Nation* (06)
Lawrence (D.A.) David Oyelowo: *Middle of Nowhere* (12), Martin L. King Jr. in *Selma* (14)
Peter (tennis!) Alessandro Nivola: *Laurel Canyon* (02), *Junebug* (05), *Selma* (14)
Josef (landowner) Jerry Adler: “Hesh,” *The Sopranos* (99-07), “Howard,” *The Good Wife* (11-15)

Off Camera

Cinematography Bradford Young: *Pariah* (11), *Ain't Them Bodies Saints* (13), *Selma* (14)
Art Direction John P. Goldsmith: *All Is Lost* (13), some set designing on *The Master* (12)
Costume Design: Kasia Walicka-Maimone: *Moonrise Kingdom* (12), *Foxcatcher* (14)
Original Score: Alex Ebert: Golden Globe for *All Is Lost* (13), Oscar-winning *Feast* (14)
Film Editing: Ron Patane: *The Place Beyond the Pines* (12), series of music documentaries

Previous features from writer-director J.C. Chandor

Margin Call (2011) – Financial-crisis drama mostly set in corporate boardrooms over one night; with Kevin Spacey, Zachary Quinto, Jeremy Irons, Demi Moore, Paul Bettany, Stanley Tucci
All Is Lost (2013) – Ocean-survival drama with no dialogue and a single actor, Robert Redford

Upcoming Project

Deepwater Horizon (2016?) – BP oil-disaster drama, written by Chandor; Peter Berg directing

If you liked *A Most Violent Year*...

Donnie Brasco (1997) – Another recent-period drama about a man lured into moral compromise
The Yards (2000) – Atmospheric, 70s-style drama about NYC crime and political machinations
We Own the Night (2007) – Same director as *The Yards*; moody drama about reluctant informant
The Place Beyond the Pines (2012) – Cross-generational drama of crime and ethical corrosion
Foxcatcher (2014) – Brooding, 1980s-set drama about moral erosion in competitive atmospheres
Leviathan (2014) – Golden Globe-winning Russian drama of citizens absorbed into corruption

Facts about *A Most Violent Year* you may appreciate...

The title alludes to factual data that violent crimes in New York City reached an apex in 1981.

Chandor has described two motives for making a study of violence, albeit one with only two dead bodies. First, he was shocked, having made two prior movies with zero violent content, that 80% of the scripts he got sent next were saturated with it. Second, he and his family live near Sandy Hook Elementary School, site of the notorious 2012 shooting, and he was appalled at how quickly the arming of security guards emerged as a “solution” the next day.

A Most Violent Year was also conceived as what Chandor has called “an immigrant story that isn’t ‘about’ immigration per se.” Not only is Abel allegedly Colombian-born and trying to establish himself in the U.S., but Isaac, Oyelowo, and Gabel are all actors from abroad.

Chandor was almost 40 when he more or less came out of nowhere to get *Margin Call* made and released in 2011, earning an Oscar nomination for its script. With each film, he has reversed expectations completely. *Margin Call* is a talk-filled, theatrical project playing out entirely in urban office spaces. *All Is Lost* has no dialogue at all and unfolds completely on the sea. *A Most Violent Year* is Chandor’s first period piece and unfolds across 35-40 NYC locations. The dialogue scenes have the ring of theater to them, but many scenes feature very little talk.

Javier Bardem, originally cast as Abel, kept pushing Chandor to expand from this character’s specific circumstances and indict capitalism as inherently amoral. The two eventually split over this issue. Chastain, already cast as Anna (though some say her part was offered first to Charlize Theron), wrote a three-page letter to Chandor advocating for Oscar Isaac, with whom she attended Julliard. It also helped Isaac that *Inside Llewyn Davis* was premiering at all the same film festivals as *All Is Lost* in 2013, allowing Chandor to get to know him. The team realized that Isaac and Chastain, despite never acting together, have been close almost exactly as long as Abel and Anna have known each other, which helped to foster intimacy.

A Most Violent Year shot in all five boroughs of NYC (as well as outlying, suburban areas), although finding locations that still reflected early-80s decay was difficult in such an aggressively spiffed-up city. The record snows of Winter 2014 were a huge help in this regard, covering up contemporary features that would have looked anachronistic, while also amplifying the sense of intense cold that makes heating oil such a life-or-death commodity.

Jessica Chastain decided that her upwardly-aspirational character in 1981 would not only wear Armani but probably be a fundamentalist about *only* wearing Armani. She used a private connection to broker a deal with the house such that they loaned out *all* her vintage duds.

A Most Violent Year, *American Sniper* (another film about a U.S. antihero, forced into grave moral compromise), and *Selma* (which shared two actors and a cinematographer with this movie), were the last big-ticket movies of 2014’s awards season to premiere, at AFI Fest.

A Most Violent Year won the Best Picture prize from the National Board of Review, an awards-giving body older than any U.S. critics’ group. Oscar Isaac shared Best Actor with Michael Keaton, and Jessica Chastain won Best Supporting Actress. No Oscar nominations followed.

Broad conversation topics...

Dramatic Predicament: On one hand, Abel Morales (whose last name is a play on “morals”), is the rare protagonist in this genre who is trying *not* to resort to violence, guns, or corruption to solve his mounting problems. At the same time, it is clear that the Morales family has not steered clear of all wrongdoing in building their business thus far, and that Abel *is* indulging himself a bit in setting up his struggles as attempts to remain “innocent” or set himself apart.

Genre Associations: Related to this point, *A Most Violent Year*’s images and screenwriting often invoke genres where violence plays a decisive role. Abel’s meetings with the men from whom he buys property, with his fellow heating-oil magnates, and with the police who try to collect Julian are all photographed like classic Western scenes—only he is trying to *avoid* a shoot-out, not engender one. Scenes like those in the barber shop are staples in 30s gangster films. The long chase scene echoes comparable but gunshot-filled sequences in famous 70s crime dramas like *The French Connection* or Blaxploitation films such as *Cleopatra Jones*.

Patterns in Photography: Chandor and his cinematographer have said they tried to structure many scenes such that they begin with widescreen long shots—filled with empty space or implying epic scale—and then gradually build toward tighter shots and close-ups, both to amplify suspense and to make a point of how city-wide problems become personal dramas.

“More Right”: Abel’s final speech to Lawrence, the D.A., concerns how there is always a *more right* path toward achieving a goal, and “that’s what this is.” What does it mean to think of a path not as *right* but as *more right*, compared to another one—and how does this idea resonate with *a most violent* rather than *the most violent* year, when in fact 1981 was both? Did you react to the film as a cynical statement about the nonexistence of a genuinely *right* path, or did you see a pragmatic, empathetic portrait of people who were acting as they must?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Opening: Abel’s runs capture something about the character’s competitive spirit and fierce desire to stay vital—often pushing himself to fast sprints amid very long jogs. At the same time, they frame the character in his essential isolation; constantly and in fact increasingly forced to consult with or rely upon others, he nonetheless styles himself a lone David against many Goliaths. Notice that he even goes on a long run by himself while his family is being moved into their new house! Meanwhile, Chandor cross-cuts between Abel and Julian in this opening sequence, juxtaposing the different fates and vulnerabilities of two immigrants. We see the NYC skyline in the background as Julian’s truck gets loaded, foreshadowing the end.

Credits: “Written and Directed by J.C. Chandor” is placed not over an image of Abel’s suave striving but over an image of Julian, beaten on the pavement beyond the Verrazano tolls.

Costumes: Anna’s white, voluminous coat with the ostentatious circular buckle communicates right away that she’s into making a statement, without over-dressing her in something tacky. Abel’s look, by contrast—the simple black turtleneck under that camel coat, with almost no buttons or fasteners except, subtly, in the back—suggests his taste for blank-slate anonymity.

Assimilation: Abel's more or less "assimilated" identity as a New American, coaching Julian to speak English and suppressing any identifiably Colombian traces from his speech, his voice, his home decorating, etc., is set off quickly against the unassimilated Orthodox Jews from whom he is trying to buy the shoreline property—another sign of how *A Most Violent Year* traces the different choices people make to blend or not to blend into the groups they join.

Sound and Image: *A Most Violent Year* often photographs its characters against featureless, flat backdrops, even in moments that might invite something more spectacular; for example, even as Abel feels the excitement of (for now) having secured this prestigious, strategically crucial property from Josef, he is filmed against the blank, whitish concrete of the oil tanks. He and other characters often appear against pure fields of black, or dull walls. In addition, the soundtrack often includes little-to-no music or background noise, not even household hums, traffic sounds, or natural twittering. Maybe this focuses us even more closely on nuances of dialogue or facial expression? Maybe it lends the world of the film a kind of tragic austerity?

Kubrick: Even if it doesn't feature in every scene, Alex Ebert's score is highly showcased in others and rather distinctive—at many points an update, in modern instrumentation, on the sorts of baroque classical scores that Stanley Kubrick frequently favored. Many viewers see allusions to Kubrick in the visuals, too: think of that cold, symmetrical, brutally modern house the Moraleses buy, framed head-on by a pitiless camera, the way Kubrick films the buildings or other sets in *The Shining*, *A Clockwork Orange*, etc. These aren't just random tributes to a revered filmmaker. Kubrick's stories were almost always about solitary men pushed into crisis by systems or problems they thought they had mastered but hadn't: space travel in *2001*, writing and isolation in *The Shining*, war in *Full Metal Jacket*, sex in *Eyes Wide Shut*, etc. Abel Morales' slowly chastened confidence fits closely in this tradition.

Fingernails: Not every visual cue is so obvious. Jessica Chastain asked to keep her fingernails conspicuously long, not only as a style statement on Anna's part, but because a woman with nails this long cannot possibly be interacting spontaneously with her kids or doing many of the household tasks associated with being a homemaker. We know the Moraleses have three daughters but rarely see them; Chastain figured this choice in look would fill in that gap.

Calculation: Another Chastain touch: the fact that Anna doesn't even have to look at the calculator to tabulate the company's books (however she approaches that task...) suggests both her confidence in her work and her long history of doing it. Nearer the end of the film, she's much more inclined to look at the keys while pressing them—with a pencil, of course, to save those nails—which implies some quaking confidence that she otherwise conceals.

Photography: When we discussed *Selma*, we noted Bradford Young's skill at pulling out visual details even in dimly lit spaces, and from actors across a range of complexions. You see the same skills at work here. It's also notable that the grounding color palette of the lighting—which tilts toward yellows, browns, oranges, and greens—implies a morally jaundiced world.

Image and Character: The camera stays far away as Abel and Anna re-enter their house after the incident with the intruder, so we can't see where he's looking when he says "Lot of help you were." He means the dog, but we're forgiven for thinking for a moment he means Anna.

Editing and Writing: “Baby, please don’t get going on this,” Abel begs Anna after the intruder incident, just as he often implores her to de-dramatize her reactions to situations. But he is also dramatic in his own lower-key way, as the film establishes by cutting immediately to his theater-training seminar for Standard Heating Oil employees, coaching them to make certain impressions on their clients through how they speak, what refreshments they request, etc.

Irony: It is almost too sad when the brutalized driver Julian asks Abel from the stairs, “Do you think I’m ready to move into sales?” with a black eye, a crutch, and a generally broken body. He doesn’t seem to notice his own bad shape. Then again, metaphorically, Abel sustains an internal version of these accumulating injuries—exactly what being “in sales” involves.

Voice: David Oyelowo of *Selma* got some flak in some reviews for his performance here, and in particular was criticized for an accent that seems uncertainly rooted in Brooklyn. Rather than “flawed” work on Oyelowo’s part, we might understand the *character* as trying to achieve an accent that isn’t necessarily his—as willfully imposed as that part he combs into his hair. (In rare moments when Abel gets angry, his vowels and consonants sound more Colombian.)

Dialogue: “We pushed it a little too far,” Andrew says, when he hears about the D.A.’s coming investigation. “God knows they’ve given money to bigger crooks than us,” he says about the bank. Note that he never actually denies their entrepreneurial wrongdoing, just minimizes it.

Dialogue: “It’s not like when we was driving,” says Bill O’Leary, the supervisor of the trucking crew, in urging Abel to arm all of the drivers. If they were drivers at the same time, and Abel is so upwardly-mobile and Bill so manifestly blue-collar, then Abel must really have a knack.

Lighting: The shot after Anna and Abel have returned home from dinner with the bankers (and hit the deer on the way) is one of many wide-scale portraits of interior space in the film that has only one clear light-source: a kitchen countertop bulb, illuminating Anna on the far right side of the shot even as Abel and everything else stay in darkness. This kind of shot recalls the lighting schemes of Edward Hopper, and lends the film a Depression-era resonance.

Costume: Anna puts that white Armani power-coat back on the second time she comes out to talk to Lawrence while her house is searched. Maybe she’s just cold, and realized after the first time she needed a coat. But she also seems to be armoring herself to give a big speech.

Choreography: Having barely survived a second hijacking of his truck, Julian is forced to run in the same direction as the guys who besieged him, who even trade some ideas about where to run or not run. Again, lines between “hero” and “criminal” are not easy to draw here.

Oil: We never actually see any heating oil until the final scene, after the bullet that kills a major character also punctures the wall of the tank. Horrifyingly, in a film where we often hear a sound before we hear its source, we may associate the audible guzzling with the blood leaking from this character’s head, until the camera reveals the sprung leak. Critics who write about oil’s representation in films and in art have observed that typically—unlike what we see with drugs, for example—oil’s presence and power is often conveyed indirectly.