2475/4250

"No Restrictions"

MONASH UNIVERSITY
THESIS ACCEPTED IN SATISFACTION OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
ON..... 3 August 2004.....
.....[redacted].....
Sec. Research Graduate School Committee

Errata

p 12, line 5, "complement" for "compliment"

p 19, line 10, "miscommunication contribute" for "miscommunication contributes"

p 26, line 23, "emphasise" for "emphasises"

p 31, line 1, "enable" for "enables"

p 35, line 24, "Kasdan's film" for "Kasden's film"

p 39, line 17, "Joel and Ethan Coen's films" for "Joel and Ethan Coen's film"

p 43, line 12, "affect" for "affects"

p 49, line 2, "complementary" for "complimentary"

p 61, line 7, "main character's gross" for "main characters gross"

p 63, line 15, comma after "lucid expression" and before "often"

p 82, footnote 54, delete "(Italics in original)"

p 96, line 8, "averse" for "adverse"

p 113, line 14, "theirs is a cinema" for "theirs in a cinema"

p 116, line 8, "invoke" for "invokes"

p 149, line 24, "its own simulacrum" for "it's own simulacrum"

p 155, line 18, "actor's own authority" for "actor's owner authority"

p 159, footnote 12, footnote reference title to be italicised

Addendum

p 14, line 15, "there are many instances" for "there exists many instances"

p 19, lines 3-4, "realisation that he has been taken for a ride by a woman with whom he has teamed to swindle a fortune in insurance benefits," for "realisation that the woman who he has teamed with to swindle a fortune in insurance benefits is taking him for a ride,"

p 27, line 7, "films also explore the" for "films are also beholden to exploring the"

p 27, line 13, "elements in novel ways" for "elements in new and novel ways"

p 39, line 1, "that trades on" for "that trades in on"

p 56, lines 15-16, "the aesthetic use of language" for "the aesthetics of language"

p 75, line 5, "until an edit" for "but an edit"

p 86, line 9, "implies a more" for "infers a more"

p 99, line 21, "mangled" for "truly vacuous"

p 103, line 6, "him and Ed" for "he and Ed"

p 121, lines 10-11, "consistent with" for "consistent to"

p 181, line 16, "the implication created" for "the inference created"

The Same Old Song:
Ironic Revisions in the Films of Joel and Ethan Coen

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A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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April 2004

Contents

Abstract

Despite the recent interest in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen few contemporary studies have sought to explore these works in relation to academic film theory. Most studies of the Coen brothers' films deliver qualified analysis that maintains a level of diffidence toward the films, unable to commit to a resolute position because of the Coens' ironic representational forms and attitudes. Many critical estimations have insisted that the Coen brothers' films are representative of empty formalism and merely vacuous constructions of allusions, quotations and references to popular culture. However, a concerted analysis of their works reveals these films to be substantial texts that vividly explore significant themes such as history, politics, identity, language and society.

This dissertation focusses on five different areas of film and cultural theory. Its diverse approach provides a structure for an in-depth study of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen, revealing the significant themes and issues contained in these texts. The areas focussed upon—book to film adaptation, film dialogue and language analysis, history and postmodernism, performance and film acting, and culture and contexts—accommodate a broad basis by which to interrogate the films of the Coen brothers. An intense focus on the films of the Coen brothers reveals that their postmodern attitude to genre and form is a key component of their aesthetic and representational approach. This critical position acknowledges the Coens' employment of texts of the past but rejects the notion that this is indicative of their inability to say anything original. Rather, it confirms that the Coen brothers' postmodern application of antecedent material is integral to their films' engagement with topical concerns. Parody, irony and subversion are crucial components in the Coen brothers' filmmaking and these elements are central to their position on the fringe of Hollywood. Joel and Ethan Coen's critique of narrative constructions, generic conventions and cinematic frameworks is pivotal to their satirical interrogation of contemporary issues of ideology and culture.

Statement of Originality

This thesis, entitled The Same Old Song: Ironic Revisions in the Films of Joel and Ethan Coen, except with the committee's approval contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Paul Coughlin

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my gratitude to Con Verevis for his tireless assistance and encouragement in the research and composition of this dissertation. His efforts for the duration of the candidature have been greatly appreciated. I would also like to acknowledge the members of the School of Literary, Visual and Performance Studies for their contributions, advice and support. Additionally, I would not have had the opportunity to conduct this research project without the aid of the Australian Postgraduate Award. The Australian Postgraduate Award afforded me the means to give this undertaking the focus and attention necessary for its proper completion. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their patience, encouragement and assistance.

Preface

The films of Joel and Ethan Coen have generally been treated with scepticism by commentators unsure of how to approach their works. The Coen brothers' position on the perimeter of mainstream Hollywood has alienated those who might champion their independent film credentials as well as estranging those who would celebrate their commercial successes. The purpose of this dissertation is not to categorise the Coens as alternative or orthodox filmmakers but to confirm their position on the fringe and to demonstrate how this standing is integral to the design and reception of their films. "The Same Old Song: Ironic Revisions in the Films of Joel and Ethan Coen" has been an ongoing concern for three years, its research beginning in January 2001. As such the ground has been constantly shifting as new Coen brothers films are released and additional books relating to their work are published. There are now eight substantial book-length studies on the Coen brothers (only two of which were available at the commencement of the research), with more books—notably R. Barton Palmer's study—due for publication in the very near future. As each new study has been published its concerns have been duly considered and incorporated into the research. *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) arrived as this dissertation was in its final phases of revision, and as a result its consideration is chiefly confined to the Conclusion. The evolution of a series of studies into the films of Joel and Ethan Coen testifies to their currency as material for contemporary film analysis. This dissertation seeks to reveal new approaches to the films of the Coen brothers and pursue aspects of their work that have largely been overlooked in other studies.

Introduction

Ronald Bergan's biographical analysis of Joel and Ethan Coen contains a particularly significant epilogue that demonstrates many of the difficulties that confront an appraisal of their films. The sardonic epilogue (apparently penned by Bergan himself, using a pseudonym: Edward Schulbyte, Professor of Cinema Studies at the University of Copacabana) takes on the character of a riposte to the arguments contained in Bergan's main text. It is a sharp and pointed condemnation of the Coen brothers' approach to filmmaking and their application of specific techniques of representation. Bergan's ruse (writing a "jokey" response to his own book) is indicative of the Coens themselves. They too have invented people in order to comment wryly on themselves and the validity of their work. Bergan (writing as Schulbyte) has adopted the same ironic attitude by calling into question the legitimacy of his own critical examination of the Coens. The epilogue describes the Coen brothers as postmodern artists who celebrate meaninglessness while making no claim to truth or reason. Schulbyte maintains the Coens merely construct "films about films, pastiches of older styles," they have "never taken an ethical stance on anything" and "the message [in their films] is that there is no message."[1] Despite the sarcastic tone of Schulbyte's contribution the arguments are typical of those that are often levelled at Joel and Ethan Coen. Thus, the epilogue is not simply an imitation of hysterical critical analysis, but a cogent parody that contains elements of truth within its double-coding. Moreover, this piece carries a more penetrating significance than simply outlining the common criticisms directed at the Coen brothers' films.

Bergan's "faked" essay at the end of his book demonstrates his qualified response to the Coen brothers. They are the kind of filmmakers who occasion doubt, often beckoning critics to cover their own tracks lest they take the Coens seriously. It is the Coen brothers' ironic tone that keeps many commentators guarded and provokes others to dismiss their films outright. And the epilogue attributed to Schulbyte fashions a pithy summary of the aspects of the Coens'

films that critics latch on to as indicative of their "cinema of meaninglessness." Their films, it is argued, are about nothing, they take no moral positions and they fail to create human characters. Given Joel and Ethan Coen's postmodern techniques—allusion, parody, self-reflexivity, irony—they are typically stigmatised by such criticisms. They are often censured for failing to commit to moral or ethical positions and chastised for constructing worlds of artificiality. Bergan's epilogue (itself an illustration of postmodernism) represents an inability to approach the work of the Coens seriously or to maintain an interrogation of their films without qualification. John Hill argues that "it is in the character of postmodernism to be suspicious of unified theoretical frameworks" maintaining that postmodern works unsettle "the knowledge claims or ontological assumptions of earlier theory."[2] The challenge with the Coen brothers is to develop an appraisal that both acknowledges their ironic tone and postmodern devices and yet maintains a focus on the essential issues evident in their texts. The application of various and diverse critical approaches to the films of the Coen brothers demonstrates how their subversive attitude to genre, narrative, Hollywood, history and American culture engages with the real world and its ethical and moral concerns. It is this seditious aspect of their filmmaking procedures that legitimates their claims as serious and significant contributors to the realm of contemporary cinema.

Despite operating across an extensive array of generic categories and employing diverse thematic approaches the Coen brothers develop many recurrent motifs and enduring interests in their films. The Coens' striking ability to compose brilliant dialogue for their characters is perhaps the most distinguished aspect of their work. The dominant critical approach taken with regard to *Fargo* (1996) focusses on the specific dialect of the Minnesota community. Peter Körte argues that the attention given to maintaining an authentic language-scheme is less a simple affectation or cute device and more an "expression of a very specific

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[1] Edward Schulbyte, "Epilogue: Laughter in the Dark," Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, 2000, pp.222-225.
[2] John Hill, "Film and Postmodernism," *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Eds. John Hill & Pamela Church Gibson, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p.96.

experience and mentality."[3] In their more overtly postmodern films, such as *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1993) and *Barton Fink* (1991), ethnographic detail is rejected in favour of allusions to popular culture. This is also reflected in the Coen brothers' rampant application of pre-existing source material in new and ironic ways such as their adaptation of Dashiell Hammett in *Miller's Crossing* (1990) and James M. Cain in *Blood Simple* (1984). It is this reliance on allusion, common in many of their films, which lends weight to the charge that their works are empty of new ideas. Todd McCarthy concludes that despite *The Hudsucker Proxy*'s inspired reworking of old movies and genre it remains synthetic and the characters are artificial constructs rather than human beings.[4] Yet, when the Coens construct more realistic characters they are often accused of adopting a mocking tone to them. Devin McKinney suggests *Fargo* is "a fatuous piece of nonsense, a tall cool drink of witless condescension"[5] and Emanuel Levy claims the Coens "have always treated their characters with contempt, ruthlessly manipulating and loathing their foolishness."[6] Aspects of language, postmodern techniques, regionalism and charges of arrogant superiority are the most common critical approaches to the works of Joel and Ethan Coen.

Each of the book-length publications dealing with the Coen brothers (eight books in the last three years) has paid significant attention to their postmodern devices and cinematic techniques as well as confronting the kinds of criticism levelled by Levy and McCarthy.[7] The inundation of analysis demonstrates the significant attention Joel and Ethan Coen's films summon and the desire to grant them a critical validity that hitherto has been lacking. While substantial in their

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[3] Peter Körte, "Looking for a trail in Coen County," *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Eds. Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen, Translated by Rory Mullholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001, p.283.
[4] Todd McCarthy, "*The Hudsucker Proxy*," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.118.
[5] Devin McKinney, "*Fargo*," *Film Quarterly*, 50, Fall, 1996, p.32.
[6] Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, New York University Press, New York, 1999, p.230.
[7] Since 2000 there have been eight substantial book length studies of the Coen brothers and their films – Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, 2000; Ellen Cheshire & John Ashbrook, *Joel and Ethan Coen: The Pocket Essential*, Second Edition, Pocket Essentials, Harpenden, 2002; Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen Eds., *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Translated by Rory Mulholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001; Josh Levine, *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers*, ECW Press, Toronto, 2000; William G. Luhr Ed., *Fargo*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004; James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, B.T. Batsford, London, 2000; Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers*, Virgin Books, London,

research each of these studies employs a direct approach to the individual texts and effectively confines its respective inquiries to film-by-film analysis. These studies occasionally deal briefly with broader topics—language, politics, intertextuality—that expand beyond narrative accounts and plot descriptions. However, any attention afforded these expansive issues is treated in a digressive manner. In contrast to these current publications, this dissertation refuses a basic film-by-film analysis and instead examines the Coens' films in relation to specific areas of film theory. This approach largely avoids the narrative analysis and plot reconstruction that is particularly evident in the current monographs, and instead offers a broad-based interrogation of the contextual factors and cultural concerns evinced in the films of the Coen brothers. This methodology demonstrates that the films under review are not merely empty constructions of allusions, quotations and references to popular culture (as is often asserted), but rather substantial texts that vividly explore significant themes ranging from identity and language to issues of history, politics and society.

This study is divided into five equal chapters that focus attention on various areas of cinema studies: adaptation theory, dialogue analysis, history and postmodernism, performance studies, and cultural theory. In each chapter the theoretical framework is established through a concise examination of relevant film and critical theory. This approach provides the structure for an in-depth consideration of the films of the Coen brothers as well as a potent interrogation of several areas of cinema studies. Each chapter explores the relevant film theory and applies the concepts discussed in an extensive analysis of three Coen brothers films. This process liberates the restrictions typical of explicative narrative analysis—plot developments, character analyses, theme descriptions—and permits a more unrestricted flow of ideas between the theory and the texts. In most cases the three films selected to interrogate the chosen area of film theory are particularly representative, though not exhaustive, of the ideas that come out of the specific area of research. Of primary importance in each chapter is not the specific texts of the Coens, but rather how their work in general relates to the issues under scrutiny. Each chapter concentrates on developing an expansive

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2003; and Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2001.

survey of relevant issues in cinema studies as well as approaching the films of the Coens from original angles. This process operates to broaden the otherwise limited approaches to the Coen brothers, in addition to interrogating and developing specific areas of current film theory.

The first chapter investigates adaptation theory and questions the manner by which film adaptations are analysed and assessed. The research explores and dispels the myth of fidelity arguing that complete faithfulness between two different media is impossible. Under discussion is the Coen brothers adaptation of James M. Cain in *Blood Simple*, Dashiell Hammett in *Miller's Crossing* and Raymond Chandler in *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Looking at how these films relate to their literary predecessors informs several questions relating to the transference of narrative units, the capacity for evaluating the adaptation of particular authorial styles, and issues of subversion, genre and intertextuality. The chapter deals firstly with instances of fidelity between the source material and the adaptation and then looks at the elements which operate to disrupt the connections between book and film. This manner of analysis seeks to provide an argument against the long-held view that the Coens are simply "pastiche-artists" who copy the works of others in a manner of casual reference. Adaptation theory posits several propositions about the nature of the relations between a primary source and its adaptation. And the films of Joel and Ethan Coen demonstrate the subversive components that support the contention that adaptations hold a position relative to source material that is more reliant on principles of reinterpretation rather than fidelity.

Chapter two provides a basis by which to investigate dialogue in film using the works of Joel and Ethan Coen as rich examples of texts in which language is a critical component. A study of film dialogue must attend to the significance of language in film, coming to terms with the crucial role this under-theorised aspect of the film apparatus plays in cinema representations. The dialogue in the films of the Coens is a rich area for discussion and contemplation, whether it be the precise representation of dialect in *Fargo*, the gangster-jargon in *Miller's Crossing* or the uncompromisingly derivative movie-speak used in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. The three films chosen for analysis—*Raising Arizona* (1987),

Fargo, and *The Big Lebowski*—are each penetrating examples of how dialogue influences a film's organisation of meaning. Language analysis helps to lay bare and scrutinise fundamental devices by which dialogue functions in film. This chapter focusses particularly on the employment of denotative language in *Raising Arizona*, dialect in *Fargo*, and language appropriation and misuse in *The Big Lebowski*. Joel and Ethan Coen's close attention to language provides an earnest critique of aspects of America's culture; of the views, values, prejudices and paradigms of power in these societies. The Coens' ironic representation of family structures, the American Dream and the authority of politicians reveals a depth of purpose that dispels suggestions that their films are meaningless. Language is entirely important to the films of Joel and Ethan Coen because it is composed with such precision and it is often the most important structuring device in their works.

The third chapter of the research thesis deals with representations of history in the films of the Coen brothers, specifically in relation to *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). These texts foreground the textuality of history itself by denying a clearly supportable separation of history and fiction. The widely diverse theories of postmodernism provide the conceptual framework and theoretical structure by which to investigate the possibility of history in a world overloaded with information and signs. Joel and Ethan Coen are regularly allusive filmmakers and they draw on a polyphony of images and references in their films. *Barton Fink* contains a stimulating mix of accepted history, anecdotal and apocryphal elements and pure fiction. A similar methodology is adopted for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* which offers a technically precise and culturally astute recreation of 1930s Deep-South America but frames the narrative using Homer's *The Odyssey*. This mixture of historical detail and archetypal fiction is a postmodern paradigm. Yet, neither of these films come close to *The Hudsucker Proxy* for re-imagining the past. With this film the Coens eschew all resemblance to reality to produce a remarkably artificial world that owes almost all of its inspiration to old movies. While postmodern texts have certainly highlighted the inherent textuality of history it is also true that access to history has always depended on mediated representation. History and fiction are discourses, constructs and signifying systems, serving to

remind us that we name the past as historical facts by selection and positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of the past through its discursive inscription, through its traces in the present. These three films—*Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—provide ample opportunity to explore issues of history, fiction, allusion and parody in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen.

Chapter four examines the role of performance in the construction of a cinematic text. Many current approaches to performance analysis begin by acknowledging the immense complexity involved in a consideration of this area of theory. How to deal with acting in film is not easily discernible and contemporary studies function more like explorations of un-charted territory than stable approaches in analysing performance. Part of the problem is one of articulation: discussing performance requires articulating the expressive qualities of an actor's voice and body. Peter Krämer and Alan Lovell describe acting as an "elusive art"[8] and Carole Zucker argues that "the project of describing and articulating an aural characteristic or gestural trait can be daunting. This same presence is, moreover, a source of reflection, passion and even revelation, uncommon conditions for scholarly labor."[9] In the films of Joel and Ethan Coen the range of performance is wide, from the candidly wacky Nicolas Cage as H.I. McDunnough in *Raising Arizona* to the ultra minimalist approach of Billy Bob Thornton (playing an inert and largely emotionless character) in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001). Thornton's celebrated performance in addition to the equally distinguished performances in *Miller's Crossing* and *Fargo* provide the raw material for the analysis of film acting. Of concern is the manner by which the Coen brothers use particular actors, employ intertextuality, exploit persona, and manipulate expectations, and how these issues hold significance in the way texts are constructed and received. These matters lead to crucial questions relating to the relevance of the performer in the construction of meaning in film and the relationship performance has to sociological theories of identity. Gabriel Byrne's remarkably restrained performance in *Miller's Crossing*, Steve Buscemi's turn as

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[8] Peter Krämer & Alan Lovell, "Introduction," *Screen Acting*, Eds. Alan Lovell & Peter Krämer, Routledge, London, 1999, p.5.
[9] Carole Zucker, "Preface," *Making Visible the Invisible: an anthology of original essays on film acting*, Ed. Carole Zucker, Scarecrow Press, New Jersey, 1990, p.viii.

an incompetent criminal in *Fargo* and Billy Bob Thornton's monotone offering of the title character in *The Man Who Wasn't There* provide fertile material with which to explore the topics of identity, construction and reception as they relate to actors in the cinematic text.

The final chapter is a wider interrogation into the cultural contexts of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen dealing more specifically with politics, ethnicity, sexuality and class. Each of *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* focusses predominantly on political issues and societal concerns and also deals with the ever changing issues of race, gender and class in America which form the crux of their cultural interrogations. This chapter takes a broad approach to the central issue of the thesis: namely, the contention that Joel and Ethan Coen's films engage with cultural concerns and social issues. This approach establishes a broad survey of the cultural contexts of these films using the methods and techniques developed in cultural studies to examine issues of politics, ethnicity, sexuality and class. Media texts are neither vehicles for the conveyance of a controlling system of values, nor are they simple entertainment without any critical agenda. Rather, such representations are intricate artifacts that organise social and political discourses. Douglas Kellner notes that "[r]eading films politically, therefore, can provide insight not only into the ways that film reproduces existing social struggles within contemporary U.S. society, but can also provide insight into the social and political dynamics of the era."[10] Kellner is outlining the two-way approach that is exploited by a film theory that both acknowledges a text's cultural positioning as well as the culture itself. This chapter explores the way that *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *Raising Arizona* and *Blood Simple* reflect, indicate, refract and contend with their contexts. *Blood Simple* takes place in suburban Texas, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is set in provincial Mississippi, and *Raising Arizona*, as the title suggests, is located in the state of Arizona. The meticulous recreation of disparate cultures highlights the

[10] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Routledge, London & New York, 1995, p.103.

social, racial and ethnic themes that run through the films of the Coen brothers, and suggests a further productive area for critical analysis.

1. Adaptation

> *It's funny that people who write about our films always refer to other films whenever they want to make comparisons. It's often down to contemporary narrow-mindedness that these literary references are overlooked.* Ethan Coen[1]

Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* takes its title from the fictional film John Sullivan wishes to make in Preston Sturges' 1941 comedy *Sullivan's Travels.* In Sturges' film, Sullivan (Joel McCrea) resents his categorisation as a light-weight movie director and sets out to make a worthwhile film dealing with the culture of poverty entitled "O Brother, Where Art Thou?". That the Coen brothers used the title of Sullivan's fictional script for their own picture invites one to speculate whether they attempted to make the film Sullivan never did. The opening credits for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* quickly dispel that suggestion, announcing the film is based upon Homer's *The Odyssey.* However, the Coens' film bears only a passing resemblance to each of these sources. Ronald Bergan anoints the Coens' practice of agitating the normal links between source and text as a "'postmodernist' joke."[2] A joke it may be, but the question remains, how is *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* to be classified? Is it an adaptation of Homer, a remake of Sturges, an extension or sequel to *Sullivan's Travels*, or a wholly original film?

Most of the Coen brothers' films are based upon original screenplays, but in many cases these scripts are influenced by other, often literary, sources. The brothers' affection for adaptation is illustrated in their loose trilogy of crime fiction based upon the literature of the *Roman Noir* writers of the 1930s and 40s. These films—*Blood Simple*[3], *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big Lebowski*—represent the brothers' revival of the "spirit" and "style" of America's lauded trio of hard-boiled authors: James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, respectively. While these films are adaptations, the contentious understanding of

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[1] Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, 2000, p.49.
[2] Ibid, p.210.

this definition emphasises the nature of adaptation as a vacillating category in which source material must be considered in conjunction with numerous other influences.

James Naremore announces that most analysis of adaptation "stops at the water's edge, as if hesitant to move beyond literary formalism and ask more interesting questions."[4] Naremore contemplates an adaptation hypothesis which looks past simple issues of fidelity and the transference of narrative units, to instead focus on the myriad influences which dictate the nature and style of the filmic adaptation. *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big Lebowski* are instructive texts in highlighting the various elements that influence the adaptation of novels to film. Each of these examples, adaptations of authors rather than singular texts, illustrate important factors that have an effect on the nature of the adaptation. Intertextuality, genre, cultural influences and literary conventions are just some of the prominent concerns in these adaptations. Moreover, claims to fidelity are overwhelmed by the Coens' penchant for the ironic reimagining of textual and generic conventions. Joel and Ethan Coen often look at the relationship between various literary texts, drawing on authorial styles, genre conventions and widely disparate intertexts in a framework as much beholden to their own concerns as to the authors they are remaking.

Blood Simple forecasts the manner in which the Coen brothers would seek to work with well known source material, extracting the essence of an author's style from several of his/her works and re-deploying this style and its fundamental elements within a different and original environment. With *Blood Simple* the Coens sought to re-contextualise the basic elements of the Cain novel. Bergan, accurately reflecting the methodology behind the Coens' adaptation, quotes the brothers as stating: "We liked the hard-boiled style, and we wanted to write a James M. Cain story and put it into a modern context."[5] While the Coens were familiar with Cain's novels they did not seek to adapt any single text but rather

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[3] The title of the Coen brothers' first film is expressed in the credit sequence as "Blood simple." – taking the grammatical form of a sentence.
[4] James Naremore, "Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation," *Film Adaptation*, Ed. James Naremore, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2000, p.9.
[5] Op. Cit., Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, p.75.

made a "Cain film" and infused it with their own vision and contexts. As is the case with all adaptations, *Blood Simple* is informed by a series of inspirations and influenced by a multitude of sources. Although clearly inspired by the style of James Cain, it also carries the influences of crime fiction conventions, *film noir*, and the uncommon landscapes of Texas. These stimulants compliment and contend with the style of Cain to create a recognisably derivative, but wholly unique text.

With *Miller's Crossing* the Coen brothers created another unique film, but this time they were criticised for not adequately crediting Dashiell Hammett. John Harkness argued that *Miller's Crossing* was "owing so much to *The Glass Key* that it's a wonder the Hammett estate didn't sue for plagiarism."[6] Max Allan Collins continued the contention that Hammett was owed an acknowledgment, proposing that the statement: "'Based on a novel by Dashiell Hammett' [should have] appeared somewhere in the credits." Collins goes on to suggest that the film bears a "strong though not identical resemblance to *The Glass Key*."[7] Steven Jenkins observes *Miller's Crossing* similarity to both *Red Harvest* and *The Glass Key* stating it borrows from the former "the corrupt interlinking of crime and politics in the running of the unnamed city." He adds that the influence of *The Glass Key* is perceived in "the ambiguous triangular relationship between Tom, Verna and Leo, and the strong hint of sadistic homo-eroticism that weaves through the complex plot."[8] The assertion here is obvious, Joel and Ethan Coen have drawn heavily on Hammett's two novels in their composition of *Miller's Crossing*. Yet, also apparent is the desire to assign some kind of singular, or dual in the case of Jenkins, origin for the framework, structure, themes and setting of the film. Harkness criticises the filmmakers for not acknowledging the film's debt to Hammett's *The Glass Key* but he himself fails to mention *Red Harvest*. *Miller's Crossing* is not just the product of *The Glass Key* or *Red Harvest* but of a series of other fundamental influences which have sought to shape and cultivate the end

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[6] John Harkness, "The Sphinx Without a Riddle," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.126.
[7] Max Allan Collins, "Mystery Seen," *Mystery Scene*, 28, January, 1991, p.51.
[8] Steven Jenkins, "*Miller's Crossing*," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, pp.71-2.

product which, while undoubtedly inspired by Hammett, is also unquestionably an original text.

The Big Lebowski was released eight years after *Miller's Crossing*, completing the informal trilogy of films based upon the three classic hard-boiled novelists Cain, Hammett and Chandler.[9] It is a loosely constructed Raymond Chandler film, drawing on many of the traits representative of Chandler's fiction. Yet, as is the case with the relationship *Blood Simple* has to Cain and *Miller's Crossing* has to Hammett, the affinity *The Big Lebowski* has to Chandler does not rely on any single textual source. Nevertheless, as Joel Coen recalled, "it was definitely Chandler's novels that inspired *The Big Lebowski* – in terms of its style and setting."[10] *The Big Lebowski* is an adaptation which illustrates the manifold inspirations, influences, intertexts and sources that fashion and model a new text out of previous material. There is no single model by which the film can be compared, there is no unmistakable source in which claims of fidelity can be argued. *The Big Lebowski*'s references to other films, Chandler's novels, locations, era and cultural references all play a significant part in the film's construction. It is a Chandler film but also "a remake of *Cutter's Way* strained through *The Big Sleep*, a poison-pen love-letter to LA and all the movies made about it, a cowboy's opium dream of life at the end of the trail, and a bowling movie about Desert Storm."[11] And finally the film plays with genre in a most peculiar way: it is a detective film, without a detective. Like *Blood Simple* and *Miller's Crossing* before it, *The Big Lebowski* is a constructive example of the issues that must be considered in theories of adaptation.

It is apparent that Joel and Ethan Coen draw heavily on literary sources in *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big Lebowski* and numerous examples from these films confirm their connection to previous texts. This chapter contends, however, that fidelity is a flawed measure for the quality or worth of an

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[9] There is certainly a case for the inclusion of *The Man Who Wasn't There* in this collection of crime adaptations as its connection to James M. Cain's work—particularly *Career in C Major*—is readily apparent.

[10] Andy Lowe, "The Brothers Grim," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.163.

[11] Credited to an uncited author in Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, 2000, p.190.

adaptation. By first illustrating the examples of closeness that exist between the source material and the adaptation and then surveying the elements which function to disrupt these associations it becomes evident the Coens are actively denying faithful representations. The issues of genre and intertextuality complicate the matter of fidelity by foregrounding the existence of other inspirations and influences relevant to the adaptation. Genre concerns are central to the construction of *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big Lebowski* and they play as much a part in defining the adaptations as the source material. Similarly, intertextuality operates to both define these texts as adaptations as well as demonstrating that they are influenced by a widely diverse collection of sources beyond their ostensible literary precursors. By cataloguing all the elements that influence the construction of an adaptation this study makes clear the impossibility of an untainted fidelity between source and adaptation. As much as *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big Lebowski* reflect their inspirations there exists many instances of direct inversion or deliberate subversion that point to the Coens' typical ironic interplay with antecedent material. And the Coens' rampant irony—reflected in their often contradictory attitudes to the material they are adapting—suggests they are more than simply pastiche-filmmakers who copy the works of others. The films of Joel and Ethan Coen reveal a subversive agenda that leads to a reinterpretation of prior representations and source material as well as a reappraisal of the fidelity principle in the assessment of adaptation.

Source to Adaptation

Fidelity consistently endures as the axis by which the public determines the relative quality of the adaptation of literary texts into cinematic form. The conversion of a beloved modern text, whether it be an adaptation or a remake, will often summon typical questions such as "How does the film stack up against the original novel?" or "How does the remake alter the contents of the original text?" The link between adaptations and remakes is important because it suggests that these two methods of reconstruction are closely associated in their attempts to reimagine an original, singular text. Many of the same issues that are at stake in

the analysis of adaptation are also relevant to remaking.[12] Remaking is also pertinent to this study because film precursors are as much an issue in the reception of the Coen brothers' films as the literary sources on which they are based. That the Coens' films are influenced or informed by several texts, authorial styles and other widely disparate films is the first and most important negation of the anachronistic fidelity principle in the assessment of adaptations. Joel and Ethan Coen's films negotiate the issue of fidelity by furnishing adaptations which reject a linear relationship to *one* model or source text. *Miller's Crossing* is based loosely on two Hammett novels, *The Glass Key* and *Red Harvest*, and it also engages in a more general sense with Hammett's style. *Blood Simple* is a Cain film without being based on any particular Cain text but rather his style and concerns. *The Big Lebowski* is perhaps the most ambitious of the three films, the Coens fashioning a Raymond Chandler-like story around the world of a doped-out loser and social-league ten-pin bowling. Fidelity forms the basis for the critical responses to these films, evinced in the observations from Harkness, Collins and Jenkins, as well as the comments made by the Coens themselves. Yet, the issue of fidelity is challenged dramatically in these adaptations because the source material is not summoned as a model to be transferred or re-presented faithfully.

Blood Simple, *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big Lebowski* are best described as being inspired by the styles of particular canonised authors. For Dudley Andrew "[a]daptations claiming fidelity bear the original as a signified, whereas those inspired by or derived from an earlier text stand in a relation of referring to the original."[13] But as much as *Blood Simple* refers to the novels of Cain, or *Miller's Crossing* to Hammett, or *The Big Lebowski* to Chandler, they also find additional stimulus from intertexts and genre concerns. These "extra-novelistic influences,"[14] as Brian McFarlane describes them, are not the only problematic issues at hand. What is the relationship *Blood Simple* has to Cain, for instance? Robert Stam's analysis of adaptation queries the principles of fidelity, asking to what authorial

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[12] For a detailed study of remaking which takes into account the issue of adaptation see: *Play it again. Sam: retakes on remakes*, Eds. Andrew Horton & Stuart Y. McDougal, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998.
[13] Dudley Andrew, "Adaptation," *Film Adaptation*, Ed. James Naremore, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2000, p.28.
[14] Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1996, p.200.

instance is one to be faithful? Is it the biographical author, the textual author or the narrator? Stam also includes questions of style, narrative point-of-view and artistic devices as issues that must be considered in the study of adaptation.[15] With *Blood Simple* there is no model which the Coens can be faithful to or reproduce. They are not adapting a single text but instead drawing on the works of Cain and representing these in an original context. Adaptation theory initially travelled through theoretical territory which valorised the source material and sought to comment exclusively on the ability of the film to attain such levels of "perfection." Naremore defines this approach as "translation" in which studies investigate "how codes move across sign systems" focussing primarily on "textual fidelity."[16] The Coens have chosen not to adapt any single Cain text but rather the style in which his literature was struck. With *Blood Simple*, the Coens sought to make a Cain film, transferring and transforming many of the aspects typical of his texts into cinematic form, emulating his style and concerns.

The Big Lebowski was calculated to emulate the literature of Chandler. As such, it is a rambling detective story concerning Jeff Lebowski's (a.k.a. the Dude) (Jeff Bridges) quest through the strange wonderland of Los Angeles seeking compensation for the rug he believes was unfairly damaged by a pair of intruders. Joel Coen suggests that the story "if you reduced it to the plot, would seem rather ridiculous or uninteresting. And it's the same with a lot of Chandler – the plots are there to drive the characters."[17] Ethan notes that the story structure—the "wandering intrigue"—was consciously inspired by Chandler's style.[18] Chandler's detective novels from *The Big Sleep* to *The Long Good-Bye* each centre around the adventures of private-eye Philip Marlowe in a decrepit and corrupted Los Angeles. The narratives are emphatically convoluted and are, for the most part, subordinate to Marlowe's quest to maintain his iron-cast system of principles while journeying through a Los Angeles society of decadence and violence. Leon Arden observes:

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[15] Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," *Film Adaptation*, Ed. James Naremore, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2000, pp.57-8.
[16] Op. Cit., James Naremore, "Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation," pp.7-8.
[17] Op. Cit., Andy Lowe, "The Brothers Grim," p.164.
[18] Ibid, p.163.

> Philip Marlowe is an adventurer as much as Robinson Crusoe or Ulysses or Ishmael, those battered examples of man's ingenuity, wisdom or endurance. With each new trial and tribulation, yet another of life's absurdities is revealed, an opportunity to triumph demonstrated.[19]

Ethan Coen's claim that *The Big Lebowski* follows the loose structure of a "wandering intrigue" certainly binds it to the style of Chandler, "his stories [involving] more than a touch of the meaninglessness of events that his detectives obsessively try to make sense of."[20] The Coens weave their film within the framework accustomed to the great detective writer, Jonathan Romney suggesting that it soon becomes clear that "we're in for a Raymond Chandler-style entertainment, a labyrinthine route followed solely for the diversions encountered along the way."[21] *The Big Lebowski* abides by an episodic structure, with a series of events casually connected by the Dude's attempts to receive compensation for his soiled rug. Along the journey he encounters pornographers, millionaires, a nymphomaniac, German nihilists, alternative artists and a further assortment of strange characters and situations.

In addition to Cain and Chandler, Hammett is one of the Twentieth century's key literary figures. Hammett took the genre of detective fiction beyond the act of puzzle solving and united it with episodic adventures fuelled by danger and violence. *Miller's Crossing* represents the most problematic of the Coen brothers' adaptations of crime fiction because it draws so heavily upon its source material—Hammett's *The Glass Key* and *Red Harvest*—yet still resists any assertion that it is singularly a derivation of this literature. *Blood Simple* is a different case because it draws on the spirit of Cain's works without really adapting the narrative or situations contained in his novels. Yet, with *Miller's Crossing* Joel and Ethan Coen utilise the structure and framework of Hammett's *Red Harvest* linking it to particular themes, characterisations and relationships

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[19] Leon Arden, "A Knock at the Backdoor of Art: The Entrance of Raymond Chandler," *Essays on Detective Fiction*, Ed. Bernard Benstock, MacMillan Press, London, 1983, p.52.
[20] Edward Margolies, *Which Way Did He Go?: The Private Eye in Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Chester Himes and Ross MacDonald*, Holmes & Meier, New York, 1982, p.39.
[21] Jonathan Romney, "In Praise of Goofing Off," *Sight and Sound*, May, 1998, p.38.

apparent in *The Glass Key*. Hammett's writings are often set in unnamed or fabricated cities. *Red Harvest* is set in the fictional metropolis of Personville, known colloquially by the town's inhabitants as *Poison*ville in view of the rampant corruption which has infected the community. The contaminated city of *Miller's Crossing* is typical of the corrupted town of Hammett's novels. In the Coens' film the narrative is wrapped tightly around Tom Reagan's (Gabriel Byrne) attempts to incite a gang war which will eventually consolidate and entrench his boss's political authority. Tom achieves this goal through a series of seemingly contrary actions which pit faction against faction; his behaviour eventually destroying the fabric of his enemy's regime. The concept of setting criminal against criminal and using their mutual suspicion as a means to cathartic destruction is drawn from *Red Harvest* in which the Continental Op uses the established distrust existing in Personville to eradicate the uncontrolled corruption. The Op contends: "Plans are all right sometimes... And sometimes just stirring things up is all right – if you're tough enough to survive, and keep your eyes open so you'll see what you want when it comes to the top."[22] And the idea of intentionally creating confusion is a crucial structuring technique by which *Miller's Crossing* is assembled.

Amir M. Karimi contends the "structure of James Cain's stories is usually such that tension and suspense are sustained not by mystery...but by what will happen next, how the relationship of the culprits deteriorates in suspicion and hatred, and how they are punished."[23] The eleventh chapter of Cain's novella *Double Indemnity* begins:

> I don't know when I decided to kill Phyllis. It seemed to me that ever since that night, somewhere in the back of my head I had known I would have to kill her, for what she knew about me, and because the

[22] Dashiell Hammett, *Complete Novels: Red Harvest, The Dain Curse, The Maltese Falcon, The Glass Key, The Thin Man*, The Library of America, New York, 1999, p.75.
[23] Amir M. Karimi, cited in Frank Krutnik, "Desire, Trangression and James M. Cain," *Screen*, 23.1, May/June, 1982, p.32.

> world isn't big enough for two people once they've got something like that on each other.[24]

This passage details Walter Huff's abrupt realisation that the woman who he has teamed with to swindle a fortune in insurance is taking him for a ride, the murder of her husband merely one step in an intricate plan of which Huff is only partly apprised. In Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the hard-bitten central character, Frank Chambers, drifts into the life of Cora Papadakis, assists in the murder of her husband, then, beset by doubts about her loyalty, denounces her to the authorities. This is essentially the driving force behind the narrative of *Blood Simple* in which doubt and mis-communication contributes to an atmosphere of confusion. When Visser (M. Emmett Walsh) guns down Julian Marty (Dan Hedaya) with Abby's (Frances McDormand) pistol, it is Ray (John Getz) who discovers the body and wrongly matches up all the pieces of the puzzle. As Larry E. Grimes astutely reckons "the characters are all trapped in private discourses," their inability to find awareness and understanding ultimately proves to be their undoing.[25] Ray, believing Abby is responsible for shooting Marty is clearly disturbed by what he presumes to be her indifference. Abby, who knows nothing about Marty's murder, begins to suspect the worst of Ray's behaviour, their doubts escalating into absolute distrust.

A further element carried directly over from the Cain stories is the representation of regurgitation. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* Frank describes his physical response to the sight of Cora: "I let everything come up...I wanted that woman so bad I couldn't even keep anything on my stomach."[26] In *Blood Simple*, Marty excuses himself from his desk and vomits in the bathroom after viewing what he believes are images of his dead wife and Ray. Later, in a prophetic dream of Abby's, Marty spews litres of blood as he collapses to the floor. And, as Ray attempts to dispose of the still living Marty, the latter regurgitates a mouth-full of blood onto Ray's shoulder. It is this blood stain which

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[24] James M. Cain, *Cain x 3: The Postman Always Rings Twice, Mildred Pierce, Double Indemnity*, With an Introduction by Tom Wolfe, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1969, p.440.
[25] Larry E. Grimes, "Shall these Bones Live? The Problem of Bodies in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Joel Coen's *Blood Simple*," *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Eds. Joel W. Martin & E. Conrad Jr., Westview, Boulder, 1995, p.27.

Abby glimpses later, sowing the seeds of doubts regarding her lover's integrity. Vomiting characters have become a trademark of the Coen brothers' work, nearly all their films containing this peculiar malady.

Several elements that the Coens borrowed from Cain for *Blood Simple* would find their way into many of their later films. The suspenseful scene in which Ray attempts to get Marty back into the car while a truck approaches on the highway is mirrored in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in which an approaching vehicle is witness to a drunken Nick being sick by the back door of his car. The nearing vehicle forestalls Frank's murder attempt; he is ready to bring a wrench down upon Nick's head on the quiet road when the set of headlights appear on the horizon.[27] Later, this device would be reapplied by the Coens in their Mid-Western murder film *Fargo* in which the brutal slaying of a policeman is interrupted by a similar set of headlights on similar stretch of desolate road. The influence of Cain in *Blood Simple* is utterly persuasive, evident in the structure, characters, and individual motifs. Yet, as much as *Blood Simple* is indebted to Cain's writing, genre, intertextuality and extra-textual elements prove just as important in the composition and nature of the film.

The distinctive language of *Miller's Crossing* is the most conspicuous feature that links Joel and Ethan Coen's film to the fiction of Hammett. The dialogue in *Miller's Crossing* is powerful, muscular, terse and brilliant, emulating the concentrated gangster-speak conspicuous in Hammett's literature. Much of the conversation is penetrated by rich jargon and flavourful slang that affords the language an almost poetic cadence and character. Naremore suggests that Hammett's narrative technique, which is rich in dialogue, is attuned to "making art out of vernacular."[28] Much of the actual dialogue of *Miller's Crossing* can be specifically drawn back to Hammett's novels. The catch-cry of *Miller's Crossing*—"What's the rumpus?"—finds voice in the character of the Continental Op in *Red Harvest*.[29] In *The Glass Key* Bernie Despain's moll describes herself as

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[26] Op. Cit., James M. Cain, *Cain x 3*, p.8.
[27] Ibid, pp.37-8.
[28] James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir and its Contexts*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p.50.
[29] Op. Cit., Dashiell Hammett, *Complete Novels*, p.8.

"the original Miss Jesus;"[30] Tom, in *Miller's Crossing*, ridicules Leo's conception of Verna (Marcia Gay Harden) using this very same phrase. The dialogue in *Miller's Crossing* is also drawn from other literary sources, and not as Josh Levine suggests, merely the invention of the brothers Coen.[31] The oft heard refrain "are you giving me the high hat?"—an accusation that one is being treated with insolence—is present in Cain's *Double Indemnity*.[32] Yet, most of the inspired dialogue of *Miller's Crossing* can be closely attributed to the writings of Hammett.

Tom is clearly a character based upon the heroes found in the works of Dashiell Hammett. The typical Hammett protagonists are "strong, silent men who have an acute sense of discipline."[33] Tom in *Miller's Crossing*, as played by Gabriel Byrne, is low-key, reserved, rarely offering his opinion or revealing his emotions unless absolutely necessary. Of Hammett's typical protagonists Edward Margolies writes "his tough heroes...were cynical, unswervingly devoted to their jobs, amoral, courageous, and seemingly impervious to emotions."[34] Despite being *Miller's Crossing*'s protagonist Tom remains essentially silent and largely out of sight in the opening moments of the film as Leo O'Bannion (Albert Finney) and the town's other unlawful power-broker, Caspar (Jon Polito), discuss the fate of a small-time grifter, Bernie Bernbaum (John Turturro), the axis upon which the narrative revolves. After the heated discussion, Caspar exits gracelessly indicating (with veiled threats) that a town war is imminent in view of Leo's obstinacy. Tom, choosing his words carefully, advises the preening Leo that he has made "a bad play." He goes on to voice what Leo is incapable of calculating: "Think about what protecting Bernie gets us. Think about what offending Caspar loses us." Leo replies: "Come on, Tommy, you know I don't like to think." And Tom suggests: "Yeah. Well, think about whether you should start." Tom is the brains behind Leo's operation, and as such he represents the heartless centre of *Miller's*

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[30] Ibid, p.604.
[31] Josh Levine, *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers*, ECW Press, Toronto, 2000, p.62.
[32] Op. Cit., James M. Cain, *Cain x 3*, p.401.
[33] James Naremore, "Dashiell Hammett and the Poetics of Hard-Boiled Detection," *Essays on Detective Fiction*, Ed. Bernard Benstock, MacMillan Press, London, 1983, p.52.
[34] Op. Cit., Edward Margolies, *Which Way Did He Go?*, p.17.

Crossing. Verna sums up the obviously Hammett inspired character: "That's you all over, Tom. A lie and no heart."

Tom shares with the protagonist of *The Glass Key*, Ned Beaumont, the burden of a swelling gambling debt. Both Ned and Tom are reluctant to relent and let their benefactors, respectively Paul Madvig and Leo, take care of their liabilities. Ned also rejects Paul's advice that he lay off of the gambling while he's on a "sour streak" by espousing his ability to withstand the consequences: "I can stand anything I've got to stand."[35] This intractable and fiercely individualistic attitude reflects clearly the ethos of both Ned and Tom, their commitment to their principles as much a flaw as a virtue. Tom, like Ned, will eventually lose everything because of this unyielding temperament. Tom and Ned share a devotion to their senior colleague, a dedication which in both cases leads to a kind of masochistic sacrifice. In *The Glass Key* Ned leaves Paul, disillusioned by the unscrupulous machinations of the political environment, taking Paul's woman, Janet Henry, with him. While Tom and Ned share many attributes, the torturous immolation Tom endures when he gives up both Leo and Verna is more in line with the self-sacrificing life of the nameless Continental Operative of *Red Harvest*. Naremore suggests Hammett's hero represents a "stoic masculine individualism, living by its wits and avoiding social, economic, and sexual entanglements," leading to attitudes which are "sometimes misogynistic and homophobic, and because of its hostility toward bourgeois marriage, it often results in latent homosexual narratives about male bonding."[36] Arguably this is precisely what *Miller's Crossing* is about. It is Leo's revelation to Tom of his intentions to marry Verna which precedes and then instigates the violent and catastrophic events of the narrative, events which culminate with a bonding so substantial between Leo and Tom that it must eventually become untenable. Margolies contends that in "the absence of anything else to believe in, the detectives [in Hammett] believe in their jobs to which they gladly sacrifice themselves and even their lovers."[37] Ultimately Tom indicates to Leo that he can

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[35] Op. Cit., Dashiell Hammett, *Complete Novels*, p.593.
[36] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir and its Contexts*, pp.52-3.
[37] Op. Cit., Edward Margolies, *Which Way Did He Go?*, p.27.

no longer work for him, providing the bitter conclusion to an already manifestly cynical film.

Many characters in *The Big Lebowski* represent what might be described as archetypal Raymond Chandler personnel: the Pasadena millionaire, his daughter the mature sophisticate, and the depraved and licentious young woman. Bunny (Tara Reid) is the nymphomaniacal trophy wife of the Coens' film, her equivalent might be the General's nubile daughter Carmen Sternwood in Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep*. Like Carmen, Bunny is plagued by threats of blackmail administered by pornographers. Bunny's wealthy husband (perhaps based on the wheelchair bound General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*) named Jeffrey Lebowski (a.k.a. the Big Lebowski) (David Huddleston), will eventually call upon the Dude to perform the role of detective in locating his missing spouse. The contrivance in *The Big Lebowski* is doubtful, a prevailing custom of many of Chandler's mysteries in which a straightforward case often turns into something quite divergent. In contrast to the principled, old-world General Sternwood, a figure with whom the jaded Philip Marlowe (the protagonist in most of Chandler's detective literature) could truly relate, the Big Lebowski is an irascible, unlikeable and arrogant autocrat with whom the Dude has no bond or empathy.

Although General Sternwood is amongst the most agreeable and resolute of characters in Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, it is often the case in the author's work that those who hold positions of power and authority in society are most likely to exploit that supremacy. Arden declares that amongst Chandler's favourite themes is "a hatred of the rich, and the influence they exert on the police to enforce not the law but the ground rules of special privilege."[38] An episode in the Coens' film directly relates this kind of exploitation of privilege. When the Malibu pornographer Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara) determines that the Dude has no information which will aid in the return of money owed to him, he drugs the amateur gumshoe and casts him into the arms of the local constabulary. Treehorn, by implication, has the corrupt and racist police chief of Malibu rough-up the Dude, with warnings to: "Stay out of Malibu, deadbeat! Keep your ugly fucking

[38] Op. Cit., Leon Arden, "A Knock at the Backdoor of Art: The Entrance of Raymond Chandler," p.80.

goldbricking ass out of my beach community!" This extreme advice, and the suggestion that the Dude doesn't belong to what the police chief deems a "nice quiet beach community" reflects a common concern of Chandler's writing. His novels explore the very tangible class animosity and resentment which runs through the L.A. community: "Chandler's class anger was more moral than political despite the fact that he used conventional symbols of social injustice – brutal police, corrupt officials, venal lawyers, and so on."[39] In Chandler's *The Long Good-Bye*, Philip Marlowe endures the unwarranted abuse of an equally megalomaniacal police chief. The episode actually concludes on a similar note to the scene in *The Big Lebowski*, with the police chief pitching a cup of coffee at his interviewee. Unfortunately for the Dude the cup hits him square in the forehead, but the more wily Marlowe, in Chandler's novel, dodges the hot coffee which is intended to scald his face: "The cup jerked but I beat it by going sideways out of the chair."[40] Like *Blood Simple*'s relationship to Cain, and *Miller's Crossing* association to Hammett, *The Big Lebowski* clearly finds its inspiration in the detective novels of Raymond Chandler.

By looking retrospectively to the *Roman Noir* writers Cain, Hammett and Chandler, and by revisiting familiar genres in addition to the conscious invocation of prior archetypes the Coens are looking backwards for inspiration. However, it is the postmodern approach of Joel and Ethan Coen, one which critiques the material and forms that are summoned, that grants their films an originality that unsettles their relationship to prior models. It is a criticism of the Coens' work that their postmodern techniques merely camouflage their inability to say anything new or original. Yet, it is clear that the films of the Coen brothers, while infused by the novels, films, genres and conventions of an older order, are indeed original in their treatment of this material. For Shane Danielsen the "Coens' genius is for homage: what originality they possess derives, for the most part, from the adroit manner in which they reinterpret their sources."[41] Danielsen here suggests a reverence the brothers maintain for their source material but also indicates the way they move beyond simple mimicry. *The Big Lebowski*, *Miller's Crossing* and

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[39] Op. Cit., Edward Margolies, *Which Way Did He Go?*, p.39.
[40] Raymond Chandler, *The Long Good-Bye*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1953, p.40.
[41] Shane Danielsen, "Arrested Adolescents," *The Weekend Australian: Review*, April 11, 1998, p.3.

Blood Simple each serve as important examples of the way in which the Coen brothers successfully negotiate the use and re-deployment of familiar sources and offer something new and original while operating within areas which are popular and traditional. By working within the styles or ideals associated with Hammett, Cain, and Chandler, the Coens are able to also subvert and undermine several of the components which are typical in the works of these authors.

As much as *Miller's Crossing* re-establishes Hammett and crime fiction conventions, the Coens seem interested in subverting the traditions, certified conventions and frameworks from which they are drawing inspiration. Their work is thriving with irony: theirs is a (post)modern take on classical texts and genres. Richard McKim views the Coen brothers as subverters of the sacred genres, suggesting their style is:

> pure esthetic and intellectual playtime on one level, but on another an irreverent and sometimes disquieting demonstration of how individuals, with all their intractable quirks and perversities, will always make mincemeat of the grand moral and cultured visions so dear to mid-century mainstreamers.[42]

Through the deep haze and corruption present in Hammett's novels—the intrinsic nature of contamination in the town of Personville ("Poisonville") in *Red Harvest* or the affliction of venality in the respected sector of society in *The Glass Key*—justice is always met in a conventional sense. In the former the corruptive forces in Personville self-destruct under the guidance of the Continental Op and in *The Glass Key* the senator is exposed as the murderer of his son. The heroes in both cases—the Op in *Red Harvest* and Ned in *The Glass Key*—while hardly uncontaminated, are for the most part worthy and moral characters. Like his Hammett counterparts, Tom in *Miller's Crossing* corrects the disturbing situations which develop and succeeds in returning the town to the status quo. Yet, in achieving this situation Tom is culpable of murdering men in cold blood (killing Bernie and engineering the death of Caspar and The Dane). In *Miller's Crossing* the justice attained is executed with more cynicism and amorality than anything

witnessed in Hammett. Caspar is preoccupied by issues of ethics throughout the film, endlessly speculating on the nature of decisions and the consequences of disobeying strict ethical principles. But in *Miller's Crossing* there exists no rigid ethical foundation, or moral grounding, only a blind loyalty Tom has for Leo which, it seems, the Coens are anxious to quietly celebrate.

With *Blood Simple*, Joel and Ethan Coen explore the basic geometry of the Cain novel but still manage to gently augment the nature of relations between these typical characters. The geometrical relationship in both *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* of husband, wife and lover is directly recreated in *Blood Simple*; Julian Marty is married to Abby who, in the film's opening moments, begins a relationship with Ray. Nick Papadakis, his wife Cora, and drifter Frank are the equivalents found in Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The Greek Nick, like Marty (who is also Greek), is a small business operator, the former managing a road-side diner, Marty the owner of a road-side bar. Yet, while the characters superficially mirror each other, they exhibit tellingly distinct characteristics. Nick, in Cain's novella, is an ignorant fool, blissfully unaware of his wife's deceit as he focusses his attention on improving his business. Marty, on the other hand, is a sleazy womaniser; his open shirt, gold jewellery and oiled hair is a parody of the immigrant stereotype. Where Nick is unaware of Cora's betrayal, Marty is aware of Abby's infidelity. In fact, Marty is so suspicious he hires a private investigator to follow Abby even before her adulterous liaison with Ray commences. Where *Blood Simple* is ostensibly a Cain film, its prominent diversions from some typical Cain motifs emphasises the futile search for a faithful relationship.

The Coens' *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big Lebowski* reject any notion of fidelity to any single source not merely because straightforward models are non-existent but also because their adaptations—or re-creations to be more accurate—are not intended to be blindly faithful to any precursor text or style. These films are persuaded in several directions by a number of different influences. Analysing the method by which the elements of a text or an author's style is deployed in a new text is invaluable, yet it is not a measure of the quality

[42] Richard McKim, "*Miller's Crossing*," *Cineaste*, 18.2, 1991, p.45.

or success of that new work. The Coens, by denying a single model source, illustrate a new approach to adaptations and remakes. These films emphasise the effect of various inspirations beyond the identified source/s, highlighting the competing influences, generic conventions and relevant intertexts that permeate all adaptations.

Genre

As well as the authors that influence *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big Lebowski*, Joel and Ethan Coen's films are also beholden to exploring the dynamics of their genres. This can manifest itself as a faithful assembly of familiar motifs and genre tropes or an active subversion of their usual positioning within a text, reconstructing the genre by which these films are defined. *Blood Simple* envisions and reconstructs a *film noir* structure and style, *Miller's Crossing* owes its design to *film noir* but reassembles elements of the gangster genre in new and novel ways, and finally, *The Big Lebowski* is clearly contrived within the constructs of the private detective genre while utilising characters and situations which subvert the assertions and convictions most often associated with that field of fiction.

Stam identifies the importance of genre in adaptation theory stating that issues of generic interplay demand that questions be asked such as "what generic intertexts are invoked by the source novel? and which by the filmic adaptation? [and] which generic signals are picked up and which are ignored?"[43] Joel and Ethan Coen's first film receives its title from a passage in Hammett's *Red Harvest*. "Blood simple" describes a state of being in which those involved in murder or similar misdeeds become weak-minded due to pressured circumstances, anxiety and doubt. *Blood Simple* draws on the rich vein of crime fiction and its conventions to develop a narrative which both features and chalienges the genre. Basic conventions of murder, greed, lust and betrayal function throughout, while the archetypal characters of private investigator, adulterous wife, vengeful husband and slick drifter are all present. These crime fiction conventions originate from canonical texts. One scene in *Blood Simple* in particular is clearly

appropriated from one of Cain's contemporary fiction writers. The moment in *Blood Simple* when Abby and Ray are besieged by gunfire from an unseen sniper across the street is drawn specifically from Hammett's *Red Harvest*. In the novel, the Continental Op is pinned to the floor of his hotel room by the anonymous gunman, the light in the room illuminating the sniper's target. In his desperation the Op finds a bible nearby and throws it at the globe knocking it free and casting his residence into darkness.[44] The final sequence of *Blood Simple* operates similarly as Visser waits with a rifle in the building across the way from Abby's new apartment. Suddenly, Visser fires a shot which crashes through the large studio-window and mortally wounds Ray. Abby, paralysed by fear, for a moment appears stunned in the gleaming light as the cross-hairs of Visser's rifle-site are trained on her head. Abby dives to the floor at the last moment, soon realising that the light in her room makes her situation perilous. She removes a shoe and throws it at the globe but it remains intact, her second shoe then knocks the globe clear and the room is thrown into darkness. Although *Blood Simple* draws heavily on James Cain, and might be described as both a Cain film and a Cain adaptation, the brothers are not confined to drawing inspiration from a single text or model but instead look to the broader arena of crime fiction.

John G. Cawelti submits that genres are in a state of flux and their frameworks are modernised when "the elements of a conventional popular genre [are set] in an altered context, thereby making us perceive these traditional forms in new ways."[45] The Coens' films readily engage with identifiable genres as a means of disrupting their usual formalities and seeking out new and fresh expressions within well-worn frameworks. The way in which Jeff Bridges' character is organised in *The Big Lebowski* owes a great deal to the subversion of the conventional detective-cum-knight epitomised by Chandler's Philip Marlowe. And the Coen brothers also seem acutely aware of Jeff Bridges' persona and how this invites certain expectations which also affect the character's composition. Bridges declared: "I was born to play the Dude. I understand the man inside

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[43] Op. Cit., Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," p.67.
[44] Op. Cit., James M. Cain, *Cain x 3*, p.58.
[45] John G. Cawelti, "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," ***Film Genre Reader II***, Ed. Barry Keith Grant, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995, p.235.

out."[46] *The Big Lebowski* is clearly derivative of Chandler's work but also enlists the wider detective fiction genre as an influence. It also engages with other films which have sought to undermine, subvert or expand upon the detective genre such as *Cutter's Way* (Passer, 1981) and *The Long Goodbye* (Altman, 1973). The influences are so many that drawing a distinct line of inspiration can be perilous. *The Big Lebowski* can be perceived as a Chandler adaptation, a remake of Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, an ironic commentary on the detective genre, or even a Jeff Bridges film.

The Dude is sprung into action in *The Big Lebowski* when his valued rug is ruined by a pair of heavies who peculiarly mistake the Dude for a millionaire with the same name. This is the trigger for the Dude's picaresque pursuit of compensation, a quest which draws him into contact with various and increasingly bizarre characters. Cawelti, speaking of the detective genre, suggests that "[w]hatever his initial impetus to action, the detective soon finds himself enmeshed in a very complex conspiracy involving a number of people from different spheres of society."[47] The Dude encounters disparate characters ranging from Los Angeles sophisticates to suburban teenage brats to amateur bowlers, one of whom is a convicted pederast. Obviously, *The Big Lebowski* is not a traditional private-eye text: the central figure is a layabout, drug-addled slacker who has no interest in justice and truth. Yet, genre manifests itself in may ways, including reworkings, which seek to manipulate and alter familiar forms. The clash that exists between the traditional conventions of the fixed genre and the counter or anomalous characters and atypical circumstances evident in a reworking, contributes to the ironic reconfiguration of the genre which takes the conventional forms in new and original directions. Additionally, these reworkings provide yet another factor which confuses the implied linear relationship between source material and adaptation.

Miller's Crossing seems to draw on the same conventions of crime fiction that characterised Hammett's writing. The characters in *Miller's Crossing* are

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[46] James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, B.T. Batsford, London, 2000, p.134.
[47] Op. Cit., John G. Cawelti, "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," p.229.

fitted out in dark hats, carry guns in long overcoats and speak of women as "twists" and "dames." The familiarity of these traditions provides a framework in which to situate the expectations of the audience. Sarah Berry notes that "[i]conography is thus a palette of familiar motifs that can be recombined creatively (or ironically) in ways that provide both familiarity and variety."[48] *Miller's Crossing* is set within a virulently corrupt world fuelled by amorality and betrayal. This environment mimics that which is depicted in Hammett's novels but is also relevant to the kinds of settings and themes associated both with hard-boiled crime fiction and most notably with *film noir*. Paul Schrader argues that *film noir* is responsible for the overthrow of many traditions, the "small-time gangster has now made it big and sits in the mayor's chair, the private eye has quit the police force in disgust, and the young heroine, sick of going along for the ride, is taking others for a ride."[49] *Film noir* is thus viewed as a reconfiguration of the kinds of crime fiction conventions typically evident in Hammett's novels.

Miller's Crossing typifies this *film noir* paradigm with its distinct absence of adequate or uncorrupted law, a perverse inadequacy in the justice system and its exploration of an environment where only the tough of mind and body hold up. In one sequence Leo negates two would be assassins in his home and then destroys the getaway car, killing more assailants. Leo is lying on his bed listening to a recording of the Irish ballad "Danny Boy" when two faceless gunman working for Caspar enter his house killing a guard. Smoke from an ensuing fire (sparked by the dead sentry's cigarette) filters through the floorboards of Leo's upstairs bedroom alerting him to the disturbance. In a quick series of agile moves Leo kills one assassin with his revolver and then the other with the first man's Tommy-gun. This is all choreographed to the rises and peaks of the music, the ballad transforming from diegetic to swelling non-diegetic score as Leo walks down the street with the Tommy-gun in hand firing endless rounds into the getaway car. While there is no equivalent to this scene in any of Hammett's works it does correspond to the numerous scraps and violent confrontations involving the Continental Op in *Red Harvest* in which physical toughness and a sure-head

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[48] Sarah Berry, "Genre," *A Companion to Film Theory*, Eds. Robert Stam & Toby Miller, Blackwell, Malden, Mass., 1999, pp.32-33.
[49] Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," *Film Genre Reader II*, Ed. Barry Keith Grant, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995, p.221.

enables the hero to triumph over lesser opponents. Katherine M. Restaino declares that the "[t]he violence of the gangster novel becomes especially evident, perhaps even best described as choreographed, in the gangster movie."[50] *Miller's Crossing* skirts several genres but each is clearly influential in the structure of the text and the nature of the adaptation. The Coen brothers' film owes as much to genre as the Hammett texts to which some critics claim it owes an obligatory credit.

R. Barton Palmer observes that a subversive attitude to genre is not achieved merely through citation and reiteration of generic convention: "If this text is repetitive, generic, conventional, then to be 'valuable' it must re-work and transform these inherited elements into something different and oppositional."[51] Palmer notes that much of the criticism surrounding *Blood Simple* at the time of its release was concentrated around the Coen brothers' attention to convention. Palmer quotes this passage from Kenneth Geist's review of *Blood Simple* in *Films In Review*:

> *Blood Simple* is yet another variation on the situation and characters of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*...In this version, however, the illicit lovers' passion is perfunctory rather than torrid, the wife is not perfidious to her lover, and the detective is a murderous rogue.[52]

Palmer keenly observes the contradictions of Geist's assessment; Geist has suggested that *Blood Simple* is *yet another* variation on Cain's basic themes but then goes on to catalogue very specific differences and alterations in character and theme. In noting this Palmer discovers that these specific alterations and revisions are particularly interesting to his analysis of *Blood Simple* and its relationship to genre. Geist's error correlates with similar misconceptions which are often apparent in the analysis of adaptations, analysis which is based upon the false premise that the "original" model is perfect and untouchable. That which is

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[50] Katherine M. Restaino, "The Poetics of Dashiell Hammett," *The Detective in American Fiction, Film, and Television*, Eds. Jerome H. Delamater & Ruth Prigozy, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1998, p.107.
[51] R. Barton Palmer, "*Blood Simple*: Defining the Commercial / Independent Text," *Persistence of Vision*, 6, Summer, 1988, p.14.

changed, altered, and varied is just as significant as that which is repeated, reiterated and recreated.

If reproduction or duplication were to exist as the only important estimations of quality in adaptation, then studies would revert to the tired and fruitless examination of narrative and character transference between two distinct media. It is the changes in conventions, the reworking of established genres and the dissonance between texts that enables a critical annotation. For example, Geist in the previous passage, has decried the characterisation the Coens have wrought upon the private detective in *Blood Simple*. In crime fiction this character has traditionally represented order and control, exemplified by the insurance investigator Keyes in Cain's *Double Indemnity*. Yet, Visser, the private eye of *Blood Simple*, is clearly the most reprehensible and appalling character in the film. He is a trashy grifter, wearing a garish yellow suit which reflects his gnarled immorality, clearly expressed in his professional ethos: "If the pay's right, I'll do it." Marty associates him with a low-living animal: "If I need you I'll know what rock to turn over." The private investigator who has traditionally been a symbol of morality and justice in crime fiction has undergone a pointed degeneration. In *Blood Simple* the Coens turn the convention on its head and perhaps reflect a new generation's disillusionment with traditional domains of virtue and justice. Robert P. Kolker demonstrates how Martin Scorsese achieves a similar representation of the readjustment of the moral parameters in his remake of *Cape Fear* (Thompson, 1961; Scorsese, 1991). According to Kolker, "Scorsese is attempting to refashion the moral landscape of the original film" by implicating the morally "right" character of Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte) in a series of immoral and illegal acts, such as concealing evidence in the court trial of Max Cady (Robert De Niro), compromising the clear cut good and bad dynamic evident in the original film.[53] Here, as with *Blood Simple*, the original text and the surrounding conventions offer traditional elements which can be adapted faithfully or extended, augmented and transformed.

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[52] Ibid, p.13.

[53] Robert P. Kolker, "Recalculating the Hitchcock Formula," *Play it again, Sam: retakes on remakes*, Eds. Andrew Horton & Stuart Y. McDougal, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, pp.42-43.

The structuring of *Miller's Crossing* relies heavily on the considered and exquisite management of repetitions of events, dialogue, settings and situations, affecting its relationship to Hammett. *Red Harvest* is about Personville's rival factions aspiring to greater power; *The Glass Key* is about rival political organisations attempting to win office. *Miller's Crossing* also focusses on two competing forces, and both rival organisations hold sway for a period. The first half of the film details Leo's attempts to maintain power and crush the glory-seeking Caspar. Leo tells him: "You're exactly as big as I let you be and no bigger and don't forget it. Ever." Leo, with the Mayor and the Police Chief in his pocket, begins a pointed destruction of Caspar's gambling and liquor joints. Yet, when Leo loses his tenuous grip on the control of the city Caspar takes over. When Tom walks into Caspar's office in the film's second half, he interrupts a meeting involving Caspar, the Mayor and the Chief of Police. The shot, character positions and camera's perspective mirrors an earlier scene when Leo was meeting with these same two civic officials. Now Caspar has control of the corrupt Mayor and Chief and he sets out to obliterate Leo's establishments in very much the same fashion in which his own were destroyed. Many of the moments from the text's first half are then replayed with Caspar now in charge. *Miller's Crossing* suggests that the corrupt officials and the gangster kingpins are much the same regardless of who they are. Their reigns are borne on the destruction of the other faction, a state where the existence of one dominant power and one weaker power provides stability and balance. This equilibrium is mirrored in the recurring structure of the film. This is an example of the Coens' ironic parody of crime fiction, a genre which tends to represent two worlds, one out of control and one in control, the latter only possible when the criminals and corruption of the former are conquered. *Miller's Crossing* is very much a genre film, but with it the Coen brothers seek to undermine the very traditions and conventions that identify it as such.

Similarly, *The Big Lebowski* may loosely adhere to the structures of the detective narrative, but the Dude is by no means a detective. He may adopt some of the terminology and transfer it into his conversation and try to deconstruct situations in the hope that they may reveal clues to the mystery, but he fails to convince as a private-eye. When Jackie Treehorn cheerily interrogates the Dude

he is interrupted by an enigmatic telephone call which the Dude presumes may offer clues to the whereabouts of Bunny. The close-up of the Dude's inquisitive eyes, matched to Jackie fervently scribbling a message on the paper pad by the phone, indicates the notation may prove crucial to resolving the mystery of Bunny's disappearance. Jackie presently leaves the room and the Dude jumps into action using a pencil to shade in the following page on the pad in an attempt to reveal the contents of the preceding message. To the bewilderment of the Dude, instead of a coded message or perhaps an important address, a rather crude caricature of a man with a giant erection is revealed. Again, the Coens here are undermining the very common conventions of the genre. In Chandler's *The Long Good-Bye* the technique of deciphering a message from a missing page using the imprint of the following page is applied, more successfully, by a policeman searching for signs of Terry Lennox's location. He finds an impression of Marlowe's phone number alerting him to the private-eye's involvement in the flight of the absconding suspect.[54] The Coens' parody of this generic motif of detection depends on a challenging of expectations as an alternative conclusion is applied to a familiar convention. The Dude's technique is drawn directly from the pulp fiction which defines the genre and creates the conventions and as such is utterly useless in the "real" world of *The Big Lebowski*. The Coens parody the genre by undermining the typical outcome of a conventional genre trope in manner similar, though more muted, to that observed in the spoofs of Mel Brooks. As with Brooks, the Coens challenge the traditions of popular narrative forms by exposing them to absurd or ultra-realistic conceptions that invalidate or expose the short-cuts that are common to particular genre representations.

Late in *The Big Lebowski*, after a series of incidents which has severely tested the hero's patience, the Dude approaches a blue Volkswagon, a vehicle which has been following his every move for a number of days. This in itself is an identifiable convention of the detective/mystery genre: the following car, its anonymous occupants concealing a hidden motive, all elements that add to the narrative's intrigue. The Dude accosts the car's owner who is revealed to be a "real" private detective, Da Fino (Jon Polito). The Dude demands to know what the detective is doing following him. Da Fino responds with the explanation that,

[54] Op. Cit., Raymond Chandler, *The Long Good-Bye*, p.36.

like the Dude, he is a "brother shamus." The perplexed Dude responds: "What, like an Irish Monk?" illustrating a wave of confusion which permeates the two characters' meeting. It is soon ascertained that Bunny Lebowski is actually Fawn Knutsen, and the detective has been charged with returning the young woman to the parents from whom she ran away. Da Fino explains to the Dude that he has followed him in the belief he would be led to Bunny. The absurdity of the meeting derives from Da Fino's honest conviction that an unemployed doper is a private investigator. This scene is an illustration of the irony in the text in which the aimless character of the Dude, who is unmistakably not a detective, is placed in the middle of a private-eye film. Joel Coen may suggest it is not an exact remounting of the genre: "of course, it's not a private eye movie. We wanted to use those conventions, but without being too literal."[55] However, it *is* very much a detective film as it hits upon so many of that genre's conventions so deliberately. *The Big Lebowski* is both a celebration and subversion of the detective genre, connecting it to other texts like Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, Arthur Penn's *Night Moves* (1975) and *Cutter's Way* which each explore the limits of the detective film's traditions.

Blood Simple to some extent is a more reverent conception of genre in its representation of a neo-noir framework. Popular through the 1980s, neo-noir represents a modernisation of the conventions of *film noir*; evident in such texts as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Rafelson, 1981), *Against All Odds* (Hackford, 1984) and *Body Heat* (Kasdan, 1981). Kasdan's *Body Heat* is a salient example which shares with *Blood Simple* a strong derivation with past representations as well as Cain's writing. John Orr proposes that Kasden's film, an indirect reworking of Cain's novels, is in fact a premier adaptation which far surpasses more traditional attempts at adapting Cain, specifically in relation to both Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and Tay Garnett's 1946 version of that same novella. Orr argues that *Body Heat* more appropriately captures the flavour of Cain's literature, remarking on its connections to *Double Indemnity*. Yet he also notes "Kasdan's highly erotic movie has self-conscious echoes of the

[55] Michel Ciment & Hubert Niogret, "The Logic of Soft Drugs," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.167.

whole noir history and uncannily evokes the forties at every juncture."[56] With *Blood Simple* the Coens exhibit a similar understanding and awareness of the *film noir* genre. *Blood Simple* solicits many of the semantic components of *film noir* with its dark and seedy setting, nefarious activities, explicit violence and low-life characters. But as Palmer notes, *Blood Simple* abides by the conventions of New Hollywood modernism as a text that is self-conscious and interpretive particularly in respect to issues of genre.[57] The reception of *Blood Simple* as an adaptation is heavily influenced by the expectations that the source material and its generic framework encourage from the audience. Genres organise reading practices as much as they organise texts, indicating to the viewer the kind of experiences to anticipate.

Cain's novels, like those of Chandler, most often find their settings somewhere within the state of California. *Film noir*, with few exceptions, is most often set within an urban environment: the narrow streets of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (Preminger, 1950) or the darkened London alleys of *Night and the City* (Dassin, 1950) are precise metaphors for city as urban jungle. The Coens buck both trends by locating *Blood Simple* within the rural regions of a Texas road-side bar and the nearby suburban district. The reasoning, Ethan Coen suggests, is "your classic *film noir* has a real urban feel, and we wanted something different."[58] The desire to subvert and to challenge accepted traditions is as much a factor in the construction of *Blood Simple* as any attention to faithfully adapting Cain's style. Yet, the use of Texas as a setting seems to agree with Cain's concerns. Joyce Carol Oates proposes the moral environment of Cain's novels is such that:

> one understands how barren, how stripped and bizarre this Western landscape has become. It is as if the world extends no farther than the radius of one's desire... To be successful, such narrowly-conceived art

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[56] John Orr, "Introduction: Proust, the Movie," *Cinema and Fiction: New Modes of Adapting, 1950-1990*, Eds. John Orr & Colin Nicholson, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1992, p.6.
[57] Op. Cit., R. Barton Palmer, "*Blood Simple*: Defining the Commercial / Independent Text," p.13.
[58] Hal Hinson, "Bloodlines," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.35, (Italics in original).

> must blot out what landscape it cannot cover; hence the blurred surrealistic backgrounds of the successful Cain novels.[59]

With *Blood Simple* Joel and Ethan Coen develop a similarly surreal environment, perhaps best evident in the empty plots of land in which Ray buries the not-yet-dead Marty. The entire sequence is played out in a funereal silence, the only voice is that heard on the car radio which is picking up the late-night pontificating of a radio-evangelist. When Ray belatedly realises that Marty is still alive he brings the car to a screeching halt and dashes into the field by the side of the road. The sequence, from the point in which Ray puts Marty into his car to his shovel violently pounding the earth above the entombed Marty, lasts almost ten screen minutes and plays out in relative silence. The barren landscapes apparent throughout *Blood Simple* not only reflect the psychology of the characters but also take into account the limited budget of the film.

Blood Simple is a low budget, self-made, community-funded enterprise, primarily financed by a conglomerate of Minnesotan businessmen. It was the Coens' first film, and focussing on Cain was an astute decision as his stripped-down style and to-the-point dialogue meshed cooperatively with the economics and limitations of first-time filmmaking. That the brothers chose to construct their first film within the conventions of *film noir* (*Blood Simple* is technically neo-noir, but the conventions are largely interchangeable) befits the limitations imposed by their independently financed situation. In his seminal essay on *film noir* Paul Schrader asserts that the genre/movement is ideally suited to the low-budget B movie, and many of the best examples of noir are B films.[60] This contention is clearly epitomised by the modest production values in films such as *Detour* (Ulmer, 1945), *The Narrow Margin* (Fleischer, 1952) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955). The Coens' decision to work within the confines of the noir tradition may have been as much an economic consideration as an artistic decision, demonstrating how significant financial factors are in influencing the nature of an adaptation. Also, the brothers regarded a genre film as easier to sell to

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[59] Joyce Carol Oates, "Man Under Sentence of Death: The Novels of James M. Cain," *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, Ed. David Madden, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1968, p.111-2.
[60] Op. Cit., Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," p.225.

distributors, eschewing the artistic for the practical.[61] Yet, employing a genre to shape and format a film need not mean that the text simply revisits familiar material; these practices and conventions are just as often applied to texts which challenge the limitations and traditions of established frameworks.

Whereas Texas is integral to the design and conception of *Blood Simple*, Los Angeles is fundamental to *The Big Lebowski*. Early in the film the Dude encounters the millionaire's richly-tanned trophy wife, Bunny, lounging by the pool. Her boyfriend and co-actor in the Jackie Treehorn produced sex film "Logjammin'" is floating on a lilo in the water, passed out, an empty bottle of Jack Daniels floating nearby. These images are quintessentially Californian: sunny days, the idle rich, excess, image, surfaces. The types represented in *The Big Lebowski* cannot exist anywhere else but in a sun-soaked land of absolute nonchalance and surreal juxtapositions. The setting of L.A. draws the Coen's' film back to its inspiration in Chandler whose novels were almost exclusively situated in L.A., his "encyclopaedic knowledge of Los Angeles, the evocation of its climate and the diverse elements of its society...so excellently drawn."[62] In Chandler's *The Long Good-Bye* one of the peripheral characters, Howard Spencer, braces against the hedonistic constitution of L.A. – "There's nothing here but one great big suntanned hangover."[63] Setting and location play as much a part in shaping an adaptation as references to the original material. Lesley Stern argues this very point in relation to Amy Heckerling's 1995 teen-film *Clueless*. Stern suggests that Heckerling remakes Los Angeles as much as adapts Jane Austen's *Emma*, contending that L.A. is not simply an imitation of the Highbury depicted in Austen's novel but rather "an intertextual site spun by the movies, tv series, MTV, and a variety of remakes and adaptations."[64] Stern here is identifying the richly varied influences that come from within, and from outside, the source material.

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[61] Op. Cit., Josh Levine, *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers*, p.13.
[62] Op. Cit., Leon Arden, "A Knock at the Backdoor of Art: The Entrance of Raymond Chandler," p.79-80.
[63] Op. Cit., Raymond Chandler, *The Long Good-Bye*, p.250.
[64] Lesley Stern, "Emma in Los Angeles: Remaking the Book and the City," *Film Adaptation*, Ed. James Naremore, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2000, p.225.

The Big Lebowski, like *Clueless*, is a film that trades in on the image of Los Angeles as much as it draws from its source material. Ethan Coen noted that Chandler's narratives were as much about L.A. and that his characters were all emblematic in one way or another of that city.[65] In *The Big Lebowski* the Dude is representative of the lazy slacker, Donny (Steve Buscemi) is the ageing surfer, Treehorn the suave lounge lizard from Malibu and Walter (John Goodman) the suburban commando. Los Angeles is peculiarly suited to the film's wandering narrative, with many classes and diverse districts creating a unique community. In *L.A. Confidential* (Hanson, 1997), itself an adaptation of a detective novel by James Ellroy, all classes and areas of society are examined, from the upper-crust corruptor Pierce Morehouse Patchett (David Strathairn), sleazy expose artist Hudgens (Danny De Vito), corrupt police chief Smith (James Cromwell), and movie stars all the way down to destitute drug peddlers and rapists. It is this idea of such disparate elements existing together in an uneasy amalgam which makes Los Angeles such a vital region for exploration. In the *The Big Lebowski* many aspects of this divergent society are represented.

Most of Joel and Ethan Coen's film have utilised the conventions of a specific genre to establish an ironic interplay which celebrates and deconstructs the frameworks that they work within. *Miller's Crossing*, while adopting similar ideas of genre reworking, is a unique case because identifying the appropriate genre is problematic. The iconography of long grey overcoats, dark fedora hats, rain-swept streets, Tommy-guns and gangland warfare seems to suggest the gangster film. Emanuel Levy argues that the reference to the gangster genre is "excessive" as the Coens "show-off" their familiarity with the genre's traditions.[66] But *Miller's Crossing* does not follow the typical narrative of *Scarface* (Hawks, 1931; De Palma, 1981), *The Godfather Parts I, II, III* (Coppola, 1972; 74; 91) *Little Caeser* (LeRoy, 1930) or *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1991) in which a small-time hood, or newly arrived immigrant, meteorically rises to a position of power in the underworld, generally inviting a fall of similar magnitude. The Hammett novels from which *Miller's Crossing* is adapted suggest a mixture of detective genre (the

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[65] David Gritten, "Brothers in Film: An Interview with Ethan and Joel Coen," *Creative Screenwriting*, 6.1, Jan/Feb, 1999, p.56.
[66] Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, New York University Press, New York, 1999, p.225.

quest to solve a mystery) and hard-boiled crime fiction (the focus on the underworld milieu, violence and nefarious behaviour). Kent Jones submits that *Miller's Crossing* is, like the Coens' later *The Big Lebowski*, a "shaggy-detective story," the two films sharing narratives that "are actually character studies of tired men whose minds are working over time, spinning vast intrigues out of thin air and finally ending up exactly where they started."[67] Yet, *Miller's Crossing* is less like the random and rambling events of *The Big Lebowski*, its narrative drawn so tightly and so deliberately that it almost seems bound to rupture. In fact, the narrative and structure of *Miller's Crossing* is one of the film's most brilliant and appealing features; an important factor which undermines accusations that it is simply a genre rehash.

Miller's Crossing opened commercially in a period which saw the release of *The Godfather Part III* and Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, leading to a situation in which this trio of films was often united by the media as a revival of the gangster genre. The opening scene of *Miller's Crossing* reworks the opening moments of *The Godfather*. In the Coens' film the camera pulls back from the initial close-up to reveal a stereotypical immigrant character—oiled hair and pencil moustache—asking for vengeance and seeking justice from the local crime boss. The connection to Coppola's seminal gangster saga is made plaintively clear in which a similar opening situates a poor undertaker, newly arrived in America, requesting that Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) organise an appropriately vengeful response to the rape and beating of his daughter. In *Miller's Crossing* the request for vengeance comes from Caspar and it is refused by Leo, who sees it more as a challenge to authority than a request for assistance. Edward Mitchell argues that the gangster in fiction is the character who dresses up, who aspires toward a greater power in the community with determination and self-glorification.[68] Caspar, with his stereotypical presentation, strong use of street-patter, delusions of grandeur and desire to move up in the world is perhaps the only true gangster figure of *Miller's Crossing*. Yet, *Miller's Crossing* is about

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[67] Kent Jones, "Airtight," *Film Comment*, Nov/Dec, 2000, p.48.
[68] Edward Mitchell, "Apes and Essences: Some Sources of Significance in the American Gangster Film," *Film Genre Reader II*, Ed. Barry Keith Grant, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995, p.208.

Tom Reagan and his small-time goals and personal quest to protect the position that his boss holds.

Where the first scene of *Miller's Crossing* recalls the opening moment of *The Godfather*, the Coen brothers' film also seeks to parody this movie's themes and concerns. *Miller's Crossing* is not the tragic drama of the rise and fall of the immigrant gangster in America. Rather, it views the phenomenon from the other side of the coin. It is not Caspar who is the film's chief protagonist or emotional pivot but Tom, a loner with few material ambitions. The ethnicities in *Miller's Crossing* also slightly subvert the gangster film tradition. Most often the crime film has associated the criminal organisation loosely with the Mafia and then in turn the characters are often of Italian descent, evinced in *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*. In Joel and Ethan Coen's film Caspar is the only Italian character, whereas Tom and Leo are Irish, and Bernie and his sister Verna are Jewish. The homosexual triangle between Bernie, Mink (Steve Buscemi) and Eddie Dane (J. E. Freedman) is a further subversion of a genre and tradition in crime fiction which generally relies on the machismo and sex-appeal of the virile heterosexual. Yet, the homosexual implication does touch upon some important antecedents which have explored similar issues; namely Bernardo Bertolucci's *Il Conformista* (1970) in which the chief protagonist presumes that a life of violence will subvert his homosexuality. The colour design of the Coens' film mimics that of Bertolucci's, favouring dark brown hues and autumnal shades. Also, the contention in *Miller's Crossing* of further perversities finds representation in the implied sexual relationship between Bernie and his sister Verna, the former suggesting that Verna "even tried to teach [him] a thing or two about bed artistry." The implication of incestuous relations recalls Howard Hawks' *Scarface* in which the verbal exchanges between Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) and his sister Cesca (Ann Dvorak) hint at a relationship than runs deeper than traditional sibling affection.

The links that the Coen brothers' film has to these canonical gangster texts—*Scarface* through to *The Godfather* saga and then *Goodfellas*—in addition to the themes and subjects of Hammett's writing are important to the nature of this and many other film adaptations. These are important issues because they

acknowledge the instrumental function that genre plays in the construction of a text based upon an antecedent model, noting that the model is not alone in providing material for reconstruction. For Stam, adapting a novel to film will:

> amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform...according to the protocols of a distinct medium, absorbing and altering the genres and intertexts through the grids of ambient discourses and ideologies, and as mediated by a series of filters: studio style, ideological fashion, political constraints, auteurist predilections, charismatic stars, economic advantage or disadvantage, and evolving technology.[69]

Taking one of Stam's filters—the importance of charismatic stars—and applying it to *Miller's Crossing* yields distinct results. Joel and Ethan Coen's film is influenced as much by the casting of Gabriel Byrne as Tom as any reference to Hammett's heroes. The Continental Op of *The Glass Key* is middle-aged, overweight and short. The casting of Byrne allows the psychological assurance, the self-confidence and the icy demeanour of the lead character to be physically reproduced in the sturdy and unruffled presence of Byrne.

Likewise, *Blood Simple* subverts its relationship to Cain by challenging the limitations and traditions of *film noir*. In his analysis of Cain's work Frank Krutnik notes that law is fundamental to both Cain and *film noir* but is often absent as a punishing agent in New American cinema.[70] The presence of various forms of order is crucial to Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*, the latter employing Keyes as the novel's moral barometer. The detective in *Blood Simple*, Visser, is the antithesis of order and control. Visser is the most disgusting character in *Blood Simple*, his whining and wheezing hiss-like voice links him to the most base of reptiles. *Blood Simple* also shuns the traditional characterisation of the femme fatale intrinsic to the conventions of *film noir* and apparent in Cain's novels. Frances McDormand's Abby is a bystander to the crooked scheming which takes place in *Blood Simple*. In comparison to Cora (Lana Turner) of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and Phyllis (Barbara

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[69] Op. Cit., Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," pp.68-9.
[70] Frank Krutnik, "Desire, Transgression and James M. Cain," *Screen*, 23.1, May/June, 1982, p.44.

Stanwyck) of *Double Indemnity*, McDormand's character is notably bland. *Film noir* established the femme fatale character as a kind of expression of the emasculation of post-war America. *Blood Simple* is the product of another time in which such cultural factors are less evident, perhaps best reflected in the largely passionless relationship between Abby and Ray. McFarlane astutely observes that a "film is not merely (perhaps not even primarily) an adaptation; it is also a film of its time and this fact will bear on the kind of adaptation it is."[71] With *Blood Simple* the Coen brothers draw on generic conventions not as a simple re-rendering of pre-existing material, but rather as a complex reworking of these established paradigms.

The Big Lebowski also touches upon many generic motifs which influence the film's structure and affects the way in which it relates to Chandler as a defining source and inspiration. The Dude follows the pattern of the eager observer who attempts to get to the bottom of what seems to be an ever-expanding web of corruption and subterfuge within the multileveled social strata of Los Angeles. Such a model is also reflected in the frameworks and patterns of *The Long Goodbye*, *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974) and *L.A. Confidential*. Formal and narrative patterns are deemed to be paradigmatic and thus serve to demarcate the sameness and difference which define the genre. Even though the Dude is inexperienced as a private investigator he quickly begins to find his place in the detective world which seems to come courting him. In fact, it seems that this adventure is driving the Dude rather than the Dude being responsible for his own fate. Kent Jones proposes that *The Big Lebowski* "has a perfect sense of people stuck in time getting nowhere, confused with somewhere just so they can give themselves a reason to get out of bed in the morning."[72] It is the slightest encouragement which inspires the Dude into his adventure. Along with the new purpose in his life, he also enjoys the misguided assistance of bowling pal Walter and a $20,000 endorsement from Jeffrey Lebowski to find his missing wife. With this kind of motivation the Dude finds the private-eye lifestyle agreeable and appealing. He begins to speak like a detective, referring to the "case," explaining to Lebowski's daughter Maude (Julianne Moore) that there are a "lotta ins, lotta

[71] Op. Cit., Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, p.200.
[72] Op. Cit., Kent Jones, "Airtight," p.48.

outs" to consider. The distance between reality and the convenient conventions of genre have clearly confused the Dude. It ceases to matter that he is not a private-eye, nor that he is a poor detective—evident in his inability to understand the wider mystery that surrounds him—for he represents an ironic reworking of the traditional generic character.

This engagement with traditional frameworks is essential to the parodic and ironic agenda in Joel and Ethan Coen's films. Parody demands such an engagement by the viewer, as its reversals of narrative procedures depend on a foreknowledge of the parodied target and a realisation of the absurdity caused by an inversion. Dan Harries notes that parody must be apt at "connoting both closeness and distance as well as the oscillating process that binds both discursive directions."[73] Harries is suggesting that the parody must work within close range of the target texts or frameworks for the subversion to both be noticeable and effective. *The Big Lebowski* is as much a deconstruction of the detective genre as it is an ode to the works of Chandler. The Dude is not the noble knight that Marlowe is, or the cynical, tough interpretation of this character by Humphrey Bogart in Hawks' adaptation of *The Big Sleep* (1946), or even the sly and weaselly J.J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson) of *Chinatown*. The Dude is an unremarkable character, an unemployable stoner with very few notable features. Ella Shohat suggests that parody functions as "a means for renewal and demystification, a way of laughing away outmoded forms of thinking."[74] By humanising the Dude's gumshoe the Coens effectively undermine the image of the detective—characterised by Chandler's Marlowe—as the untouchable and incorruptible hero with ethics and morals unattainable to most. In doing so they also destroy the myth of the hero and celebrate the mediocrity of their profoundly ordinary protagonist.

As previously stated, the narrative structure of *Miller's Crossing* is highly repetitive: moments, set-ups, situations and phrases are repeated in an ironic commentary on the rise of the would-be-gangster crime-lord Johnny Caspar. Joel

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[73] Dan Harries, *Film Parody*, B.F.I. Publishing, London, 2000, p.5.
[74] Ella Shohat, "Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema," Ed. Lester D. Friedman, *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991, p.239.

and Ethan Coen are postmodern artists who employ irony as a means by which to comment on the material they re-deploy within their films. Repetition and difference is also key to the study of adaptation. The link between adaptations and postmodernity is significant: "A great many postmodern artists adopt a similar strategy; more like *bricoleurs* than creators, they make new texts out of borrowed or retro motifs, becoming ironic about their originality."[75] It is the differences within the repetition that illustrate the ironic ingredient of postmodern texts. It is precisely through the reiteration of texts, genres, authors, and styles that a critique is negotiated using such techniques as satire, parody, pastiche and irony. Linda Hutcheon verifies the contradictory nature of postmodernism contending its function is to "use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to the critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past."[76] Perhaps the Coen brothers' films are not adaptations in a traditional sense but rather, to borrow Hutcheon's term, ironic re-readings. Yet, to a degree, this is true of all adaptations, because where fidelity breaks down, then reinterpretation and transformation must surely prevail.

Intertextuality

In arguing for a study of film adaptation which advances beyond oversimplified issues of faithfulness to source material Stam maintains the significance of intertextuality to understanding the numerous influences behind all texts. He contends:

> The concept of intertextual dialogism suggests that every text forms an intersection of textual surfaces. All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and conflations and inversions of other texts.[77]

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[75] James Naremore, "Authorship," *A Companion to Film Theory*, Eds. Robert Stam & Toby Miller, Blackwell, Malden, Mass., 1999, p.21.
[76] Linda Hutcheon, "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History," *Cultural Critique*, 5, 1986-7, p.180.
[77] Op. Cit., Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," p.68.

There is a proliferation of allusion and quotation throughout the rampantly postmodern films of Joel and Ethan Coen. Devin McKinney notes this obsession suggesting the brothers "have used the in-joke (or, in polite society, intertextuality) not as a self-justifying end but as a springboard to touch depths mostly unplumbed by the purveyors of either pulp fiction or *Pulp Fiction* [Tarantino, 1994]."[78] Here McKinney is identifying the critical and shrewd manner in which the films of the Coens feed off other texts. They do so not in manner of floating quotation but in the ironic inversion and critical application of the elements of previous texts, genres and settings. Intertexts operate on an expansive network yet they are always consequential and penetrating in the understanding of the patterns of repetition and marks of difference which transform and extend an adaptation in relation to its primary model. In relation to issues of adaptation, intertextuality disturbs the purity of relations between what is generally considered to be the original or source text and its filmic equivalent. Intertextuality has a tangible impact on the way in which the Coen brothers choose to adapt Cain to *Blood Simple*, or how they decide to remake Hammett with *Miller's Crossing*, or how they re-imagine Chandler in *The Big Lebowski*.

Adaptation theory traditionally examines the quality of the transference of a single source material into a new medium. *Miller's Crossing* is an adaptation but not of any particular or singular source text. After all, Joel and Ethan Coen draw upon several sources in addition to Hammett in their construction of *Miller's Crossing*, recalling Warner Brothers gangster pictures of the 1930s, the seminal modern gangster film *The Godfather* and the Italian art-film *Il Conformista*. At play in *Miller's Crossing*, therefore, are several competing and intertwining sources which agitate the direct relationship to Hammett. Discussing this issue in relation to remakes Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal suggest that the remaking of a previous text relies on "a special pattern which re-represents and explains at a different time and through varying perceptions, previous narratives and experiences."[79] With *Miller's Crossing* what we are left with is an adaptation that is inspired by another set of texts but also in effect remakes those texts. It is

[78] Devin McKinney, "*Fargo*," *Film Quarterly*, 50, Fall, 1996, p.31 (Italics in original).
[79] Andrew Horton & Stuart Y. McDougal, "Introduction," *Play it again, Sam: retakes on remakes*, Eds. Andrew Horton & Stuart Y. McDougal, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p.2.

an update of Hawks' *Scarface* with a greater emphasis on the sexual perversity of the characters; an Americanisation of *Il Conformista* re-presenting its visual design and re-exploring its musings on sexuality, male-violence and crime; and a film clearly influenced by the conventions and themes working through Hammett's canon. Restaino clarifies the issue well when she argues that the "spare, lean language and objectivity of Hammett's *Red Harvest* and *The Glass Key* served as models for an evocation of an order, an era, and a style where friendship and loyalty are called upon to end chaos and upheaval."[80] *Miller's Crossing* is very much an adaptation of a style and an evocation of the spirit of Hammett. As Jenkins observes, Joel and Ethan Coen "have tapped a kind of essence of Hammett."[81] *Miller's Crossing* perfectly illustrates the incongruity of the quest for fidelity that has traditionally characterised the appraisal of adaptations. It is a film with no single model, no source text, no sense of obligation to a precursor and with several manifest intertexts operating to complicate its relationship with its primary inspirations. *Miller's Crossing* defers to several texts, several genres, and several sources to create what might forever be considered the definitive Hammett film.

Leo Braudy acknowledges that in understanding a remake one must venture beyond the simple comparison of the new text with the older model on which it is based and in doing so discover that "the remake can exist anywhere on an intertextual continuum from allusions in specific lines, individual scenes, and camera style to explicit patterning of an entire film on a previous exemplar."[82] Here the memory of things past informs the reception and interpretation of the present text. These memories—the analysis of the influences which conspire to affect the adaptation—are vital to studying the adapted text and its relation not only to primary material but all other stimuli. For John Ellis the adaptation "trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading [or from] a general circulated cultural memory."[83] And this suits the study of the Coens' films as they have, with *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing* and *The Big*

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[80] Op. Cit., Katherine M. Restaino, "The Poetics of Dashiell Hammett," p.109.
[81] Op. Cit., Steven Jenkins, "*Miller's Crossing*," p.72.
[82] Leo Braudy, "Afterword: Rethinking Remakes," *Play it again, Sam: retakes on remakes*, Eds. Andrew Horton & Stuart Y. McDougal, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p.327.
[83] John Ellis, "The Literary Adaptation: An Introduction," *Screen*, 23.1, May/June, 1982, p.3.

Lebowski, recalled the essence of Cain, Hammett and Chandler, respectively. The Coens are expert in drawing on this circulated memory and using it to define and refine their narratives and style. Where memory can be persuaded by truth, fiction and the often un-reconciled linking of the two, so too will adaptations, through the agency of intertextuality, be drawn in different and sometimes contrary directions. In a study of the various derivations at play in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) Robbie Roberston asserts that "all narratives have their sources within shifting complex patterns of memories, associations and reflections."[84] This is true of the Coens' adaptations which owe as much to various sources as they do to the authors from which they were ostensibly developed.

Intertextuality plays a prominent role in muddying the waters that link *The Big Lebowski* to Chandler. While it is very much an adaptation of the style of Chandler and a reworking of his concerns and themes, *The Big Lebowski* is also influenced by several other sources. In his analysis of *The Big Lebowski* Romney wants to read the film in relation to Chandler but also to draw into his critique an acknowledgment of both *Cutter's Way* and Altman's revisionist detective film *The Long Goodbye*. Romney argues that the Dude is "several degrees of weathered somnolence beyond even Elliott Gould in Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*."[85] The Dude and Gould's Marlowe share a kind of proto-typical L.A. laziness and alienation. They exhibit the same physical scruffiness: they are unshaven, unkempt, and largely unimpressed by the communities that surround them. But where Gould's Marlowe has been pushed to an attitude of disinterest and lethargy by a swelling disaffection with a society he does not understand, the Dude has adopted his laziness as a lifestyle. The Dude is protected from the moral and social corruption that encircles him because he refuses to summon the energy necessary to hold a point-of-view. Gould's Marlowe is much more in line with Chandler's incorruptible and stoical detective yet remains a reinvention as Altman places him in a context which clashes so violently with his values.

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[84] Robbie Robertson, "The Narrative sources of Ridley Scott's *Alien*," *Cinema and Fiction: New Modes of Adapting, 1950-1990*, Eds. John Orr & Colin Nicholson, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1992, p.171.
[85] Op. Cit., Jonathan Romney, "In Praise of Goofing Off," p.38.

The attitudes of Gould's Marlowe and Bridges' character in *The Big Lebowski* suggest links which are both complimentary and also contradictory, providing insights into the way the Coens' text engages with Altman's film while always winding back toward Chandler. William Luhr observes that throughout Altman's *The Long Goodbye* "Marlowe continually says, 'It's OK with me,' in response to nearly everything he encounters. The line implies the kind of laid-back, southern Californian indifference to which Terry [Lennox] refers when he says, 'Nobody cares'."[86] The Dude also shares this kind of indifference to the world that surrounds him; his perpetual refrain is "Fuck it." The Big Lebowski contends this is an appropriately apathetic moniker for the Dude's generation: "Oh, fuck it! That's your answer! Your answer to everything! Tattoo it on your forehead!" Yet while Gould's Marlowe and Bridges' Dude are both listless representatives of their times, their motives for such detachment begin to diverge. Bergan curiously contends Gould's Marlowe is "played as a laid-back, shambling slob, out of touch with the L.A. of the Seventies, just as the Dude is alienated from the L.A. of the Nineties."[87] Yet, while Marlowe as represented by Altman is definitely a casualty of alienation it seems clear that the Dude fits almost perfectly into the strange milieu of his circumstances. The Dude is in fact "the man for his time'n'place, he fits right in there," as the hayseed narrator (Sam Elliott) proclaims at the film's commencement. He perfectly represents the L.A. of 1990: disinterested, disaffected, and disassociated. The Dude's laziness makes him incorruptible, unable to really be affected by anything around him, and thus immune to moral dilemma or quandary. The Dude is the direct descendant of Bridges' Richard Bone in Ivan Passer's *Cutter's Way*.

Cutter's Way is the story of a Vietnam-War veteran, Cutter (John Heard), and his indolent friend Bone. In the film's opening act Bone is witness to the disposal of a murdered body, but later, he is reluctant to involve himself in any investigation which will identify the murderer. Bone finds himself enmeshed in a web of intrigue, mostly manufactured by the irascible Cutter. For Cutter, the murder mystery provides an opportunity to indulge his keen analytical intellect and also to bring to justice a wealthy community member, his veiled desire is to

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[86] William Luhr, *Raymond Chandler and Film*, Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., New York, 1982, p.164.
[87] Op. Cit., Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, p.201.

prove that the rich are not untouchable. Cutter—a drunken, psychotic, avid conspiracy theorist, and bitter Vietnam-War veteran—encourages Bone to pursue the mystery and bring down the respected member of the community they each suspect is responsible for the crime. The links to *The Big Lebowski* are quite startling: the layabout nature of the protagonists, the bitter veteran buddy with a fertile imagination, the respectable and inviolable millionaire, the mystery which is, and is not there, and, of course, the presence of Bridges in both films playing ostensibly the same character. *Cutter's Way* concludes in a similar manner to Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, with the alienated anti-hero shooting dead the wealthy character who has used his position to rise above responsibility.

Bridges' casting as both Bone and the Dude exemplifies the significance of the persona of the actor in the interplay of intertextuality. Barbara Klinger notes that "[v]arious personnel's biographies, commentaries and reported worldviews become part of the public's structuring principles for viewing films."[88] It is therefore apparent that actors are just as significant in fabricating intertextual grids as any other element involved in the construction of a film. Naremore argues convincingly along the same lines with regard to Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* (1983):

> Critics often call attention to the ways intertextuality or a 'horizon of expectations' can affect our response to a movie, but most discussion of the issue has focused on plots, genre, or the star system: *The King of Comedy* shows how intertextual cues function at the level of acting itself, in the form of allusions to familiar performance conventions or to the mannerism of famous players.[89]

Naremore is referring to the performance of Jerry Lewis as Jerry Langford in a role which is as close to reality as it is to fiction, drawing upon Lewis' entire career from vaudevillian to talk-show host, the latter the occupation of Langford in Scorsese's film. Mottram describes the casting of Bridges in *The Big Lebowski*

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[88] Barbara Klinger, "Film History terminable and interminable: recording the past in reception studies," *Screen*, 38.2, Summer, 1997, p.117.
[89] James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p.263.

as a "loaded move," identifying the manner in which his persona and previous film roles would inform the reception of his performance as the Dude.[90] Not only is Bridges' performance as Bone significant to the reading of *The Big Lebowski* but also Bridges the man, his other performances, his public profile, his celebrity status and his relationship with the media. These elements all affect the response his presence in a text creates.

Naremore asserts the "actor is already a character in some sense, a 'subject' formed by various codes in the culture, whose stature, accent, physical abilities, and performing habits imply a range of meanings and influences the way he or she will be cast."[91] In the same way that Bridges unites *The Big Lebowski* to *Cutter's Way*, M. Emmett Walsh provides a bridge which spans between the Coens' first film, *Blood Simple*, and a modest crime film from the late 1970s, *Straight Time* (Grossbard, 1978). It was Walsh's performance as Earl Frank, the unmerciful and underhanded parole officer in *Straight Time* which inspired the character of Visser and the choice of Walsh to play him in *Blood Simple*.[92] The use of a specific actor is as important to the composition of an adaptation or a remake as the original source material. The actor can alter and inform the expectations of the audience who rely as much on an understanding of that actor's profile and career as an understanding of a genre's conventions or the influence of a novelist. With Visser, the Coens effectively remake a previous performance of Walsh's, using it to shape their own vision.

This vision is also informed by other alternative sources and stylings. The sequence in which Ray buries the still breathing Marty in complete silence aptly employs the Texas vista to accentuate the psychological aspects of the characters. In addition to utilising the scarce and desolate setting this sequence also highlights a further component which disrupts the relation *Blood Simple* has to Cain. The sequence bears a noteworthy resemblance to a moment in Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* (1966) in which an East German agent is brutally killed in a similarly silent and drawn out scene. Stephané Braunschweig notes the connection

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[90] Op. Cit., James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, p.134.
[91] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.158.
[92] Op. Cit., Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, pp.82-3.

stating that in both Hitchcock's film and *Blood Simple* the human body proves extremely resistant to the violence placed upon it.[93] Like the East German agent, Marty will not die unless some authentic and terrible violence is wrought upon his body. Both the Coens and Hitchcock convey the brutality and savagery in a murder; each example reverberates with enhanced power when compared to the usually perfunctory treatment afforded death in crime fiction. This extra-novelistic inspiration further confuses any suggestion of a singular or linear relationship between Cain and *Blood Simple*.

The study of intertexts transcends connections between narrative texts from cinema and literature. They can also manifest themselves in the associations between a text and a cultural or historical movement of significance. Such an intertextual cue is evident in *The Big Lebowski*'s relationship with the Gulf War. In 1990, Saddam Hussein's despotic regime invaded Kuwait inciting a conflict situated in the Persian Gulf that culminated in the Gulf War of 1991. The war and its socio-cultural milieu provides a thematic context for the adventures represented in *The Big Lebowski*. It is appropriate to look at the text as an understanding of the cultural and historical world from which it was produced as well as the world that the text represents. The "unchecked aggression" exhibited by Hussein's Iraqi forces is matched by the heedless assaults brought upon the Dude and his property. *The Big Lebowski* commences with the Dude buying a carton of milk in a supermarket. As he writes a cheque to cover the cost of the single carton he watches George Bush on a television screen declaring that the attack on Kuwait will be countered: Bush proclaims: "This aggression will not stand." This television address occurred on August 2 1990, and although it would not be another six months until the conflict escalated into a fully fledged armed encounter, many of the discussions between the Dude and Walter refer to the Desert Storm operation. Walter declares that the Iraqis represent unworthy adversaries, unlike the enemy he encountered in the canopied jungles of Vietnam. Walter even adopts a General Norman Shwarzkopf haircut, outfits himself in khaki coloured clothes which resemble battle fatigues and dons gun-range, anti-glare spectacles.

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[93] Stephané Braunschweig, "Blood Simple," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.22.

This historical setting is an important influence on *The Big Lebowski* suggesting that adaptations are servants of many masters. *The Big Lebowski* has rarely, if ever, been dealt with as a "Gulf-War film." Yet, the Dude's motivation and situation illustrate a tangible association to the rationale Bush used to justify his involvement in a conflict which did not directly involve the country over which he presided. At the time of the invasion Bush administered the following statement:

> Protecting freedom means standing up to aggression...because a bully unchecked today is a bully unleashed tomorrow...The invasion of Kuwait was without provocation, the looting of Kuwait is without excuse, and the occupation of Kuwait will not stand.[94]

The Dude is bullied by Jeffrey Lebowski, by Treehorn's thugs, by Treehorn himself, by the German nihilists and by the corrupt Malibu police chief. In these situations the Dude takes his cue from Bush and rallies against this aggression. Walter, in an imitation of the American president, declares that at issue is the "unchecked aggression" concerning the intruders who invaded the Dude's home. The Dude seeks out justice for the wrongs he has endured, remuneration for a damaged rug, and he also finds a belated thirst to uncover the truth of the intrigue in which he finds himself enmeshed. Even though the laconic narrator is loathe to describe him as such, the Dude is a hero of his time and place. As much as *The Big Lebowski* owes to Chandler it is clearly a film interested in a broader network of influences.

Robert Ray criticises the obsession with analysing the transposition of the "original" to a new media in adaptation studies. Ray argues that studies which focus only on the two texts—source and adaptation—confine their analysis only to that aspect of the adaptation. Therefore these approaches remain isolated from the survey of extra-novelistic influences and return to the inadequate question:

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[94] Larry Berman & Bruce W. Jentleson, "Bush and the Post-Cold-War World: New Challenges for American Leadership," Eds. Colin Campbell & Bert A. Rockman, *The Bush Presidency: First Appraisals*, Chatham House Publishers, New Jersey, 1991, p.117.

"How does this film compare to the novel on which it is based?"[95] Joel and Ethan Coen's *Roman Noir* trilogy is more than just a standard recreation of the tropes, conventions, traditions and conceptions of Hammett, Cain and Chandler. *Blood Simple* is a Cain film, an adaptation of his works in entirety, an extraction of his essence and redeployment of his style in a new manner. It is a Cain film filtered through *film noir*, neo-noir and crime fiction, by way of Hitchcock, *Straight Time* and bearing the indelible marks of Texas. In the same way Los Angeles, the Gulf War and George Bush drive *The Big Lebowski* as much as the film's pivotal inspiration: Chandler. Detective-story conventions, filmic intertexts and even actors' back-catalogues draw the film in different directions always providing integral connections and relevant asides. And *Miller's Crossing* works with two famous Hammett novels but the Coens' attention to (and subversion of) the generic conventions of *film noir*, gangster films and the film's intertextual connections sufficiently reveals the amorphous nature of the adaptation and its problematic relationship to any one (or two) primary models. Like most adaptations and remakes the source material is never singular nor contained, typifying the broad circuitry of influences that all adaptations encounter and deal with.

[95] Robert B. Ray, "The Field of 'Literature and Film'," *Film Adaptation*, Ed. James Naremore, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2000. p.45.

2. Dialogue

My name is H.I. McDunnough...Call me Hi. H.I. McDunnough (Nicolas Cage) *Raising Arizona.*

The ten-minute prologue to Joel and Ethan Coen's *Raising Arizona* is a masterpiece of compressed exposition. Every detail of small-time crook and hillbilly philosopher H.I. McDunnough's (Nicolas Cage) errant existence—his penchant for devising ill-conceived armed robberies, his courting of "desert-flower" policewoman Ed (Holly Hunter), their ensuing marriage, and subsequent failure to produce a much desired child—is crammed into a one-reel act. The brevity of this opening is achieved largely through H.I.'s voice-over narration, delivered with the literacy and lucidity of a gifted southern raconteur. Here, the use of dialogue has both a structural function and an aesthetic effect. The dialogue maintains the breathlessness of the opening sequence but also sets up the language games that function throughout to inform the characters, themes and concerns explored in *Raising Arizona.* Dialogue and language structures are essential to the conception and design of a Coen brothers' film, particularly *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo,* and *The Big Lebowski.* Within these three films the Coens interrogate the methods by which dialogue is used in a way that exposes the power, authority and significance of language in both the cinema, and in the wider society.

Dialogue has been a central element of the cinema since the introduction of sound to film in the late 1920s. Yet, dialogue in film theory remains largely ignored, and those studies that consider the significance of sound in film generally persuade dialogue to the fringe of scrutiny. Mary Devereaux decries this situation as essentially deficient arguing that "[i]f the sound film is a marriage of word and image, then no adequate film criticism can ignore one half of that symbiosis."[1] Devereaux's argument implies that the ignorance of dialogue in film theory stems not from any fundamental irrelevance to film analysis nor any suggestion that it only offers trivial interest, but rather from a stubborn belief that cinema is primarily a visual art form. The reality, however, is that cinema is a conjunction

of image with sound. Within this sound component dwells a fertile and crucial thematic and stylistic device: dialogue. Focussing on dialogue in film does not undermine traditional cinema theory, rather it simply provides a means by which a neglected element of the film language can be incorporated into that theory. Sarah Kozloff's monograph *Overhearing Film Dialogue* seeks to acknowledge this relevance by providing an elementary taxonomy of dialogue in film. The focus of her analysis ties dialogue conventions to particular genres. Kozloff's contention is that dialogue remains consistent amongst genres and not filmmakers: issuing yet another mortal blow to the already brutally bowed auteur theory.[2] However, dialogue is such a key element in each of Joel and Ethan Coen's films that it compels one to reconsider Kozloff's supposition. It is apparent that the dialogue in the Coens' oeuvre, which spans a vast generic array, continually touches upon consistent concerns and ideas, exhibiting a persistent interest in language.

A focus on film dialogue obliges an interrogation of the formal, textual and cultural significance of language in a cinematic text. The aesthetics of language in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen is evident in the stylised dialogue of *Raising Arizona* and the realistic conversation in *The Big Lebowski* and *Fargo*. These issues lead to other elements of language—inarticulacy, dialect, rhythms and repetitions—evident in the formal construction of dialogue in these films. The Coens define the communities they depict through the representation of language; constructing characters, forming social connections and exposing communal divisions. The Coen brothers combine these two factors—style and content—to then remark on how language operates in contemporary culture. They depict a modern culture largely devoid of attainable goals and cut off from reality; aspects that are often apparent in the misuse and abuse of language by the characters in their films. By looking at the issues that exist beyond the texts themselves it becomes clear that the Coens are interested in commenting on the ideological implications of class, culture, politics and the viability of the American Dream. The words used by the characters in *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* frequently have trivial diegetic value. But the Coens expose how this

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[1] Mary Devereaux, "Of 'Talk and Brown Furniture': The Aesthetics of Film Dialogue," *Post Script*, 6.1, Fall, 1986, p.44.
[2] Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 2000, p.268.

language reflects the demands of a culture predicated on legitimate representations of success even when those objectives are often out of reach.

Language and Style

Joel and Ethan Coen have worked within a widely disparate generic catalogue and the dialogue in their films is a prominent factor in the organisation and maintenance of these generic constructions and in the fulfilment of specific stylistic strategies. *The Hudsucker Proxy*'s artificial visual design is mirrored by the highly stylised dialogue, the criminal milieu of *Miller's Crossing* is characterised by memorably rich gangster jargon, while *Fargo*'s attention to visual realism operates concurrently with the application of an appropriate regional dialect. Barry Sonnenfield—the director of photography on *Raising Arizona*—suggests that the script has greatest priority to the Coens, declaring that words and structure are more important than any visual concerns.[3] Kozloff regards words and structure as integral to the analysis of film. Her taxonomy is divided into two broad divisions. The first deals with the way words are used to communicate narrative detail through anchorage, causality, characterisation, the adherence to normal conversational strategies, and as a means by which emotional meaning can be transferred to the spectator. The second division deals with the way dialogue is used in film. Examining the elements of language that work beyond the mere relation of narrative enumeration this component focusses instead on the aesthetic significance, ideological persuasion, and commercial conditions that influence (and are influenced by) film dialogue.[4] It is the first of these latter components—aesthetic significance—that is vital to understanding *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*. The formal characteristics of the dialogue in these films—stylisation, realism, rhythms, dialects—all reveal a depth of meaning and attention to detail which expands the nominal interpretation of each of these texts.

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[3] David Edelstein, "Invasion of the Baby Snatchers," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.51.
[4] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, pp.33-63.

Jack Shadoian argues that we expect characters to speak in particular ways, we take into account certain cues of "dress, age, [and] the situation they find themselves in" and we expect to hear particular language: "[h]ence dialogue is generally keyed to propriety, and this 'law' makes it possible to exploit incongruity."[5] Mannered dialogue directly confronts the illusion inherent in representation and marshals the ironic possibilities of characters whose language is at odds with their situation. The dialogue of *Raising Arizona* is, in many ways, similar to that which Joel and Ethan Coen composed for *Miller's Crossing*: it is uncommonly slick, affected, without pause, hesitation or mistake. It is, in fact, so clean and controlled that it becomes purely artificial. It is a stylised dialogue to match a synthetic collection of characters. *Raising Arizona* examines the lives of a hayseed newlywed couple whose inability to conceive a child leads to a ludicrous plan to steal another couple's baby; the scheme designed to appease their desire for normalcy and success. The Coens' film is rich in caricature, the over-the-top characters representing the extremes of the American South-West. H.I., a recidivist stick-up artist, fills his day to day speech with cliché, aphorism and home-spun maxims which lend his character a literacy that contrasts sharply with his modest visual image (hair akimbo, elaborately-patterned shirts, and permanent hang-dog expression). Despite spending the majority of his adult life in the tough and harsh environs of correctional institutions, H.I. relates his story with the grace and eloquence of a poet. In describing the vision he has of a filthy, leather-clad biker who is haunting his dreams, H.I. notes: "He left a scorched earth in his wake, befouling even the sweet desert breeze that whipped across his brow."[6] Carolyn R. Russell, suggesting that the language of *Raising Arizona* is a reflection of the film's visual stylisation, describes H.I.'s manner of speaking as "a sweetly droning, pseudo-biblical, quasi-mournful ecstasy of verbiage."[7] The dialogue in *Raising Arizona* is too eloquent, too poetic, and too articulately related to be mistaken for an attempt to capture and present realistic conversational practices.

As inappropriate as this language seems to be to the characters it is also, strangely perhaps, very stereotypical. With *Raising Arizona* Joel and Ethan Coen

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[5] Jack Shadoian, "Writing for the Screen...Some thoughts on Dialogue," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 9.2, 1981, p.85.
[6] All film quotations are transcribed from DVD copies.
[7] Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2001, p.30.

take to extreme the notion of the loquacious southerner with silky conversational dexterity. Philip Brophy contends that in the case of *blaxploitation* films of the 1970s the excessive and exaggerated characters and dialogue served to privilege "terse burlesque over naturalism," in effect taking the stereotype to the limit for its curiousness and aesthetic appeal.[8] With *Raising Arizona* the Coens are elevating the aesthetic qualities of the dialogue and diminishing to some extent the meaning of those words. Siegfried Kracauer argued for the cinematic use of dialogue in which its material and formal qualities could be highlighted or promoted and therefore scrutinised. For Kracauer what was said was less important than the formal aspects of the utterance, identifying the process by which cinema might render discernible the physical realities of those elements of nature which are taken for granted.[9] In *Raising Arizona* the Coens successfully establish a language world of utter unreality yet they do not do so through the invention of a new idiom, as say, in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, but rather through a tightly constructed expression of dialogue which determines to elide realism in favour of artificiality.

The presence of artificiality proffers the necessary inquiry into the nature of its alternative: realism. What is realistic dialogue? Is it dialogue that reflects the qualities and components of ordinary, everyday speech? Kozloff suggests that this is in fact an impossibility: "the defining characteristic of film dialogue is that *it is never realistic; it is always designed 'for us'*."[10] Kozloff's argument pivots on the implication that dialogue in film is most often intelligible, accommodating, useful to the viewer, and often free from the typical distractions of everyday conversation such as anterior sound, inaudibility and confusion. Yet, Kozloff's argument seems more attuned to Classical Hollywood film, a representational form that employs dialogue which traditionally operates to "maintain an unambiguous, efficient, purposeful, and uninterrupted flow of narrative information."[11] Kozloff ignores the vast array of methods by which sound and

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[8] Philip Brophy, "Read My Lips: Notes on the Writing and Speaking of Film Dialogue," *Continuum*, 5.2, 1992, p.257.
[9] Siegfried Kracauer, "Dialogue and Sound," *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, Eds. Elisabeth Weis & John Belton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, pp.126-142.
[10] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.121 (Italics in original).
[11] Todd Berliner, "Hollywood Movie Dialogue and the 'Real Realism' of John Cassavetes," *Film Quarterly*, 52.3, Spring, 1999, p.6.

dialogue is used by filmmakers seeking to break free of such traditions. Robert Altman, for instance, has consistently explored the parameters of film dialogue with experimentation in sound recording and representation. *M.A.S.H.* (1970), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *California Split* (1974) are three notable films in which Altman sought to represent the distinctive chaos of ordinary conversation by employing a network of microphones positioned on set to enable the dialogue to overlap and collide in a clutter of words.

It is Todd Berliner's contention that the conventions of traditional film dialogue cannot sustain real conversation traits such as disorder and inefficiency. Amongst the irregularities of typical conversational discourse is the breaking of syntactic construction, where one thought or statement will be ruptured mid-stream as another thought or idea takes over.[12] Berliner's argument, though, seems flimsy in the face of Joel and Ethan Coen's most iconoclastic creation: the Dude. The hero of *The Big Lebowski*, the Dude, becomes thoroughly enmeshed in an abduction mystery that develops into a shaggy-dog story of epic proportions. The Dude's real name is Jeffrey Lebowski, which is also the name of a wealthy entrepreneur with whom the Dude's life becomes inextricably entangled after a preposterous case of mistaken identity. The confusion that surrounds the larger mystery in the narrative seems to be embodied in the Dude's inability to verbalise anything remotely like a reasonable explanation for his circumstances. The Dude's bewilderment at the plot unfolding around him is mirrored in a wonderfully inarticulate account which he offers the other Jeffrey Lebowski (referred to in the film as the Big Lebowski) as he sits, under heavy interrogation, in the back of the millionaire's limousine:

> I—the royal we, you know the editorial—I dropped off the money, exactly as per... . Look, man, I've got certain information, all right, certain things have come to light, and, you know, has it ever occurred to you, uh, uh, instead of, uh, running around blaming *me*, given the nature of all this new shit, I mean it's, not just, you know, this could be a lot more, uh, uh, uh, uh, complex, it might *not* be just such a simple...you know?

"What in God's holy name are you blathering about?" is the response from the baffled Big Lebowski to the Dude's rambling explanation. The Dude's account of the situation takes the concept of syntactic chaos and disorder to the extreme as every utterance stops short of coherence and his "clarification" of the predicament merely serves to further obfuscate the situation. Joel and Ethan Coen are not interested in the typical eloquence of Classical Hollywood dialogue, rather they focus on their main characters gross inarticulacy.

Like the Coens, David Mamet pays great heed to the language of the characters he constructs. Anne Dean's analysis of Mamet's works invites several comparisons to the manner in which the Coens compose the dialogue in their films. Dean notes how Mamet "capitalizes upon the fact that real-life conversations seldom proceed smoothly and logically from point to point: most dialogue is repetitious and inconsequential, or both."[13] In light of this and the example of the Dude's speech (a true if a little bit exaggerated guide to his overall inarticulacy throughout the film) it is stimulating to consider Walter Weintraub's contention that the dramatic artist will always avoid a true depiction of realistic dialogue in deference to the tenets of dramatic pacing, lucidity and traditional structure. Weintraub declares that "[t]he genius of the 'realistic' novelist or playwright is that he or she can create the illusion of real-life conversations without reproducing the mumbling and stumbling that constitute the dialogue of most living individuals."[14] Yet, in the case of *The Big Lebowski* Joel and Ethan Coen eschew such a conventional approach and, recalling Kracauer's appeal, successfully reproduce typical conversational patterns as a means to representing effectively the aesthetic qualities of language.

Berliner has developed a set of principles by which traditional film talk operates. Vital to his analysis are two precepts upon which Hollywood speech functions: effective communication through dialogue, and the tendency for movie

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[12] Ibid, pp.6-7.
[13] Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London & Toronto, 1990, p.28.
[14] Walter Weintraub, *Verbal Behavior in Everyday Life*, Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1989, p.31.

characters to speak flawlessly.[15] Clearly, the Dude's scrambled speaking style subverts the convention of dialogue to communicate with eloquence and intelligibility. *Fargo* also explores the possibilities of communication which breaks down between characters as discourses become obscured by vagueness and incoherence. This style of dialogue holds sharply to the conception of realism, Weintraub suggesting that "qualifying phrases may be a verbal marker for spontaneity in speech, at least when used to distinguish extemporaneous from impromptu remarks."[16] Throughout *Fargo* the spectator remains uninformed as to why Jerry Lundergaard (William H. Macy) so urgently requires such vast sums of money. Jerry's explanation to Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare), the men he contracts to kidnap his wife, is clouded in mystery and vague rationalisations conveyed in a series of halting, half-finished sentences rich in indecisive qualifiers: "Well...that's, that's...I'm not going to get into...into...See, I just need the money... ." Carl's response to Jerry's unsatisfactory explanations at their inaugural rendezvous betrays a suspicion that Carl, not surprisingly, also fails to communicate effectively: "You're tasking us to perform this mission but you won't...[searching for a word]...you won't....ah, fuck it, let's take a look at that Ciera." Carl's incompetent language use and malapropism, evident throughout *Fargo*—he struggles to describe second-hand cigarette smoke as carcinogenic and instead settles on "cancerated"—mirrors his inadequacy in the real world for which he seems ill-prepared and overwhelmed. Ethan Coen declared in an interview the objective of representing Carl and Jerry as so inept:

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[15] Op. Cit., Todd Berliner, "Hollywood Movie Dialogue and the 'Real Realism' of John Cassavetes," pp.4-5.
[16] Op. Cit., Walter Weintraub, *Verbal Behavior in Everyday Life*, pp.23-24.

> One of the reasons for making them simple-minded was our desire to go against the Hollywood cliché of the bad guy as a super-professional who controls everything he does. In fact, in most cases criminals belong to the strata of society least equipped to face life, and that's the reason they're caught so often. In this sense too, our movie is closer to life than the conventions of cinema and genre movies.[17]

The aspects of *The Big Lebowski* and *Fargo* which undermine and rally against film convention and successfully adopt characteristics more attuned to reality give these films a more naturalistic identity. The prevalence in the characters' speech of qualifiers, modifiers, uncertainties and vagueness indicate the Coens' desire to fulfil and maintain an authenticity of language which is opposed to the stylisation present in *Raising Arizona*.

Inarticulacy is a thread that runs all the way through *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*. In both films the characters demonstrate an inability to employ language as a means to lucid expression often fumbling over words and sentences. Kozloff argues that conventional film dialogue has a tendency to eliminate such inarticulacy: "The actual hesitations, repetitions, digressions, grunts, interruptions, and mutterings of everyday speech have either been pruned away, or, if not, deliberately included."[18] Kozloff is suggesting that in such cases that film dialogue incorporates actual conversational characteristics it is then employed in a self-conscious manner. Yet, the construction of this kind of dialogue in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen demonstrates both naturalism as well as a consistent thematic concern which runs through much of their work: alienation. The premise of the Coens' *Blood Simple* evolves upon the protagonists' inability to communicate effectively, their private discourses breeding distrust and confusion leading to the tragic consequences at the film's conclusion. Mottram observes that the "four main protagonists, although existing in a unified physical world, inhabit a separate mental and emotional space that causes repeated misinterpretations."[19] With *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* the Coens have extended this philosophy of

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[17] Michel Ciment & Hubert Niogret, "Closer to Life than the Conventions of Cinema," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.159.
[18] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.18.
[19] James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, B.T. Batsford, London, 2000, p.20.

miscommunication to an ailment of society in which inarticulacy is an observable symptom.

The dialogue the Coen brothers formulate for their characters contributes to the realism in both *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*. Even though *The Big Lebowski* is an absurdist comedy with colourful and broad characterisations, the dialogue nevertheless embodies authenticity. Dean's assessment of Mamet's writing identifies similar properties in the playwright's work stating he has "an ability to produce wonderfully funny dialogue that retains all of the grammatical chaos of ordinary conversation, while functioning brilliantly as a kind of free verse."[20] A function of such "grammatical chaos" in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen is, perhaps ironically, in the elucidation of character, if not plot. The previous example of Carl's stumbling on the word carcinogenic or his faltering attempts to intimidate Jerry, suitably undermine his character's credibility. Carl is linked to the fictional characters of Mamet's world: "When one of Mamet's characters has something of importance to say, his or her abortive attempts at eloquence can paradoxically speak volumes."[21] Likewise, Molière would put his characters in situations where they intended to exhibit intelligence but instead spoke instinctively, conveying a more authentic picture of themselves.

As is the case with Mamet and Molière, the Coens are using the words, phrases and verbal gestures of their characters, which in themselves are unremarkable, to relay considerable character information. Shortly after kidnapping Jerry's wife Jean (Kristin Rudrüd), Carl and Gaear are pulled over by a state trooper. Carl assures the laconic and controlled, and importantly taciturn, Gaear that he will handle the situation. Carl's inept bribery attempt followed by a noise from the back seat of the car alerts the cop to Jean's presence. As the officer leans into the car his curiosity is met with swift and decisive action by Gaear who clutches the policeman's head and shoots him in the skull with a handgun, a fountain of blood emanating from the wound and covering Carl's lap. The only phrase that Carl can muster, despite his usual garrulous manner, is "Whoa! Daddy... Whoa! Daddy." George Toles suggests that for "a few instants Carl

[20] Op. Cit., Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, p.22.
[21] Ibid, p.24.

surrenders any pretense that he is equal to what is going on. He has no ready-made response that is adequate for the extremity of Grimsrud's action."[22] Carl is undermined nearly every time he opens his mouth; the dialogue that the Coens assign him acts as an apparatus as distinctive and decisive as any traditional visual signifier.

In *The Big Lebowski* The Dude's unwavering inarticulacy, demonstrated in a frequent use of qualifiers, reveals his character to be lazy and lacking conviction (traits also illustrated in his informal costume, unkempt appearance and sluggish movements). Weintraub contends that a prevalence of qualifiers—"I think," "kind of" and general suggestions of vagueness—indicate a lack of decisiveness or lack of commitment, often reflected in the lifestyle of the speaker.[23] Similarly, Walter (John Goodman), the Dude's bowling pal, is a verbose but often inarticulate speaker whose statements and attempts to maintain an eloquence or complexity of language merely serve to undermine his credibility. In one particular discussion Walter attempts to catalogue the series of infringements committed by a gang of German nihilists responsible for attacking the Dude in his home, unleashing a marmot upon the blithely unaware Dude as he bathed. Walter contends that not only are nihilists no better than Nazis, but also, the gang was not acting in accordance with the regulations for the suitable administration of wildlife: "And, also, let's not forget—let's not forget, Dude—that keeping wildlife, an amphibious rodent, for... uh... domestic, within the city – that ain't legal either." Walter's failed attempt at verbal assuredness paradoxically undermines any certainty he has about this statement or his authority in making it.

Walter's distinctively angry diatribes, on the other hand, are for the most part completely lucid arguments which spew from his mouth with tremendous intensity. His conviction is never more certain than in these instances. Weintraub declares that "[i]n the heat of extreme anger, all evidence of indecisiveness disappears" accompanied by extreme negativity, rhetorical questions and direct references to the listener which indicate aggressive engagement.[24] Walter's

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[22] George Toles, "Obvious Mysteries in *Fargo*," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 38.4, Fall, 1999, p.654.
[23] Op. Cit., Walter Weintraub, *Verbal Behavior in Everyday Life*, pp.13 & 27.
[24] Ibid, p.98.

berating of the coffee-shop waitress for infringing on his first amendment right to free speech and his vehement protestation that a bowling opponent stepped over the line in a league tournament demonstrate his angry turns and the manner by which his dialogue reflects his emotional condition: "As speech communicates phonological, grammatical, and sematic information, it also conveys emotional meaning."[25] Whereas Walter's attempts at affected intelligence through cerebral expression ascribe a contrasting trait, his enraged outbursts expose the authentic core of his character. Walter is never more assured, never more certain of his identity, than when he is slamming his fist into the diner counter arguing for constitutional justice, or when he is training a pistol on a bowling opponent and ardently condemning those among his peers who fail to respect the rules. The dialogue, as well as the associated visual elements, expose the emotional truth of Walter's deeply disturbed, post-Vietnam paranoid condition.

Inarticulacy is the emblem for the weak, the challenged, the indecisive, the ineffectual and the frustrated. Classical Hollywood conventions determine that extremes of verbal ability are often signifiers in film. Linguistic dexterity is often symbolic of intelligence and pretension and is customarily associated with villainous characters; whereas, stammering, halting and verbal inferiority may designate weakness, shyness or nervousness.[26] This latter contention is clearly apparent with respect to Jerry and Carl in *Fargo*. Their stuttering, arrested, and uncertain dialogue is the prominent feature of their character and serves as the prime signifying component available to the spectator. The most articulate character in *Fargo* is also the character who speaks the least. Gaear is the silent psycho-killer partner to Carl whose every action is decisive and every word is final. Gaear has no problems with articulate expression because he refuses to place his conceptions of events into words; instead he acts, and often acts violently. Brophy argues that the rise in the graphic screen-violence through the 1970s and 80s reflects the decrease in the level of dialogue exhibited by film characters: "the degrees of violence are compensated by residuals of dialogue, the

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[25] Timothy Jay, *Why We Curse – A Neuro-Psycho-Social theory of Speech*, John Benjamin's Publishing Company, Philadelphia & Amsterdam, 2000, p.17.
[26] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.78.

more action the less talk."[27] Gaear in *Fargo* is a distant cousin to Walter. He is what Walter would become if he denied himself the verbal expression of his frustration. With the double-dealing of *Fargo* and the mammoth confusion of *The Big Lebowski* it is perhaps no surprise that any clarity that is relayed to the viewer comes not from *what* the characters are saying but in the *way* they say it, or in Gaear's case, the way it is not said.

When Gaear does speak, in *Fargo*, his heavy accent operates clearly to betray his heritage. As "Regional Independents" Joel and Ethan Coen have spread their film wings right across the extensive lands of the United States. *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona* document the South-West, *Barton Fink* and *The Big Lebowski* are each set in Los Angeles and *Fargo* is perhaps the most prominent film ever to capture the specific culture of the American Mid-West. The Coens have acquired a reputation for a certain kind of ethnographic expression through the critical exploration of the specific factors that contribute to defining particular cultures. Todd McCarthy is unequivocal in his praise, stating that the Coens:

> are unequaled among contemporary screenwriters in their ability to create memorable dialogue for aggressively ethnic characters, be they the Irish gangsters of *Miller's Crossing* or the Hollywood Jews of *Barton Fink*, and the cultural specificity of *Fargo* provides the terrain for a field day, of which they take rich advantage.[28]

McCarthy is, of course, referring to the peculiar dialect of Minnesota which the Coens brought to a world-wide audience in *Fargo*. Dialect in this case moves beyond the mere recreation of an extravagant, stereotypical accent and instead focusses on the more clinical determination of dialect which covers a broader range of differences, including not only matters of pronunciation, but also distinctions in vocabulary and sentence structure. It is to the Coen brothers' credit that the dialogue for *Fargo* is uncompromising and wholly realised, never once

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[27] Op. Cit., Philip Brophy, "Read My Lips: Notes on the Writing and Speaking of Film Dialogue," p.261.
[28] Todd McCarthy, "*Fargo*," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.143.

becoming a mere exercise in the relation of a few quirks and idiosyncrasies of an alien dialect.

With *Fargo* the main area of interest surrounds the presentation of the particularised dialect of Minnesota, the characters' phrases replete with terms such as "yah," "you betcha," "you're darn tootin'," "heck" and "real good then." The delivery is a Scandinavian influenced lilt characterised by economic and monosyllabic utterances, typified by protracted vowels and an absence of inflection. These expressions, idioms and peculiarities are exemplified at every turn in *Fargo*, perhaps most notably in the description Mr. Mohra (Bain Boehlke) offers of the suspicious events which occur while he is tending bar at Ecklund & Swedlin's the previous Tuesday. In recounting the events to the policeman, Mohra's speech is coloured by all the aspects of the idiomatic dialect: "And he says, 'Yah, that guy's dead and I don't mean of old age.' And then he says, 'Geez, I'm goin' crazy out there at the lake.'" The aesthetic and formal characteristics of the dialogue in *Fargo* are a prominent feature of the film, Lizzie Francke arguing "[e]thnically it is specific: so much so that audiences used to cinema's all-purpose Middle America may find the inhabitants of Fargo quite exotic, with their singing, Scand-inflected accents, punctuating all sentences with a 'yah' or two (a genuine patois, if strange to foreign ears)."[29] The effect might be akin to watching a foreign-language film. Moreover, there is an additional underlying effect (applicable to each of the Coens' ethno-specific films but most precisely to *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski* and *Raising Arizona*) that this kind of attention to detail reveals. This is the manner in which language relations can reflect a wider, more interesting cultural relationship between the characters in the texts.

In *Fargo*, Joel and Ethan Coen make a broad distinction between those characters who are locals and those who are outsiders. The distinction is initially apparent in their dialogue—the language used, the accents carried—but this evolves into a wider division based upon systems of values and morality. Carl Showalter, judging by his name, is a local, but his broadly American accent suggests he is a local who has lived most of his life away from Minnesota in a more varied and diverse cultural milieu. His preference for obscenities and

argumentative language estranges him from the locals who favour politeness and contrition. The language and the cultural variance reflect each other at every turn. Writing about the relationship of language to society, Martin Montgomery states:

> Diversity of language within the overall speech community can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, distinct variety of (or even variant within) language can be used to affirm social solidarity between those who use it. And, on the other hand, it can be used in a boundary-maintaining role to signal or impose distance between those who use it and those who don't.[30]

It is the inappropriate vernacular (an outsider's language) which draws attention to Carl, and the bartender regards the inherent hostility in the conversation to be worthy of mentioning to the police officer. Patterns of power, heritage, values, and beliefs are often clouded by the words the characters use, but the manner in which they express themselves and the kind of language scheme they adopt, more often that not, reveal what the specific words fail to transmit.

A further formal characteristic which is common to the dialogue in Joel and Ethan Coen's films is the manifestation of rhythmic and repetitive language. It is often not the actual content that suggests the chief insights into the speakers, but its emphatic and persuasive rhythms. Again, and as is the case with much of the dialogue in the Coens' films, it is the formal attributes of the language that convey much of the meaning. The measure and tone of spoken language necessarily affects our understanding of the film. Rhythms and repetitions not only fulfil an aesthetic function but also, as John Fawell insists, the most memorable lines in a film "are simple ones that are repeated, as a line of poetry might be, or a phrase in a musical score, and which through this repetition achieve a dramatic resonance that is central to the meaning of the film."[31] In the Coen brothers' films repetition is used productively and pointedly, substantiating the

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[29] Lizzie Francke, "Hell Freezes Over," *Sight and Sound*, May, 1996, p.24.
[30] Martin Montgomery, *An Introduction to Language and Society*, Methuen, London & New York, 1986, p.135.
[31] John Fawell, "Musicality of the Film Script," cited in Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.85.

precept that film dialogue can be as poetic and valuable as any of the other more traditionally accepted cinematic devices. The dialogue in *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* is as crucial to the Coens' style and as open to essential analysis as, for instance, a Max Ophuls dolly-shot, or a Sergei Eisenstein montage sequence.

The attention and regard that Joel and Ethan Coen show toward the language in their films is even more significant in light of Kracauer's petition for film dialogue to carry a necessary aesthetic capacity. Kracauer cites Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1943 & 1958), Jacques Tati's *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (1953) and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) as examples where the content of speech is abandoned in deference to the aural qualities of the dialogue. He insists that dialect, accents, and foreign (or made up) languages are suited to the cinema's search for artistic revelation because they overwhelm the meaning of the utterances and instead draw attention to rhythms, cadences, inflections, techniques and styles of language.[32]

The rhythms and repetitions of the various discourses in *The Big Lebowski* are duly celebrated and emphasised by the Coens. The relationship between the Dude and Walter is characterised as much by their rhythmical arguments and conversational patterns as by their mutual passion for social bowling. When Walter and the Dude interrogate Little Larry Sellers (Jesse Flanagan)—a teenage boy suspected of stealing the Dude's car, and therefore also the ransom money contained within—their technique of questioning reveals their laughable incompetence:

Walter:

Is this your homework, Larry?

Walter:

Is this your homework, Larry?

Dude:

Look, man, did you—

Walter:

Dude, please!... Is this your homework, Larry?

Dude:

Just ask him about the car, man!

Walter:

Is this yours, Larry? Is this your homework, Larry?

Dude:

Is that your car out front?

Walter:

Is this your homework, Larry?

Dude:

We know it's his fucking homework!
Where's the fucking money, you little brat?

A similar line of conversation between Jerry and Carl (over the phone) occurs in *Fargo* as they too stumble their way through a ransom deal and its attendant problems:

Carl:

Know who this is?

Jerry:

Well, yah, I got an idea.
How's that Ciera workin' out for ya?

Carl:

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[32] Op. Cit., Siegfried Kracauer, "Dialogue and Sound," p.135.

Circumstances have changed, Jerry.

Jerry:

Well, what do ya mean?

Carl:

Things have changed. Circumstances, Jerry.
Beyond the, uh ... acts of God, force majeure...

Jerry:

What the – how's Jean?

A beat.

Carl:

....Who's Jean?

Jerry:

My wife! What the—

Carl:

She's all right. But there's three people up in
Brainerd who aren't so okay, I'll tell ya that.

As in screwball comedy the rhythms here are often balanced and musical. The humour created by the situation of Jerry asking after his wife and Carl's misunderstanding registers not only because of the incongruity of a kidnapper who does not know the name of his victim but also because of the "beat" of time which interrupts the rhythm of the conversation. Kozloff maintains that the dialogue in screwball comedy is often musical in nature and it functions as "a play of reiteration and controlled difference."[33] The manner by which Walter interrogates the young suspect in *The Big Lebowski*, through the repetition of a single question, betrays both Walter's simple-mindedness and his complete faith

in this approach. That this technique should fail miserably, culminating in a violent confrontation between Walter and a Corvette, reflects Walter's failed command of language.

In *The Big Lebowski* the relationship between the Dude and Walter is confounding on many levels. They are diametrically opposed at a political and social level, and their conversations habitually degenerate into mis-communication and arguments. It seems their only commonality is their argumentativeness, which is based not upon hatred but rather on mutual frustration. This phenomenon invites a stimulating connection to Robin Lakoff and Deborah Tannen's discussion of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973). Concentrating on the constantly bickering couple of Bergman's film, Lakoff and Tannen assert that because of "the underlying and overriding similarity of intent and desire, (to agree to disagree, to have non-communication in common) this couple actually has a great deal in common. It may not make for pleasant or productive communication, but the similarity creates a need, and an indissoluble bond between them." They go on to claim that what "is apparently conflict-ridden and anti-communicative is in effect deeply satisfying to the participants."[34] Similarly, the rapport that exists between the Dude and Walter, their mutual antagonism, is the twine that binds their unorthodox relationship.

A further component which establishes rapport is the incorporation and usage of another person's words or phrases. Tannen argues that repetition of this kind "bonds participants to the discourse and to each other, linking individual speakers in conversation and in relationships."[35] The phenomenon of sharing phrases and forms of expression functions in *The Big Lebowski* with such conviction and emphasis that it calls attention to itself. As Brandt (Philip Seymour Hoffman) hands the Dude the ransom money for the advancing hostage exchange, he stresses: "Her [Bunny's] life is in your hands," repeating "Her life is in your hands, Dude." Later, when the exchange fails, due mostly to Walter's stubborn

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[33] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.188.
[34] Robin Tolmach Lakoff & Deborah Tannen, "Conversational strategy and metastrategy in a pragmatic theory: The example of *Scenes from a Marriage*," *Semiotica*, 49.3/4, 1984, p.345.
[35] Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p.52.

faith in a simple-minded plan, the Dude repeatedly proclaims, with intensifying despair: "Her life was in our hands, man." Although, in *The Big Lebowski*, characters will refuse to understand each other, they do exhibit some communion if only in the way they cling to the words and phrases of the people with whom they come into contact. By the close of the film the phrase "where's the money, Lebowski?" is uttered by four different people each in a different context and directed at different people. Late in the film the Dude storms in on the millionaire finally realising that he has been used as a stooge and that the briefcase given to him contained no money. The Dude berates the Big Lebowski asking him where the money is, repeating the very same question he himself was asked in the film's opening sequence. The stratified city of Los Angeles may be inhabited by a wide variety of character types—from the wealthy to the deadbeats, from the perverse to the perverted, from the psychotic to the artistic—but the chain of language evinced in *The Big Lebowski* suggests it is indeed a true, if not quite harmonious, community.

In *Fargo*, one particular scene examines the repetition of single phrases and ingeniously incorporates other cinematic devices to establish an ironic interplay which undermines the viewer's expectations. Shortly after discovering that his wife has been abducted, a feat he engineered himself, Jerry tries to contact his father-in-law, Wade (Harve Presnell), on the telephone:

Jerry:

Yah, Wade, I - it's Jerry, I.

(Then, slightly more agitated.)

Jerry:

...Wade, it's, I, I don't know what to do...it's Jean.

.... I don't know what to do it's my wife

... I don't know what to do it's Jean.

Beat.

Jerry:

...Yah, Wade, it's Jerry, Wade it's Jerry

– we gotta talk, it's something, aww geez, it's terrible...

The dialogue is presented as an aural accompaniment to a slow survey of the disturbed household that initially hides Jerry's presence but an edit eventually reveals his position near the telephone, the viewer at last realising that Jerry is rehearsing his speech, attempting to produce just the right amount of mock-hysteria and panic to allay suspicion. The dialogue is simple and repetitive, but it is in the manner in which it is presented and undermined by the visual cues which lends it significance. Kozloff suggests that "cutting us off from the actor's face and body...would withhold from us the information that reaffirms (or complicates and undercuts) the spoken words."[36] John Simon, too, observes the importance of the surrounding circumstances to dialogue, arguing: "The word gains unprecedented richness from its context...on screen, the word performs, as it were, in concert with faces in closeup...with backgrounds" and with "trick photography."[37] The Coens have achieved here what Kozloff and Simon maintain are the vast possibilities of film dialogue. Joel and Ethan Coen's use of speech and language as a cinematic device is always expansive and significant and succeeds on several levels, incorporating authenticity, stylisation, affected-incoherency and exquisitely measured rhythms and repetitions.

Language and Community

Within the diegetic worlds of the Coen brothers' films exists a complex and vivid interplay of speech that reveals the way language is often used as an apparatus of power. While representing the nature of dialogue amongst communities of speakers Joel and Ethan Coen examine how language is marshalled, manipulated and contrived to meet various purposes. Language can be used as a security mechanism, a homogenising device, a tool to subvert traditional hierarchies and as a contrivance for maintaining desired social divisions. The

[36] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.98.
[37] John Simon, "The Word on Film," *The Hudson Review*, 30.4, 1977-78, p.515.

Coens are interested in the way language marginalises and contains communities, how individuals seek language to complement a social framework, how speech and words are used to implement personal glorification, and how the composition of the dialogue reflects the nature and states of relationships.

It is sometimes argued that the Coens' films are overly derivative pastiches, rich in recycled material and lacking in originality.[38] It is perhaps ironic then that a prevailing interest in their films deals with the contention that in language nothing is original. A recurring motif in the dialogue contained in the Coen brothers' films is the manner in which particular words and phrases are reused by a new speaker to provide the means for assimilation into a community. The words used, the phrases assembled, and the manner of communication, all conspire to demonstrate an intricate system of remembered texts. Linguist and phonological expert A. L. Becker asserts that "[v]ery little of what one says or writes is new... We are not so much the compositors of sentences from bits as reshapers of prior texts (the self-evident a prioris of language)."[39] Becker does not make this claim in a negative manner but rather observes the act of repeating as intrinsically valuable, explaining that:

> Repeating is almost entirely speaking the past, whether it be repeating something said a moment ago or written a millennium ago – a repeated remark, a prayer, a song. Yet in these activities there is always something of the present, some variable of the communicative act that is free to express the *now*, be it only the voice quality of the speaker, the variations of the tempo and pitch and resonance that express the repeater's attitude about what he is repeating.[40]

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[38] For negative reactions to the films of the Coen brothers see Edward Schulbyte's epilogue – "Laughter in the Dark," in Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, 2000, pp.222-25; and Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, New York University Press, New York, 1999.
[39] A. L. Becker, *Beyond Translation: Essays Toward a Modern Philology*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995, pp.89 & 384.
[40] Ibid, p.26 (Italics in original).

Becker's contention is that an individual's language is not original and is not static, rather the user is always learning to apply recycled words, phrases and sentences to new contexts.

Interestingly, Kozloff does note that this phenomenon—language acquisition—has a peculiar circular effect which is reflected in popular culture. She argues that there is a relationship between the protagonist in certain films and the viewer which is often expressed through language: "'Adopting another's dialogue' is a way to signal connection. Viewers regularly take these tag lines out of movies and make them their own for similar reasons."[41] The significance of this argument is pertinent to *The Big Lebowski*. The Dude is often cast as a kind of empty vessel, a cipher in which the other characters' influence is omnipresent. This is most overtly evident in his language formulation which is unquestionably persuaded by those around him. In the pre-title sequence of *The Big Lebowski* the Dude watches American President George Bush's media presentation outlining his administration's response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Overheard is a snippet of the President's address: "...this aggression will not stand. It will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." The Dude pays special attention to this fragment of Bush's speech and it is therefore no surprise that later, when confronted by what we might assume is an injustice of equal currency, he repeats what he saw on the television monitor that night. While meeting with the Big Lebowski, the Dude tries to explain that two men accosted him in his home and one soiled his rug and because their target was in actuality the Big Lebowski, he should then bear some responsibility for compensation. When denied by the blustery millionaire the Dude responds: "No, I do mind. The Dude minds. This will not stand, you know. This aggression will not stand, man." The language adopted by the Dude carries two notable traits: it clearly indicates the Dude's recollection of the words of his Commander-in-Chief, and it is also constructed in the Dude's own inimitable way, with the customary "you know" and "man" punctuating each utterance. Becker's notion of the variable in the communicative act which distinguishes the repeater's utterance from its original is represented here in the Dude's own application of Bush's words

The Dude's acquisition of this language is also significant because of its origin: a television address from the President of his country. Robin Lakoff suggests that "[w]e often take the behavior of people depicted on television as a model for our own, to suggest how we should feel and speak about events."[42] Tom Shachtman, speaking of what he believes to be the ever increasing inarticulacy of American society, suggests "Americans are not only getting their news from the broadcasts of the television networks, they also appear to be obtaining from these broadcasts their notions of proper and effective ways to use language."[43] Both of these commentators note how elements of popular culture provide language-building opportunities. And in the case of Shachtman, who decries the lack of eloquence in modern American politicians, the influence of leaders upon the public remains in evidence. The power of political-speak is often apparent in various situations as a conveyor of a message that is most suited to the time and the place. More recently, George W. Bush's inability to describe global terrorists as anything other than "evil-doers" indicates more than a lack of imagination and limited vocabulary. The description also highlights the presidential agenda of simplifying a potentially complex, obscure and problematic issue into a struggle between two sides conveniently labelled "good" and "evil." Shachtman claims that "[s]ince political figures are extremely prominent in American life, and even though they are not universally admired, the style and level of the politicians' articulate behavior has an equal if not greater influence on the population's speech than do the products of the entertainment industry."[44] The Dude's easy receipt of Bush senior's expression as suitable and legitimate emphasises the power of political addresses which seek to indoctrinate the public with ready-made phrases which claim to provide clarity but mostly only offer a deficiency of explanation.

The Dude also misappropriates some of the more extravagant phrases which colour his adventures through the diverse culture of Los Angeles. Maude Lebowski, the millionaire's daughter, exhibits a peculiar hold over the protagonist and his pilfering of her vocabulary betrays an affection which is later realised in

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[41] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.86.
[42] Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *The Language War*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 2000, p.212.
[43] Tom Shachtman, *The Inarticulate Society: Eloquence and Culture in America*, The Free Press, New York, 1995, p.119.

their mutual coupling. While speaking with her he seems fixated on the word "coitus" which she offers as an appropriate surrogate for a host of other less appealing terms. Later, while under heavy interrogation from the Big Lebowski, the Dude describes the millionaire's young spouse as a "trophy wife" intoning quickly "in the parlance of our times," two phrases uttered recently in a conversation with Maude. Tannen avows that using the same syntagmatic structure to construct a sentence indicates that the speaker feels the ordering—including instances of slight variation—encapsulates for him/her what is memorable or reportable about the incident or experience being discussed.[45] The Dude's desires for Maude are apparent in the dream sequence in which he caresses and coddles her in an intricately choreographed production. Therefore, it is unsurprising that he also covers her elaborate and refined vocabulary as further evidence of his infatuation.

Language acquisition in *Raising Arizona* is represented as a means not only by which people expand their vocabularies but also as a justification for their morally ambiguous actions. H.I. and Ed's absurd plan to abduct the child of the local furniture magnate is so wildly outrageous it can only be premised upon vague rationalisations reflected in the couple's use of language. The initial attempt to kidnap the child is fruitless. As H.I. returns to the family station-wagon empty-handed, Ed sits behind the wheel in despair at his failure. Ed is unmoved by H.I.'s claims that the abduction attempt "just didn't work out." Her obstinacy is apparent as she locks the doors and explains that they are not leaving till H.I. performs his duty: "You go right back up there and get me a toddler. I need a baby, H.I.. They've got more than they can handle." Ed's proclamation echoes the newspaper headline announcing the birth of the "Arizona Quints" – "'More than we can handle', laughs Dad." Becker contends that "much of apparently free conversation is a replay of remembered texts: from T.V. news, radio talk, the New York Times..."[46] More crucial than the source of Ed's remark is the manner in which she chooses to make literal what appears to be an off-the-cuff statement, a means to justify an indefensible crime.

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[44] Ibid, p.156.
[45] Op. Cit., Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices*, p.56.
[46] A. L. Becker, "Correspondences: An essay on iconicity and philology," cited in Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices*, p.44.

Ed exhibits a trait which is common to many of the characters in *Raising Arizona*: the use of language to suit one's own purposes. Repetition is apparent in much of the Coen brothers' films, the mirrored narrative structure of *Miller's Crossing* is the most dazzling example, but it is the dialogue that most often reveals the richness and power of repetition. Using Bruce Kawin's terms applied to practitioners of repetition, the Coens are "artists who repeat something *now* to make you remember something *then* and set you up for something to come *later*...who draw contrasts and assume you will *remember* how a word was used last and will draw your own conclusions from the difference of contexts."[47] In the examples just cited from *The Big Lebowski* and *Raising Arizona* it is often the media that is the conduit of the language that is acquired by the characters of the Dude and Ed. The dialogue reflects the desperate plight of the characters to find a place in the community that surrounds them.

The characters in Joel and Ethan Coen's films often employ language for their own benefit: they make it do for them what they are incapable of doing in real terms. Dialogue is a tool to be exploited: it is a device which cuts the characters off from one and other, draws them closer to their fellow man, enables the acquisition of a new or improved identity and aids in the demarcation of cultural boundaries. Language can be used to establish exactly where one belongs in a community and dictates precisely how society manifests itself. According to Martin Montgomery the composition of a community is mirrored in the language:

> If the society is stratified, then as language enters into the life of that society to shape, cement and reproduce it, it too will display stratification. Particular groups will tend to have characteristic ways of using the language—characteristic ways of pronouncing it, for example—and these will help to mark off the boundaries of one group from another.[48]

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[47] Bruce Kawin, *Telling it Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film*, University Press of Colorado, Boulder, 1989, pp.34-35 (Italics in original).
[48] Op. Cit., Martin Montgomery, *An Introduction to Language and Society*, p.62.

The character of Carl in *Fargo* is ambiguous for he is ostensibly a local—his surname is Showalter, indicative of the Swedish sounding resonance congenital to Minnesota—yet his manner and speech casts him as an outsider. His language is coarse and he assembles sentences replete with obscenity and crude double entendres. Thomas Doherty slightly erroneously submits that only villains utter the "f-word" in *Fargo*.[49] It is not entirely true, one of Jerry's customers summons the word quite deliberately in one critical scene. Yet, what Doherty is implying is quite obvious: the use of obscenity by Carl, and by the other wicked characters, is an indication of their marginalisation from proper society. It pushes them to the boundary of the local community whose politeness, cheery phraseology and musical dialect is indicative of their disposition and, perhaps, repression. According to Mottram language "acts as a barrier between [the residents of Brainerd] and the morally deficient underbelly that lurks beneath the omnipresent blanket of snow that engulfs them."[50] In *Fargo* the villains are identified by their unwillingness to join in on this language game. They express themselves violently both verbally and physically, with one exception: Jerry. Jerry represents the character who sits astride this moral barrier. His place within society is assured by his language use: he presents an image of righteousness yet personifies vile corruption. Jerry's attempts to maintain his outward integrity betray a desire to be within the community, even when his scheming compels him to that community's outer-limits.

The Big Lebowski plays a similar game, operating within the widely diverse culture of Los Angeles, the Coens have ample opportunity to explore the distinctive way language articulates social division. Montgomery suggests that whenever "differences are registered between groups of speakers who use ostensibly the 'same language', these differences become a site for the interplay of social judgements as part of an intricate symbiosis between language and society."[51] Josh Levine notes the manner in which the dialogue in the Coens' film encompasses a society of militants, nihilists, pacifists, tycoons, surfers and artists, with "fountains of testosterone-soaked rhetoric from Walter, good-natured if flaky

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[49] Thomas Doherty, "*Fargo*," *Cineaste*, 22.2, 1996, p.47.
[50] Op. Cit., James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, p.126.
[51] Op. Cit., Martin Montgomery, *An Introduction to Language and Society*, p.62.

cynicism from the Dude, perverse obscenities from Jesus, hardball capitalism from the rich Lebowski..."[52] and so on. In *The Big Lebowski*, Joel and Ethan Coen are able to explore just how social stratification is achieved through language, how it can marginalise in the same way as ethnicity and religion.

Raising Arizona, on the contrary, reveals the way that language is deployed to subvert just such stratification. Here the Coen brothers' dialogue comically evaluates the attempt by the marginalised types to adapt to the dominant middle-class culture, values and attitudes. Thus, when Gale and Evelle Snopes (John Goodman and William Forsythe, respectively) employ clinical terminology and specific expressions to describe their escape from jail and their planned illicit activities it is obvious that the language is used to vindicate their otherwise dishonest endeavours. They describe their jail-break as determined by their personal belief that "the institution no longer had anything to offer." Earlier in the prison counselling sessions Gale describes a life of crime as a "career" which sometimes carries priority over family, Evelle noting: "Work's what's kept us happy." Their dialogue explores the method by which language is used desperately as a controlling and directive tool. If this kind of misapplication of language is used enough times, with suitable conviction, it seems entirely possible that it will enable the speaker to establish his/her desired place within the culture, at least in the speaker's mind. After all, as Tannen argues, "[p]erceiving and utilising words and phrases represents part of what makes an individual a member of a culture."[53] The characters in *Raising Arizona* are analogous to children who play act, they are trying to establish for themselves an alternative identity, and the tool they engage for such a task is language. Russell notes that *Raising Arizona* is:

> redolent with characters who appear to have composed themselves from language appropriated from various sources...Their clichéd speech reveals the pop-cultural foundations of their existence, the extent to which the culture offers pre-fabricated identities easily accessible through its predigested images and ready-made phrases."[54]

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[52] Josh Levine, *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers*, ECW Press, Toronto, 2000, p.142.
[53] Op. Cit., Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices*, p.76.
[54] Op. Cit., Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, pp.41-42 (Italics in original).

Russell argues that this illustrates the Coens' postmodern conception of identity, "wherein self is not 'a pre-given entity or essence, but [is] produced in the signs, narratives, fictions and fantasies that make up the social world'."[55] Joel and Ethan Coen observe that in their postmodern worlds language can be, and often is, a site by which we can secure our cultural membership and forge identities.

The Coen brothers manufacture dialogue for their characters to exploit, but these characters also tend to misuse and misapply the words and phrases that they frequently employ. These are not mistakes on the Coens' part, nor are they the errors of the characters, instead these are often the strategic means by which these characters short-circuit reality. The language styles pursued by the characters in films such as *The Big Lebowski, Fargo*, and most explicitly *Raising Arizona*, frequently betray repressed or unconscious desires, sometimes in modes which expose social insensitivities and the value systems of these cultures. The irony inherent in the dialogue of *Raising Arizona* stems in part from the gulf that exists between the florid, loquacious, and poetic speech of the characters and their sparse, homely and modest physical reality. Illustrating this theory Jeff Evans cites a sequence in which H.I.'s machinist buddy (M. Emmett Walsh in cameo) details an incident when as a road worker he had witnessed one of his co-workers walking along a stretch of highway with the head of a road-accident victim in one hand and his lunch in the other. H.I.'s buddy, to anyone paying attention to the story, is a labourer enlisted to clean up after road accidents. Yet, as he tells his tale he declares he is "patrolling down" a stretch of highway and is involved in "paramedical work in affiliation with the state highway system." The manner by which Walsh's character chooses to employ terms which are not at all appropriate reveals his desire to impress those around him, and perhaps even himself. Evans notes "we see all the characters' attempts to demonstrate knowledge of their world and capabilities to work with it through their language use and control."[56] *Raising Arizona* is to some extent about that desire to improve one's position: H.I. a confirmed recidivist ("that's one bonehead name") wants to marry, work, build a home and start a family. He's after the American Dream, as is his machinist

[55] Ibid, p.42.
[56] Jeff Evans, "Comic Rhetoric In *Raising Arizona*," *Studies in American Humor*, 4.3, 1996, p.49.

friend, only his friend has found a way to fabricate a chimera of success, having failed to achieve it in a material sense. The moral of the film will finally suggest that this material success is as much a charade as Walsh's story, and that true happiness and prosperity come from the modest pursuit of doing the right thing. To tell it any other way is a falsehood, exemplified in the earlier reference in which the Snopes brothers use language to justify their life of crime. Their language misuse and misapplication illustrates the concept of applying standard or regular forms of expression—cliché and platitude, for instance--to hide the reality of one's existence behind an image of order and respectability.

The individuals in *Raising Arizona* are highly adept at manipulating the elements surrounding them to exhibit an image of normalcy. These characters seek to circumvent the natural order of reality, to take the short route—robbery, escape, baby snatching, extortion—mirroring their abuse of language which endeavours to emphasise a success or achievement which has not been realised. Russell maintains the application of " ichés, bromides, and homilies that comprise much of the film's rhythmic dialogue take on a mad intensity when the Coens orchestrate their utterance in disjunctive contexts."[57] But there also seems to be more than mere lunacy or irony in this marrying of inappropriate language with unsuited contexts. There is a sinister aspect to this language misuse, similar in principle to cheating in an exam, as the characters' short-cuts reveal both an absence in their lives and an unwillingness to achieve or overcome this deficiency via legitimate means. In *Raising Arizona* the distinction between word and deed passes a damning critique not only on the characters but also on the concept of the American Dream. The characters' basic misunderstandings of language and ignorance of the gap between what is said and what is meant promote the Coen brothers' running commentary on the quality and viability of the dream. If the American Dream, or something like the American Dream, can be attained simply through the manipulation of words then what is its true worth? Ultimately, the Coens will suggest with *Raising Arizona* that to achieve a personal success, based on sacrifice and hard work, whether or not it equates with traditional notions of success, is the true achievement.

In *The Big Lebowski* the unemployed Dude uses curious phrases which fail to match his situation, but perhaps reflect his needs and desires. As his adventure becomes too complicated and he comes to the belief that there will be no solution at the heart of the abduction mystery he proclaims to Maude: "I've got to tender my resignation...or whatever." The qualifier on the end of this statement illustrates the Dude's unwillingness to commit fully to the specialised jargon of the workplace. The Dude is never really in employment in any official sense; initially the Big Lebowski engages him to identify the kidnappers and escort the ransom money, and later Maude herself requests his assistance in getting to the bottom of the mystery which she jealously believes is a plot by Bunny to extort cash from the Big Lebowski. Maude's request brings a quaint response from the Dude as he tries to explain the unplumbed depths of the mystery. It seems in this exchange the Dude has taken on the language of the gumshoe, explaining: "It's a complicated case, Maude. Lotta ins, lotta outs, lotta what-have-yous." The idea that the Dude is actually on a "case" reflects his desire to have some purpose and direction in his life. That he is in fact really employed by no one when he chooses to tender his resignation is perhaps the foremost example of how language can be used to confuse and undermine reality in service of the speaker and his or her desire to seek acceptance in a community.

The manner in which the Snopes brothers, H.I. and the Dude tend to grasp onto language inappropriate for their respective situations demonstrates their crises of identity. The desire to harness an improved self-image--the Dude as private dick, H.I. as family man—and the clash with reality expressed through language recalls one of cinema's most famous identity seekers: *Taxi Driver*'s (Scorsese, 1976) Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro). In Scorsese's film the chief protagonist is anguished by a vacant personality, and his inability to find a place in the society that surrounds him eventually evolves into a violent explosion of rage and frustration. Bickle's mind is laid bare to the audience through a voice over narration of his diary entries revealing his ham-fisted attempts at eloquence and the inherent desire for a common language. This desire is undermined by his failure to connect with people in real situations demonstrating a dual reality in Bickle's existence. Marion W. Wiess, writing on this subject, argues that the

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[57] Op. Cit., Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, p.29.

combination of "street talk" (or regional vernacular) with elaborate coding—that is, extended and more detailed vocabulary, such as Bickle's diary entries—suggest a clash of noble aspiration and expression demonstrated in the restricted ability for communication.[58] H.I., in *Raising Arizona*, exhibits perhaps an unlikely connection to Scorsese's urban wanderer. The Coens' hayseed philosopher works in a dead-end job until fired by a debauched supervisor, whilst suffering a hopeless family situation and living in a trailer in the middle of the Arizona desert. Yet, H.I. is able to express himself, through elaborate coding, into a better reality. In *Taxi Driver*, according to Weiss, the elaborate coding infers a more exalted image of Bickle than is originally communicated, suggesting perhaps a duality at work that pits his mundane existence against a more dignified personality.[59] In *The Big Lebowski* the Dude's desire to be both accepted into Maude Lebowski's life (by using her words) and his need to have some purpose (by using terms and phrases of an employed detective) reflects his urge to form an identity. Here, the Dude's compulsion to give meaning to his existence, particularly where there is such a clear vacancy, links him, also, to Bickle.

In *Fargo* the distinction between the meaning of the words and the situation to which these words are applied carries a more nasty and less appeasing significance. Early in the film Jerry arranges a meeting with his father-in-law Wade and Wade's accountant, Stan Grossman (Larry Grandenburg), to furnish a business proposition. The deal ultimately falls through for Jerry with Wade using his financial clout to humiliate him. Shortly after his wife has been abducted, Jerry meets again with these two men to go over the details of the ransom. These two meetings—the business meeting and the ransom meeting—proceed in much the same manner: the participants bargaining, arguing and throwing their weight around. The perversity of a business deal being conducted over a woman's life is not lost on the Coens as they underscore the odious analogy with relevant dialogue. The abduction is being treated as an unsound business deal in which Wade suggests they offer half a million rather that the requested million. Wade is reluctant to pay the money because the deal is unfavourable: "where is my

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[58] Marion W. Weiss, "Linguistic coding in the films of Martin Scorsese," *Semiotica*, 55.3/4, 1985, p.193.
[59] Ibid, p.193.

protection, they've got Jean." Later, Jerry contends, "this is *my* deal here, Wade. Jean is *my* wife here." Jerry's dialogue not only reflects the authority he has now assumed—undermining Wade's typical supremacy—but also the fundamental absence of sensitivity or consciousness for his wife's humanity. Jerry's assessment that "we gotta play ball with these guys" and Stan's declaration that "we're not horse-trading here...we gotta just bite the bullet" makes clear their dispassionate reduction of a human life into a series of placating and empty bargaining adages. The language of American consumerism is here (mis)applied to the sanctified commodity of a human life.

Fargo identifies many of its less reputable characters by the language they adopt in certain situations. In the Coen brothers' films many elements of the dialogue contribute to the formation of relationships between the characters, even in the way they use coarse language. Joel and Ethan Coen have used obscenity as a complex signifying tool in their films. *Raising Arizona* is almost devoid of any serious obscenity, its world is closed and contained, the unreal dialogue divulging no desire for common expletives. But *The Big Lebowski* incorporates obscenity as a means to identify the partitions of that society. Russell criticises *The Big Lebowski* for excessive obscenity, stating that "[m]arring *Lebowski*'s particular discourse on the Coens' ever-present fascination with the geometries of language and self-construction is an abundance of gratuitous obscenities. The constant barrage of foul verbiage is at best annoying and boring...at worst...repellent."[60] Russell's statement seems contradictory, acknowledging that the dialogue in Joel and Ethan Coen's films is pregnant with significance but also redundant and trivial. It seems Russell's mistake resides within her blind disregard for obscenity as a vital and relevant language device, overlooking the notion that it holds just as much significance as any of the other "geometries of language" she considers substantial. Kozloff, conversely, regards obscenity in film dialogue as a prime area for analysis suggesting that it is indicative of strong emotion and a willingness to transgress, break codes of parental admonishment and religious taboo, and provides yet another avenue by which to compose character.[61] In *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* the prevalence of cursing or offensive language,

[60] Op. Cit., Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, p.166.
[61] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, pp.207-208.

usually of the four-lettered variety, demonstrates how this form of language can work to divide or unite members of a culture.

For Montgomery, "speech will vary according to the primary group affiliation of the speaker around crucial reference points such as class, region, ethnicity, gender and also age."[62] And these influences are the very same which have the power to sanction language and to decide what is appropriate. The community values in *Fargo*—the strong sense of family, evident in Marge's marriage and the moral and polite constitution of the inhabitants of Brainerd—has dictated the nature of appropriate language and most of those who transgress this are ushered to the boundary of this society. A peripheral character in *Fargo* keys us into the dialectal nature of obscenity in this Coen film. Shep Proudfoot (Steve Reevis) is a mechanic at Jerry's work-place and is the link between Jerry and the kidnappers. He is also the first step in the investigation of the crimes. Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), Brainerd's police chief, catalogues the checkered past that has befallen Shep: "Now I know you've had some problems; struggling with the narcotics, some other entanglements, currently on parole... ." This interview positions Shep on the outskirts of this respectful Mid-Western community. It is perhaps no coincidence that his language also deviates from the traditional courteous conversation of the locals. When he discovers that Carl's incompetence has placed him under suspicion with the authorities his rage is unbounded. He delivers upon Carl a merciless beating and unleashes a string of obscenities, notable for the almost total absence of sentence structure or meaning. His verbal barrage is merely a litany of curses, one following the other; his speech taking on the character of animalistic noises, carrying no meaning just unadorned emotion. Timothy Jay affirms what will be no surprise to many: that anger and obscenity go hand in hand. He contends that in "hostile verbal aggression, the goal of cursing is to harm a person who has hurt the speaker or damaged his self-esteem."[63] Obviously the pain Carl suffers stems more from his physical beating but the language that Shep uses when he administers this physical abuse gives aural expression to his anger and frustration.

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[62] Op. Cit., Martin Montgomery, *An Introduction to Language and Society*, p.101.
[63] Op. Cit., Timothy Jay, *Why We Curse – A Neuro-Psycho-Social theory of Speech*, p.57.

Jay also maintains that "angry cursing takes one of two forms: the use of expletives, which is automatic and reflexive, and strategic verbal aggression which is controlled and calculated."[64] Clearly the first of these applies to Shep's emotional outburst but the latter is explored in one of *Fargo*'s most interesting episodes. Early in the film Jerry attempts to sell a client a car with a rust resistant seal known as Tru-coat, of which we soon learn the customer has specifically refused. The customer berates Jerry, accusing him of lying in their deal, while Jerry simply sits in his chair, a pained expression painted on his face. When the customer eventually relents, under great sufferance, a faint smile on Jerry's face suggests he plays these manipulative games everyday and that he is used to the abuse the technique is bound to invite. Russell contends that the "disgusted customer ultimately accepts the hidden costs of his new car, cursing Lundergaard with each breath."[65] But Russell is mistaken, for the customer only utters the one expletive, at one key moment. In the controlled and level-headed attack the customer dubs Jerry "a *fucking* liar" with all the conviction he can muster for a word he can barely bring himself to say. Russell's error brings to notice the significance of this moment in *Fargo* in which the dialogue clearly demonstrates the cultural significance of obscenity in this society. The angry customer is forced by his frustration to step outside his normally restricted sphere of experience in order to convey his disappointment with a double-dealing charlatan. It is worth noting the hesitation of the disgruntled customer just before he utters the word which causes him so much consternation, and the way his reserved wife clutches his arm as a gesture of restraint. Jay states: "Cursing that is not reflexive goes through an inhibitory phase prior to an act of verbal aggression. Here elements of the provoking event and context are weighed. At this point, the speaker makes a risk-benefit analysis of cursing."[66] Shep's rampant foul language is unmeasured and unfettered by concerns for formalities and decorum. The customer's language, while no less passionate, is a strategic and necessary break with the conventions of the society in which he exists. The values of this restrained society dictate what is acceptable and what is not, and the customer's anxiety about flouting these values reflects not only the frustration he endures but also the kind of community

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[64] Ibid, p.56.
[65] Op. Cit., Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, p.119.
[66] Op. Cit., Timothy Jay, *Why We Curse – A Neuro-Psycho-Social theory of Speech*, p.58.

in which he exists. Thus obscenity is yet another element of language which shapes a society.

The language of the Dude and Walter in *The Big Lebowski* is abundant in expletives. Their conversations are punctuated by largely benign obscenities which function to underscore their mutual understanding and endorse their shared influences. Although at odds on some fundamental principles—the benefits of pacifism, the continuing relevance of Vietnam as a point of comparison to all current issues—their conversations suggest they do understand each other perfectly. Similar to the contention that Walter and the Dude are like a married couple, their compatibility is also apparent in the way they casually include like-minded coarse language into their everyday discourse. Jay notes "[a]n individual's knowledge [of cursing] depends on personal experience, psychological make-up, and on the culture in which he or she is raised. As such, a person's style of cursing will be the product of both shared and private experiences."[67] The Dude and Walter's relationship is built upon these shared experiences and their mutual manner for expressing their responses to such encounters. Mamet's plays are also renowned for the strategic deployment of similarly offensive language. Again an analogy between the Coens and Mamet is clearly apparent when Anne Dean notes that Mamet uses obscenity, "to maintain rhythm, to express the frustration felt by his characters, to illustrate the bond and understanding that exists between them, and to demonstrate the *ordinariness* and acceptability of such language to certain sectors of society."[68] The coarse language of some of the characters in *The Big Lebowski* and the fact that others avoid such verbal references represents an additional system by which these people attempt to forge identities for themselves through language and how they use this language to demonstrate their membership to certain sectors of the community.

Language and Culture

Ultimately, within the films of Joel and Ethan Coen the formal components of the dialogue in conjunction with the intra-textual aspects of the

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[67] Ibid, p.20.
[68] Op. Cit., Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, p.33.

language conspire to reveal issues that exist beyond the texts themselves. Text reflects context, and vice-versa. Montgomery's analysis identifies similar interconnected relationships in the child's progress toward language:

> In the act of engaging with others in dialogue s/he is learning the prevalent modes of relationship as given in the language of the surrounding society. And at the same time, that society is imparting to him/her in language its own dominant meanings and preferred ways of looking at the world.[69]

The manner in which the characters use language in the Coens' films investigates these dominant meanings. Kozloff believes that dialogue is capable of examining "issues of power and dominance, of empathy and intimacy, of class, ethnicity, and gender."[70] The preponderance of rhetoric, proverbial and generic cues and cliché as language devices in the Coens' films announces the manner by which dialogue is used by the filmmakers to critique cultural institutions such as the American Dream, ethnicity, politics, religion and the image of the family within popular culture. The way the Coens use this element of their films reveals a depth of meaning that commentators generally suggest is lacking in their apparently derivative films. *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* are three Coen films in which dialogue exhibits an underlying inquiry into social institutions and the ideologies on which they are founded.

The response of President George Bush's administration to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was a typical political statement; rich in rhetoric and coloured by hyperbole it was the kind of language expected in such times:

> Protecting freedom means standing up to aggression. You know, the brutality inflicted on the people of Kuwait and on innocent citizens of every country must not be rewarded, because a bully unchecked today is a bully unleashed tomorrow...The invasion of Kuwait was without

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[69] Op. Cit., Martin Montgomery, *An Introduction to Language and Society*, p.53.
[70] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.26.

> provocation, the looting of Kuwait is without excuse, and the occupation of Kuwait will not stand.[71]

A decade later, George W. Bush's absent-minded call for a "crusade" against terrorists in the Middle-East, and his summoning of the standard Old-West slogan "Wanted: Dead or Alive" in reference to the chief terrorist suspect expressed the dual nature of rhetoric as both meaningless, but also filled with intent and purpose. It is this dual nature which is persistently examined via the dialogue in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen.

Mottram contends that *Raising Arizona* is clearly contextualised in the Reagan era as it recreates the economic conditions brought on by that administration's policies. Mottram argues that *Raising Arizona*:

> sets out to examine the desire to conform through having children. Set during the time of Reaganomics, this is the first of two occasions that the Coens would use their country's President to establish a context for the film. In *The Big Lebowski*, the appearance of President Bush on the television sets the film during the Gulf War, highlighting just how out of step with the times the Dude and Walter are.[72]

Raising Arizona is abundant in political critique, damning in its indictment of the conservative values that were espoused and the systems of control that were imposed during the 1980s. Christopher Beach contends that *Raising Arizona* is a "transgressive commentary on the self-absorbed yuppie values of the 1980s and on the materialist aspirations of the middle-class American family."[73] Ronald Reagan's era as the American President promoted a strictly controlled fiscal policy of supply-side economics which sought to eradicate foreign debt through the metaphorical tightening of the nation's collective belt. To achieve this Reagan's policies were unusually harsh on government programs, dissuading

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[71] Larry Berman & Bruce W. Jentleson, "Bush and the Post-Cold-War World: New Challenges for American Leadership," Eds. Colin Campbell & Bert A. Rockman, *The Bush Presidency: First Appraisals*, Chatham House Publishers, New Jersey, 1991, p.117.
[72] Op. Cit., James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, p.45.

dependency on federal beneficence, and relying instead on a series of undertakings to reduce the federal role in welfare. The difficulty of these circumstances is hinted at early in *Raising Arizona* as H.I. implicates Reagan's policies in his compulsion to jack-up convenience stores, declaring it's not easy going straight "with that son-of-a-bitch Reagan in the White House."

The previously cited examples of the Snopes brothers vindicating their aberrant lifestyles through popular maxims—"work's what's kept us happy"—suggests the manner in which these characters use rhetoric to justify their actions in an economically hostile environment. Evans notes that the rhetoric in *Raising Arizona* encourages false pride, self delusion and mock success: it is "language that mimics the cultural tenet of the pursuit of success even as it misrepresents the individual's place in relation to his world or the dream."[74] Referring to the Snopes brothers, Evans argues that they use rhetoric and adages associated with the American Dream and apply it to their "careers" as serial armed thieves: "Here the language of American aphorism and initiative combine to rhetorically legitimize the future while linguistically and ethically obfuscating the means to those ends."[75] The Snopes boys claim that their predicted crime spree across the South-West will continue until they "can retire or get caught" noting "either way we're fixed for life." Evelle justifies the lifestyle by neatly applying a well worn maxim picked-up in the prison counselling sessions: "It's like Doc Schwartz says, 'You gotta have a little bit of ambition.'" Here, the Coens satirise the misguided use of empty language to justify immoral practices and attitudes.

The Snopes' reliance on meaningless words will eventually come back to haunt them. As they rob the bank which will begin their crime spree they are confronted by a collection of elderly farmers cashing their subsidy cheques. The old folks can only interpret literally what the Snopes transmit figuratively, disrupting the rhythm of the robbery. Gale and Evelle burst through the bank's doors with shotguns at the ready, Gale commanding: "Everybody freeze.

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[73] Christopher Beach, *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p.190.
[74] Op. Cit., Jeff Evans, "Comic Rhetoric In *Raising Arizona*," p.45.
[75] Ibid, p.46.

Everybody down on the ground." The confused bank customers merely stand, unwillingly to drop to the floor adhering to Gale's first order. Evans asserts:

> The resultant plot disorder comically locates the generational and cultural rift between the old-timers' literal adherence to and trust in denotative language to direct or describe action, a time when language held credence and permanence, to the Coens' present era of linguistic self-service and confusion.[76]

Later Gale confesses the robbery would have gone more smoothly but for the old-timer who disrupted his concentration. These career criminals short-circuit their route to success in action and word; the oppression of the political regime which sought to limit legitimate opportunity makes convenient this self-justification and self delusion.

The Big Lebowski also investigates the use of rhetorical language constructions which serve their users in manufacturing purpose in and mastery over their lives. According to David Edelstein, "[t]he Coens principle target is the way Americans conceal their self-interest behind apple-pie slogans and icons, sometimes unconsciously."[77] The Dude's personal rhetoric reveals how he, like the Snopes boys, uses words which help to give some form and legitimacy to his wayward existence. While in bed with Maude she enquires about his life, the things he has done, the achievements he has attained. He speaks of a life as political protester, his potential fame compromised by his rigidity on issues of principle. Among his past adventures he describes a period where he worked "in the music business briefly." Maude emits a curious: "Oh?" to which the Dude responds: "a roadie for Metallica – Speed of Sound Tour." Maude's more discouraged "Oh," suggests the very real gap which exists between what the Dude initially implied and what is, to Maude at least, a certain disappointing reality. Joel and Ethan Coen depict communities in which words have very little value, and in which language is often manipulated to create a meaning which does not follow from the expression uttered: verbal non-sequiturs. The word for the Snopes

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[76] Ibid, pp.48-49.
[77] Op. Cit., David Edelstein, "Invasion of the Baby Snatchers," p.57.

and the Dude and many other Coen characters is merely there to serve their users, and their selfishness and demand for legitimacy and success seems to drive this desire.

The language of the Coens' characters is pre-packaged and genre-specific, absent in content but always serviceable to the user. Travis Bickle's language in *Taxi Driver*, according to Weiss, is elaborately coded, identifying his desire and attempts to find some communion with those around him. He declares in a diary entry that he thinks he has stomach cancer but he really should not complain because, as the maxim suggests: "You are only as healthy as you feel." Weiss insists that the combination of his personal expression—his sickly state—with the cliché, which carries universal currency, enables Bickle to place his own experience into accord with the world around him.[78] Cliché is a method by which the individuals of *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*, in particular, are able to achieve or construct a sense of identity. The dialogue employed by these characters is ready-made but necessarily lacking in substance.

When Wade has decided that Jerry is too incompetent to handle the ransom deal, he vows to take on the task himself. George Toles believes that "[e]verything that Wade is, and every Western he has ever seen, tell him that he must reject a deal whose terms he never agreed to, and settle the matter in person."[79] As he drives through the wintry night he rehearses a speech that betrays his intense anger but also his misguided sense of inspiration. Wade checks that his revolver is in working order, uttering to himself: "Okay, here's your damn money...(laughs humourlessly)...Now, where's my daughter? You, you goddamned punk!" Kozloff argues that the conventions of dialogue in film are largely due to generic function, suggesting "filmmakers and filmgoers have unconsciously internalized these patterns of speech as most appropriate for these types of stories."[80] So Wade rehearses the kind of clichéd speech most often associated with fictional ransoms, kidnappers and face-offs. His inspiration perhaps is Clint Eastwood's reactionary cop, Dirty Harry Callahan, a character

[78] Op. Cit., Marion W. Weiss, "Linguistic coding in the films of Martin Scorsese," p.193.
[79] Op. Cit., George Toles, "Obvious Mysteries in *Fargo*," p.659.
[80] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, pp.137-8.

renowned for sparing the crooks the exigency of a criminal trial and instead throwing them upon the mercy of his revolver. Yet, when Wade tries the same phrases he rehearsed in the "real" ransom situation he finds it to be fatally inadequate and inappropriate. Wade's use of cliché is misguided, for he is not in a Western, and he is not the impervious hero—Gary Cooper or Clint Eastwood—but rather just an ordinary man who believes language will be enough to make him the man he needs to be. The words, though, prove to be mortally futile.

Carl himself is not adverse to adopting the phraseology which he thinks will best suit his incompatible identity. He may kill Wade in the just related sequence but up until this point he has exhibited a certain reluctance to expose himself to such violence. By the time he meets Wade in the parking garage he has been beaten, deceived, humiliated, and the straightforward plan he is adhering to is being flouted by everyone else involved. The frustration of seeing the obstinate Wade when he was expecting to meet Jerry triggers his character's descent into irrevocable violence. In the scene in which Gaear murders the policeman, Carl demonstrates his character's desire to manufacture the tough identity which would give him the capability to deal with the life-style he has chosen. Just as the police car shines its lights and Carl registers the need for calm he turns to Jean, covered by a blanket in the back seat, and warns her: "Keep it still back there, lady, or we're gunna have to...you know...to shoot ya." Carl's uneasiness with the clichéd phrase reveals his apprehension with its real meaning. He tries on the cliché for size and finds it ill-fitting and uncomfortable. Carl delivers the line like a poor actor in a cheap movie, his stilted articulation suggesting just how remote he considers the possibility of violence.

The Dude is not much of an actor in his b-grade attempts at playing the Philip Marlowe of his detective adventure. This detective mystery which has given meaning and direction to his largely aimless existence offers him the opportunity to use the clichéd dialogue that he knows is appropriate to the situation, but perhaps, not his situation. Berliner notes that generic clichés offer "us the same comfort that genre in general provides, they tell us where we are and

where we are going."[81] For a character like the wayward Dude, anything that tells him what to do and where to go is indeed a blessing. When the Dude's stolen car is recovered he asks the policeman whether they have any "leads" regarding its theft and the whereabouts of his briefcase. The smirking cop responds comically: "Leads, yeah. I'll just check with the boys down at the Crime Lab. They've assigned four more detectives to the case, got us working in shifts." The clichéd language the Dude thinks will pass as significant merely reveals his ignorance. Also, his insistence about referring to the "case" he is working on when really it is just a minor mystery which has developed around him exhibits his desire to fit in and to find some sort of validity in this situation. The clichés of Wade, Carl, and the Dude are consolations in a world of uncertainty and perplexity.

A still further manifestation of this epidemic of empty language exists within proverbial language, a style of utterance used by the characters in the Coens' films for guidance and instruction. Aphorisms and adages are called upon to describe and control events, the dialogue reflecting the manner in which words are used to create structure and fabricate command over certain situations. Evans notes that in *Raising Arizona* "[t]he characters want language, and want to trust language, to give them the verbal instructions for assimilating into the American community."[82] The characters of *Fargo*, *Raising Arizona* and *The Big Lebowski* reverse the natural order of action and language. For them language comes before deed, it is the foreordination of the action. It is not applied to the description of the act after the event but provides the guidelines to the event as the characters hope it will play out. These are the words by which the characters choose to live.

With its eloquent dialogue and elegant and creative narration, *Raising Arizona* offers ample opportunity for the expression of proverbial speech in which slogans and mottos are applied to everyday situations. Yet, H.I.'s narration is a florid mismatching of proverbs; his ability to combine two sayings to describe one event emphasises the meaninglessness of the words he is using. Beach notes that it is here that "we find contradictory forms of language, representing the confused

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[81] Op. Cit., Todd Berliner, "Hollywood Movie Dialogue and the 'Real Realism' of John Cassavetes," p.3.
[82] Op. Cit., Jeff Evans, "Comic Rhetoric In *Raising Arizona*," p.49.

form of linguistic habitus associated with a mediatized postmodern culture."[83] H.I.'s justification for Nathan Jr.'s abduction to the sceptical Ed is a notable example of the mismatch: "Well now honey, we've been over this and over this. There's what's right and there's what's right, and never the twain shall meet." His rationalisation of the kidnapping is nothing more than the application of a mixed aphorism without any claim to logic or validity. Rather, H.I.'s statement acts as a cool and comforting platitude. This is the "quick, aphoristic, proverbial language/wisdom – rhetorically packaged and controlled," which Evans argues is characteristic of the individuals in *Raising Arizona*.[84] Gale is not beyond the use of such colourful phraseology in his never ending attempts to recruit H.I. back to a life of crime. Noticing the increasing friction between Ed and H.I., and learning of the latter's recent termination, Gale tempts H.I. with his plan to rob a hayseed bank, beginning the conversation: "I'd rather light a candle than curse your darkness." The phrase is indicative not only of the opportunity laid out for H.I. but also of Gale's ability to sugar-coat his designs in positive and appealing phrases.

This kind of rhetoric, these ready-made ideas transmitted in colourfully eloquent truisms, not only reveal an underlying emptiness to the characters' gestures but also a trite superficiality as well. For linguist Deborah Tannen, the fixed nature of proverbs is often viewed as insincere in American culture which more often than not favours novelty.[85] Novelty in this sense bears the hallmarks of spontaneity and consideration and suggests the relevance of the words to a situation. In Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* the morose romantic decries the superficiality of a fixed expression: "for no argument so throws me as when somebody trots out a meaningless platitude when I am speaking straight from the heart."[86] But, in *Raising Arizona*, the proverb is not always fixed so rigidly, often evolving into a new, and even less profound statement. H.I. and Ed are expert at applying these mixed maxims to their circumstances as married couple and baby snatchers. Under the new pressures of fatherhood and recently laid-off by his depraved supervisor, H.I. returns to robbing convenience stores, much to the

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[83] Op. Cit., Christopher Beach, *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*, p.195.
[84] Op. Cit., Jeff Evans, "Comic Rhetoric in *Raising Arizona*," p.44.
[85] Op. Cit., Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices*, p.40.
[86] Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Translated by Michael Hulse, Penguin Books, Ringwood, translation published in 1989 (first published in 1774), p.61.

chagrin of his wife. Ed just happens to be nursing Nathan Jr. in the family car when H.I. performs a stick-up, driving off and leaving him to an elaborate Keystone Cops-style police pursuit in which he is shot at, trailed by dogs and launched out of a pick-up truck. When H.I. eventually reunites with a somewhat reluctant, and still peeved Ed, he attempts to placate her with a calming and rationalising statement: "I'm okay and you're okay, and that's there what it is." Later Ed will describe their married situation with an equally colourful clash of cliché: "You and me is just a fool's paradise." Their words are haphazard and thrown together, much in the manner of a collage. Their familiar and homey aphorisms seem to stem from a constant supply of ready-made dialogue which can be applied to almost any situation.

At the conclusion of *The Big Lebowski* the Dude shares a word with the film's narrator, actor Sam Elliott (credited as "The Stranger"). He had earlier spoken to the narrator when his despair was at its greatest. In this initial meeting The Stranger comforts the disconsolate protagonist, offering him some reassuring words which may serve him well in the continuance of his adventures. The Stranger proclaims to the Dude: "Sometimes you eat the bar, and sometimes, well, the bar eats you." Finally, in the concluding sequence of *The Big Lebowski* the Dude returns the phrase to The Stranger, suggesting that even though his adventure has come to nothing, it is just one of those things. Here the emptiness of a truly vacuous proverb reflects not only the Dude's existence but also the formal qualities of the Coens' shaggy-dog detective story. Without something new to say, without something that originates from the speaker, there is an absence. Proverbial speech in the Coens' films reflects this transparency of language and examines how it undermines the characters' attempts to be or do something original and instead opt for the dialogue which they hope will help them belong.

The emphasis on the vacuum of meaning in the words of the characters in Joel and Ethan Coen's films provides an earnest critique of aspects of America's culture. They examine the views and values, prejudices and hegemonies in the societies depicted, demonstrating how language can maintain these standards. *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*, evident in their dialogue, examine the validity of the American Dream of prosperity, the authority politics holds in

influencing ordinary individuals, and the manufacturing of the image of the family within American culture.

Two major themes are developed in *Raising Arizona* and refracted in the characters' language: the quest to adhere to and fulfil the appropriate image of the American Dream, and the desire to exhibit the qualities and characteristics befitting the ideal image of the family. The film's extended prologue details in an abbreviated form H.I.'s journey toward normalcy: withdrawing from a life of crime, finding reputable employment, buying a home and marrying Ed. While he tends the garden that surrounds his mobile-home stationed in the midst of the harsh Arizona desert, H.I. declares in voice-over: "These were the happy days – the 'salad days' as they say. And Ed felt having a critter was the next logical step." H.I.'s combination of proverbial language and his deference to the tenets of logical reasoning quickly establish that it is forces outside of his and Ed's emotional determination which are guiding their choices.

In David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1998) the Narrator (Edward Norton) attempts to define himself and his life by what he has around him, confiding to the viewer: "I'd flip through catalogues and wonder 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?'" Later, when his condominium mysteriously explodes, destroying all his possessions, he relates his desperate situation to Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt)—who will shortly become a guru to the Narrator, showing him a life beyond consumerism—"I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent. A wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete." To which Durden sarcastically replies, "Shit, man. Now it's all gone." *Fight Club* is very much about the crisis of identity within a world which no longer has any connection to any real, or primal, realities. Fincher's film submits that the rampant consumerism in modern society has told us who to be and how to be it; the protagonists then find a novel way of undermining this culture and returning to a life with some kind of immediacy and tangibility.

For *Raising Arizona* the criticism is more subtle and worked through in a less reactionary manner. The American Dream—the quest for success, financial security, stability and normalcy—is interrogated for its viability. The characters

use language to achieve the dream even when in reality it seems to have eluded them. The Coens apply images which do not necessarily correspond with traditional representations of that dream, such as H.I.'s description of "salad days" in relation to his modest home-life in the barren wastelands of Arizona. But most notable is the way these characters, some of whom are career felons and delinquents, latch on to dialogue as a means to a dream which in reality is out of their grasp. The previous examples of the Snopes brothers adopting working jargon to describe their criminal misdoing is a prime illustration of this principle. Again, a link is drawn to Mamet's work which examines a culture where "people have been urged to live falsely, to seek financial success by any means open to them, including cheating and stealing."[87] Yet, by the conclusion of *Raising Arizona* H.I. will have discovered that the dream he has of success and prosperity should not necessarily conform to the standard image. Rodney Hill establishes a keen analogy between John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and the Coens' *Raising Arizona* suggesting that "by borrowing Steinbeck's theme of small Americans and their misguided dreams, Joel and Ethan Coen contend that, in order to achieve true personal success, one must look beyond the cultural stereotypes of what one's goals should be and pursue instead the small, truly wonderful things in life."[88] A revelation actually comes to H.I., fittingly, in a dream. This is a dream in which he sees the Snopes return to prison because "they weren't ready to come out into the world;" and where the now returned Nathan Jr. grows up happily; and where H.I.'s nemesis, Glen, is "still havin' no luck getting' the cops to listen to his wild stories;" and finally where there is some happiness in the future for he and Ed. H.I. dreams of "an old couple bein' visited by their children and grandchildren too...[in a land]...where all parents are strong and wise and capable, and all children are happy and beloved... ." The imagery of H.I.'s dream predicates satisfaction not in material acquisitions nor in the conventional representation of the traditional family unit but in the communion of human beings.

The quest for success in *Raising Arizona* is so strong that it clouds the reality of such issues as identity, commercial enterprise and truthfulness. When

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[87] Op. Cit., Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, pp.190-91.
[88] Rodney Hill, "Small Things Considered: *Raising Arizona* and *Of Mice and Men*," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, 8.3, Summer, 1989, p.26.

Nathan Arizona Sr. (Trey Wilson) conducts a hastily convened press conference after the abduction of his infant son it soon evolves into another sales pitch for his state-wide chain of unpainted furniture stores. The practical and emotional content of the interchange is soon replaced by a shameless advert which will serve his commercial interests: "But, uh, remember it's, uh, still business as usual at Unpainted Arizona. If you can find lower prices anywhere, my name still ain't Nathan Arizona." And, it's not. It's actually Huffhines, the furniture merchant confiding to the interrogating FBI agent that he changed his name to better serve his business. Even his identity is laid bare to commercial endeavour.

H.I., while not changing his name, still aspires to a level of success which compels him to compromise his integrity. His desire for prosperity breeds class resentment and H.I. truly resents the barriers that confront him as he seeks material and representational achievement. Reagan's America had pursued a supply-sided economic agenda which affected the lower-classes most. Reagan's critics, of which H.I. is a prime example, had noted that the wealthy gained the most from Reaganomics, while the middle and lower classes enjoyed nominal benefits at best.[89] *Raising Arizona* examines the real-life difficulties incurred because of H.I.'s predicament in which, to paraphrase the character himself, biology and the prejudices of others conspire to keep him struggling. The New Right stressed minimalist state involvement and the promotion of the free market in which "[r]educed welfare spending was essential in its own right, to reduce dependency, increase personal and familial responsibility, and enhance incentives to work."[90] The New Right was an internal element within the Republican party—State Senators, lobbyists, etc.—who were interested in the promotion of family values, conservative ideals and strong economic rationale. The traditional family in *Raising Arizona* is represented by H.I. and Ed's "decent folk" friends Glen ("there's somethin' wrong with my semen") and Dot. Yet, as the symbol of the traditional family, Joel and Ethan Coen configure them as repulsive sexual

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[89] Peter B. Levy, *Encyclopaedia of the Reagan-Bush Years*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1996, p.305.
[90] Dilys M. Hill, "Domestic Policy in an Era of 'Negative Government'," *The Reagan Presidency: An Incomplete Revolution?*, Eds. Dilys M. Hill, Raymond A. Moore & Phil Williams, The MacMillan Press Ltd, London, 1990, p.161.

deviants with uncontrollable monsters for children. The New Right invites considerable criticism in the Coens' film.

The other "perfect" family in *Raising Arizona* is the Arizonas: Nathan Sr, Florence, and their five kids – the quints. The introduction to the Arizona household is a visual representation of "Ozzie and Harriet," the image that H.I. claims is not attainable for he and Ed. They sit in their living room, while the children sleep soundly upstairs, she knitting, he conducting business on the telephone and then reading a newspaper. It is in this moment that Florence Arizona utters her only dialogue for the entire film, the wonderfully trite: "Yes Dear. Fine Dear." Kozloff examines the manner in which gender relations are worked through in film dialogue, stating "[w]ho gets to speak about what? Who is silenced? Who is interrupted? Dialogue is often the first place we should go to understand how film reflects social prejudices."[91] Although Glen and Dot remain a depraved and contaminated image of the family unit right up to the conclusion, the Coens seem to reserve judgment on the Arizonas with a touch of sincerity at the end. When Nathan catches Ed and H.I. returning the kidnapped child he listens to their tale of woe and observes their intentions to terminate their marriage. Finally, he beseeches them to reconsider their decision noting that as he is an astute judge of personality he can tell that they are meant to be together. Then in an earnest aside Nathan contends that he could not survive without his wife, noting: "I do...love her so." With a genuineness and veracity that has been absent in his words for almost the entire film he confirms the importance of family when predicated on love rather than image.

In *Fargo*, the denouement places Marge in her home with her husband Norm (John Carroll Lynch) as they trade accustomed familial patter about the imminent birth of their child. Here, as in the finale to *Raising Arizona*, the dialogue carries a sincerity that is for the most part lacking in these films. But, like *Raising Arizona* the pursuit of the American Dream at all costs is the genesis and crux of the film's action. The viewer is never privy to why Jerry needs the money that he covets so greedily but it is reasonable to assume he has somehow involved himself and his family in a bad commercial deal. His insatiable hunger

for money results in the callous and unscrupulous use of his wife as bait in a half-baked faux-kidnapping plan. Even in the midst of the scheme, with his wife missing, Jerry all but forgets about his teenage son and the anxiety he has caused him. It seems Jerry has let the unethical and unthinking practices of his day-to-day life as a car salesman enter into his everyday life as a husband and a father. His salesman spiels, filled with rhetoric and double-talk, based on lie and deceit, are reflected in the duplicity and mendacity of his home-life.

The Big Lebowski is more in tune with *Raising Arizona* as the suffering caused and the prejudices wrought seem to be a symptom of the culture rather than one individual's heedless neglect. Kozloff argues that politics and film dialogue can sometimes become entwined; she identifies key allegorical elements in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) suggesting that the director placed instrumental phrases and words into the mouths of a disreputable character knowing that those utterances would be recognised as representational of contemporary politicians of the late 1930s.[92] By identifying the Dude with George Bush, by placing his words into the mouth of the Dude the Coens designate Bush as a lazy, confused and redundant president with an aimlessness solved exclusively by the Gulf War – much the same way the Dude's rambling existence is given relevance by a couple of simple-minded "rug pee-ers." Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame submit "[w]ithout the Gulf War, George Bush as president would be easier to dismiss. He might have been seen as an irresolute, do-nothing president."[93] Like the Dude, Bush's existence had no direction and no purpose until he found something to rally against. The connection between the Dude and Bush is in some ways quite uncanny evident in their respective incoherency. Marcia Lynn Whicker states that "[t]hroughout his administration, Bush's informal speaking style was uneven and irregular, indicating a difficulty in focussing on a linear thought pattern from beginning to end."[94] The Dude's aberrant limousine speech may never be mistaken for a George Bush press conference but both betray a wandering way with words. By making the Dude like Bush, the Coens ridicule the

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[91] Op. Cit., Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, p.27.
[92] Ibid, p.160.
[93] Michael Duffy & Dan Goodgame, *Marching in Place: The Status Quo Presidency of George Bush*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1992, pp.134-35.

administration's redundancy. The dialogue and the manner in which it is deployed or situated within the greater film composition allows Joel and Ethan Coen to celebrate, critique and scrutinise the culture and society that they are representing.

Language is entirely important to the films of Joel and Ethan Coen because it is composed with such precision. Dialogue in their texts is often the starting point of meaning. The capabilities of linguistics, phonology, language analysis and dialect theory help to uncover underlying devices by which meaning is made with film dialogue. In Elizabeth Closs Traugott and Mary Louise Pratt's *Linguistics for Students of Literature* the authors proclaim:

> linguistics can contribute a great deal to our understanding of a text. It can help us become aware of *why* it is that we experience what we do when we read a literary work, and it can help us talk about it, by providing us with a vocabulary and a methodology through which we can show how our experience of a work is in part derived from its verbal structure.[95]

This statement has applications beyond literary analysis, the same principles applying to the study of film dialogue. It is just such an approach which assists one's understanding of the ideologies that exist within the undercurrents of a text. It submits by implication that film dialogue is an artistic and resourceful domain bursting with creative expression that is instrumental to film analysis. The Coens' consistent inquiry into language and discourse clearly suggests that to properly appreciate cinematic texts, it is important to listen as well as look.

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[94] Marcia Lynn Whicker, "Managing the White House," *The Bush Presidency: Triumphs and Adversities*, Eds. Dilys M. Hill & Phil Williams, The MacMillan Press Ltd, London, 1994, p.22.
[95] Elizabeth Closs Traugott & Mary Louise Pratt, *Linguistics for Students of Literature*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1980, p.20.

3. History

The Coens are clever directors who know too much about movies and too little about real life. Emanuel Levy[1]

The films of Joel and Ethan Coen are regularly criticised as being too artificial. Their films are often charged with being empty of meaning, and of failing to interlock with reality or history and thus ignoring any moral and ethical concerns. Mottram contends that "[i]t is fair to say that [the Coens'] films exist in a highly artificial environment, a constructed milieu that owes its debt to cinema as much as the world around us."[2] This contention suggests the Coens are reliant on references to other films rather than anything in "real" life. The Coen brothers do exhibit a vast knowledge of films from the past, and also popular and high culture, and their films are clearly influenced by this knowledge; yet it is precisely this grounding in texts of the past that sustains an engagement with history. The Coen brothers' films, particularly *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, display an acute awareness of history and its inscription in the texts of the past and the present. Joel and Ethan Coen do not employ allusion to resolve a dearth of ideas, they actively examine the texts they draw from as a means to building a bridge to the past. The Coens deny the usual mythical constructions; they do not invest in traditional frameworks of representation, rather they interrogate those frameworks to examine and expose how they construct meaning. With this process the films of the Coen brothers are diligent in their investigation of history and its ideologies.

It is perhaps too simplistic to contend that the films of Joel and Ethan Coen are merely influenced by other films. *Barton Fink* draws on the histories of Clifford Odets, William Faulkner, old-Hollywood and Roman Polanski. *The Hudsucker Proxy* functions within the generic conventions of Screwball Comedy, employing elements of Frank Capra's films as well as setting up connections to George Orwell. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* takes its title from Preston Sturges'

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[1] Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, New York University Press, New York, 1999, p.223.
[2] James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, B.T. Batsford, London, 2000, p.120.

Sullivan's Travels, reworks stereotypes of the Old-South, focusses on Depression-era radio and takes it narrative cues from Homer's *The Odyssey*. By adapting Homer, Mottram suggests, "the brothers are reminding us that fragments of literature—like the past itself—exist in our subconscious to be reinterpreted."[3] And herein dwells the relationship the Coens' films have with history, a relationship that is intensely aware that history is a textual construct. It is this aspect of their films, their deep referentiality, which posits their work as postmodern. The application of postmodern theory to *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* reveals that these works exhibit a keen acknowledgment of history. These films explore the textuality and plurality of history, repudiate absolute truths, and analyse the methods by which history is considered as legitimate or artificial.

A focus on the Coen brothers and issues of history compels an investigation of postmodernism. According to Jim Collins one of the main themes of postmodern historiography is "that history can exist for us now only in the form of representation, that we construct the significance of the past only as we frame it in the present."[4] Thus, an inquiry into the texts of the past is an inquiry into history. Linda Hutcheon provides the kind of awareness of postmodern representations that legitimises the Coens' ironic approach to the past and its textual constructions. The notion of using and abusing textual forms and installing traditional frameworks of representation only to subvert them is the basis of this interrogation. An analysis of historical representation in *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* examines how the chronological gaps and temporal collapses distort the typical reception of history. The Coens' films rely heavily on the viewer's contribution to "finishing" their texts. As such, this chapter explores the significance of memory in cinema, changes in technology, and how these issues have affected the way history is perceived. The rampant allusion and referencing in the films of the Coen brothers reflects a modern culture that engages critically with historical texts. The Coens interrogate how memory is vital to the understanding of generic constructions and

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[3] Ibid, p.159.
[4] Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, Eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner & Ava Preacher Collins, Routledge, London, 1993, p.248.

traditional frameworks. *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are redolent with subversion in the manner that they foreground their constructedness, parody older forms and ironically critique the texts they recall. And finally, these issues lead to an examination of ideology, demonstrating how the Coen brothers' films scrutinise and critique the texts (and history) that they reference.

Postmodernism

> *The honest answer is I'm not real clear on what postmodernism is.*
> Ethan Coen[5]

Coming to grips with the notoriously unstable definition of postmodernism is virtually an impossible task. David Morley has identified four different, though still interconnected, general definitions which cover the range of accepted interpretations. He suggests that postmodernism generally refers to one, or a combination, of the following: a period of social life, one that postdates modernity; a cultural sensibility indicative of this period; an aesthetic style which captures the ethos of this period; and a mode of thought, appropriate to analysing the period.[6] The application of a theory of postmodernism to examine the Coen brothers' films employs, to some degree, each of these conceptions, but places a greater emphasis on the third understanding of postmodernism. The films of Joel and Ethan Coen are indicative of the aesthetic style that characterises postmodernism. To expand upon this definition Peter and Will Brooker argue postmodernism exhibits:

> a formal self-consciousness, borrowing from other texts and styles in a meta-historical and cross-generic free-for-all which breaks down distinctions between high and low, Western and other cultures, or the past and present. The result is a self-ironic eclecticism experienced by a generation of postmodern viewers and readers who share a bank of

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[5] John Naughton, "Double Vision," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.134.
[6] David Morley, "Postmodernism: The Rough Guide," *Cultural Studies and Communications*, Eds. James Curran, David Morley & Valerie Walkerdine, Arnold, London, 1996, p.50.

> cultural citations and consequent knowingness with the postmodern artist. This culture, we can say, intensifies the features of fragmentation and intertextual allusion which characterised an earlier modernism, though now without its yearning for a redeeming order and unity. Hence postmodernism's anti-universalism and anti-essentialism, and indifference, so it seems, to matters of aesthetic and ethical value.[7]

John Hill provides a more succinct, though no less significant explanation of postmodernism's anti-foundationalism and its rejection of an absolute substructure of knowledge. Hill characterises postmodern representations as carrying a "suspicion of totalizing theories and explanations which attempt to offer comprehensive and all-embracing accounts of social and cultural phenomena."[8] And Mike Featherstone posits that postmodernism is reflected by:

> the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of surface 'depthlessness' of culture.[9]

The predominant themes in these definitions are the absence of meaning, prevalence of intertextuality, collapsing of typically binary traditions, a reliance on the cultural memories of the viewer/reader, and above all a suspicion of traditional domains of knowledge and certitude. This leads to a confrontation with the validity of history. Postmodernism suggests that history is a text like any other and as such is open to interpretation. History has become an unstable entity and postmodern representations reveal it as a cultural construct.

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[7] Peter Brooker & Will Brooker, "Introduction," *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*, Eds. Peter Brooker & Will Brooker, Arnold, London, 1997, p.3.
[8] John Hill, "Film and Postmodernism," *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Eds. John Hill & Pamela Church Gibson, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p.97.
[9] Mike Featherstone, "In Pursuit of the Postmodern: An Introduction," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5, 1988, p.203.

Postmodernism is an extension and repudiation of the tenets of modernism, adopting its processes and rejecting its desire for absolute truths. Postmodernism renounces the universal avowals of modernist discourses to understand the truth of the human condition or to investigate the abstract concepts of justice or society. The dominant feature of postmodernism is the manner by which it installs the styles of past representations in order to investigate them. Linda Hutcheon identifies the paradox of postmodernism as one "of complicity and critique of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world."[10] What Hutcheon suggests is that postmodernism is not a dead practice that simply imitates other styles without any significant agenda but rather interrogates dominant modes of cultural construction.

Hutcheon has written extensively on the beneficial aspects of postmodernism, particularly its ability to draw attention to the processes of construction in both fiction and history. Hutcheon suggests that irony, historical reference, an interest in textual structures, and the collapse of boundaries between art and reality, are all typical of the processes by which postmodern representations can enact a subversion of dominant paradigms.[11] She distinguishes Terry Gilliam's satire *Brazil* (1985)—detailing a dystopian future of rampant bureaucracy—as a definitive postmodern film, identifying its parodic references to other films, parody of iconic scenes and images, its ironic reworking of history suggested by its temporal paradoxes and its conflation of genre. Rejecting Hutcheon's claims, Fredric Jameson finds only emptiness and absence at the heart of postmodern forms. Jameson, under the auspices of Marxism, argues in his famous condemnatory article *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that postmodernism represents a "new depthlessness" which has led to a "weakening of historicity."[12] For Jameson the contention that postmodernism engages with parody as a critiquing agent is a fallacy and he insist that pastiche or "blank parody" is in fact the dominant method of discourse in postmodern

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[10] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London & New York, 1989, p.7.
[11] Ibid, p.9.
[12] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146, 1984, p.58.

representations. As such, Jameson argues that postmodern texts fail to engage with reality and thus ignore issues surrounding culture, history and ideology. Jameson maintains that "we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach."[13] With such an argument Jameson dismisses any notion that "History" is, or has ever been, a conflation of textual recreations of the past. This is where the divide between Hutcheon and Jameson is at its greatest, on the nature and availability of history. Hutcheon wants to argue against Jameson's contentions that postmodernism is impotent and ahistorical when she declares "that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, denaturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations."[14] It is this distinction between the concepts of parody and pastiche and what is appropriate and applicable to postmodern representations that defines and supports the arguments in both camps. And it is these two divergent trajectories that provide the basis for an analysis of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen and their relationship to history.

The line in the sand drawn over the value of postmodern representations characterises the two dominant arguments surrounding issues of intention: Jameson suggests postmodernism favours pastiche (an empty form) and Hutcheon contends that parody is the dominant mode of expression in the postmodern text and is the basis of its critical agenda. Hutcheon argues:

> Contrary to the prevailing view of parody as a kind of ahistorical and apolitical pastiche, postmodern art... uses parody and irony to engage the history of art and the memory of the viewer in a re-evaluation of aesthetic forms and contents through a reconsideration of their usually unacknowledged politics of representation.[15]

Hutcheon is declaring that parody is precisely the tool that will unlock the frameworks of representation, and it does so by foregrounding the structure and

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[13] Ibid, p.71.
[14] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.94.
[15] Ibid, p.100.

organisation of texts. Postmodern parody imitates an existing work of art which is familiar to its readers and reconsiders it with an ironical, critical or antagonistic design. Distinctive features of the work are retained but are often mimicked with an antithetical intention. Parody changes the texts it imitates, corroding the ideologies they construct and challenging the authority of their methods of representation.

Pastiche, conversely, promotes a relationship that is focussed more closely on similarity. And for this reason pastiche is often considered in negative terms. It is viewed merely as a form of plagiarism that carries no function other than blank recreation. Robert Stam describes pastiche as the dominant form of postmodernism:

> The most typical aesthetic expression of postmodernism is not parody but pastiche, a blank, neutral practice of mimicry, without any satiric agenda or sense of alternatives, nor for that matter, any mystique of "originality" beyond the ironic orchestration of dead styles, whence the centrality of intertextuality and what Jameson calls the "random cannibalization of all styles of the past".[16]

Stam's description is one that considers pastiche, and by extension postmodernism, a fruitless artistic exercise.

The films of Joel and Ethan Coen exhibit elements that resemble both parody and pastiche. While often considered to be postmodernists, the nature of their aesthetic style is wound up in descriptive terminology like homage and mannerism. Georg Seesslen argues that the Coen brothers' films can be compared to mannerist artists of the 16th Century. Seesslen argues that the Coens are enriched by the mannerist style as they draw from old masters and the classic genres chiefly as a method by which to subvert them and to challenge their

[16] Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Malden, Mass., 2000, p.304.

singular and closed perspective.[17] John Harkness is less kind in his assessment of the Coens' penchant for pillaging the work of the "old masters":

> There's a fine line between homage and rip-off. The Coen brothers' originality lies not in their stories, which are derived from any number of better-known sources, but in the sheer aplomb they bring to the film-making process, the relentless darkness of their humour and the ironic twists they give to familiar tales.[18]

And Harkness' backhanded compliment, while acknowledging the way they twist familiar material into something new, suggests what many commentators feel is the Coen brothers' dominant approach: one of empty formalism.

Yet, with their self-conscious and referential films, touching on procedures of parody and pastiche, drawing on issues of homage and mannerism, the Coens still manage to engage successfully with history. Despite all the criticism of their work—their films are merely about other films, theirs in a cinema that celebrates the emptiness at the core of art, their work hides behind style to avoid moral and ethical issues—the Coen brothers nevertheless set-up a connection to history through their heavy emphasis on the investigation and inquiry of the texts that represent the past. With their keen approach to historical periods and texts of bygone eras, and their reliance on irony and parody, the Coen brothers not only engage with history but they question and challenge the ideologies by which it is constructed.

Historicity

[17] Georg Seesslen, "Games. Rules. Violations: Looking for a trail in Coen County," *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Eds. Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen, Translated by Rory Mullholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001, p.261.
[18] John Harkness, "The Sphinx without a Riddle," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.126.

> *...there is no directly and naturally accessible past "real" for us today, we can only know—and construct—the past through its traces, its representations.* Linda Hutcheon[19]

The past no longer exists. The only way for the past to live is in memory and those memories are always conditional, multiple and diverse. Where postmodern theory advocates the decentered, fragmented subject, it also promotes the notion that the past (history) is in a state of constant flux. The postmodern age has decreed that history is something of the present, rather than the past: we only know history through the texts that define it, the texts that conduct it. To know the past is to know the texts that represent the past, and to accept these texts as designating an unmitigated truth is to ignore the multiplicity of history. In *Barton Fink, The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Joel and Ethan Coen are exploring the idea of the inconstancy of history by satirising and parodying the texts that represent and reflect the past. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* recreates 1930s Deep-South America but relies on Homer for its narrative's inspiration. *Barton Fink* is set in Hollywood but tells a fabricated tale of a writer's failed attempts to pen a wrestling film. And, *The Hudsucker Proxy* is the Coen brothers most fantastic creation drawing on the textual remains of the Screwball Comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, Frank Capra, Preston Sturges and George Orwell. Each of these Coen brothers' films draws heavily on identifiable representations from the past in order to engage with history.

Every text inevitably forms a succession of intersections with a series of other texts. Mikhael Bakhtin's conception of dialogism suggests that the text progresses beyond the statement of the author and establishes a relationship with an array of other forces. History is persuaded by the textual and intertextual relationships that surround it. Hutcheon argues that the past existed in an empirical sense, but in "epistemological terms" we can only know the past today through its textual representation: "the absent past can only be inferred from circumstantial evidence."[20] To know the past it is necessary to wade through its

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[19] Linda Hutcheon, "Postmodern Film?," *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*, Eds. Peter Brooker & Will Brooker, Arnold, London, 1997, p.39.
[20] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, pp.73 & 81.

textual traces (an often elaborate and intricate collection of contemporary representations in divergent media from literature to film, photographs and documents, and all other historical residue which seeks to represent the past). Jameson argues that history is becoming obsolete and that the past is now only accessible through the references of popular culture: "The historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about the past (which thereby at once become 'pop history')."[21] Jameson's contention—the links to the past become increasingly tenuous by their representation in "idea" and "stereotype"—acknowledges the inherent textuality of history. Hutcheon, on this point and on Jameson's avowal that reality has been replaced with simulacrum, suggests the eternal nature of history:

> The referent is always already inscribed in the discourse of our culture. This is no cause for despair; it is the text's major link with the "world," one that acknowledges its identity as construct, rather than as simulacrum of some "real" outside. Once again, this does not deny that the past "real" existed; it only conditions our mode of knowledge of that past. We can know it only through its traces, its relics.[22]

It seems Jameson's actual problem is not with a waning access to the "real," but rather his criticism is directed at the kinds of texts being drawn upon to represent the past. The past has only ever been accessed through its retelling and it seems Jameson no longer likes the way that history is being told. The postmodern cultural climate is one that is dominated by an unaccustomed access to information reflected in multiple media. The information age has cultivated widely diverse forums for encountering the past and, as such, history is becoming increasingly contestable.

Barton Fink is set in Los Angeles, in 1941. It is not the "real" Los Angeles, nor is it the "real" 1941, rather its historical currency is drawn from several influences and numerous sources. The film's protagonist Barton (John

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[21] Op. Cit., Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," p.71.
[22] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, New York, 1988, p.119.

Turturro) is ostensibly modelled on 1930s playwright Clifford Odets, with inflections that also suggest Nathanael West, Cornel Woolrich and George S. Kaufman. And Barton, upon his arrival in Los Angeles is commissioned to pen a wrestling movie that will star Wallace Beery, a situation that echoes William Faulkner's own introduction to Hollywood. Other characters in *Barton Fink* allude to other literary and Hollywood personalities. W.P. Mayhew's (John Mahoney) florid verbal expression, white suit, Southerner charm, implied genius and alcoholism evokes Faulkner. Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) is a conflation of the stereotypical studio-head, linking Harry Cohn's bombastic demeanour, Louis B. Mayer's physical appearance and Jack Warner's enormous self-possession. It has been suggested that Warner was so eager to represent his country in World War II that upon enlisting he had the wardrobe department at Warner Brothers fit him out in an army uniform. This possibly apocryphal story is recreated in *Barton Fink* as Lipnick tells Barton:

> I was commissioned yesterday in the Army Reserve.... Actually it hasn't officially gone through yet. Had wardrobe whip this up. You gotta pull teeth to get anything done in this town. I can understand a little red tape in peacetime, but now it's all-out warfare against the Japs.

Setting *Barton Fink* on the cusp of the United States' entry into World War II is indicative, argues Richard T. Jameson, of the Coen brothers' exploitation of history for their own benefits, claiming *Barton Fink* manipulates its setting, both temporal and physical, to create a mythical Hollywood which can lay no claim to authenticity.[23] For Jameson, the employment of such anecdotal tales like the one just cited and the use of real models as the basis for the fictional characters just "won't wash" – to borrow a phrase from Lipnick. Similarly, Bergan declares that the Coens' depiction of Hollywood history is out of sync with the setting: "by 1941, the brave new socially-conscious theater that Fink burbles about had already erupted. Clifford Odets' *Waiting For Lefty*, about a taxi drivers' strike, had blazed the trail six years earlier [and] Wallace Beery was too

old at 56 for wrestling movies."[24] But these criticisms miss the essential point being made in this temporal collapse of history. The Coen brothers are drawing on their bank of historical remembrances to construct *Barton Fink*, and the focus of their attention on these historical figures, issues and situations is the key to the historical interrogation. By simply referring to these moments and characters from the past the Coens are actively engaging with history. Hutcheon rejects the charge that postmodernism is "an 'enfeeblement of historicity'" arguing that "[p]ostmodernist film (and fiction) is, if anything, obsessed with history and with how we can know the past today."[25] Postmodernism has taught us that it is no longer acceptable to conceive of history as pursuing a single linear route and that the possibilities of other expressions of the past are now inextricably implicated in relationships of power and authority.

A film such as *Barton Fink* foregrounds the nature of history as a plural enterprise – always changing, always different. Postmodernism has brought this issue to the forefront rather than "invented" it; historical meaning is seen today as precarious, contextual, intertextual and ephemeral. Moreover, postmodernism exposes the human complicity in the construction of history, and as such in the representation of "truth" and "fact." Yet, while history is contestable, it does not mean that truth is extinguished. Hutcheon maintains:

> This does not necessarily destroy [a representation's] "truth" value, but it does define the conditions of that "truth". Such a process reveals rather than conceals the tracks of the signifying systems that constitute our world – that is, systems constructed by us in answer to our needs.[26]

Signifying systems are not granted, natural or universal, rather they are cultural constructions. E. L. Doctorow, whose meta-fictive novels are celebrated as archetypes of postmodernism by Hutcheon, expresses this notion more directly when he notes that "the regime of facts is not from God but man-made, and, as

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[23] Richard T. Jameson, "What's in the Box," *Film Comment*, Sep/Oct, 1991, p.26.
[24] Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, Thunder's Mouth Press, New York, 2000, p.135.
[25] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, "Postmodern Film?," p.39.
[26] Linda Hutcheon, "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," *Textual Practice*, 1.1, 1987, p.19.

such, infinitely violable."[27] A film like *Barton Fink* explores the violability of this regime of facts by expressing a history that does not entirely mesh with a more "acknowledged" account. Yet, by constructing a past that is made up of incidents and characters from 1932, 1935, 1941 etc., the Coens' text is not a false representation, but merely a different version. Postmodern texts affirm that there is no such thing as the truth, rather, there is a series of truths.

It is to this point that postmodern articulations frequently challenge their own authenticity. The films of the Coen brothers are often reflexive and always layered with irony. Ihab Hassan believes this is a natural response in the postmodern climate: "Irony, perspectivism, reflexiveness: these express the ineluctable recreations of mind in search of a truth that continually eludes it, leaving it with only an ironic access or excess of self-consciousness."[28] *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are films in which the processes of story-telling, in one way or another, are laid open to exposition and demonstration. *Barton Fink* is a Hollywood film set in Hollywood, the hub of modern American story-telling. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is a defiantly referential film which overtly exposes its design: the film's narrator (the primary indication of the text's narrativity) stops the film midstream and directly addresses the audience. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* foregrounds the narrative framework of its trajectory in the opening credits when the brothers cite Homer's *The Odyssey* as the film's basis. Yet, even before this point the film forecasts its fictionality and contrived nature with its title which replicates the fictitious novel that John Sullivan proposes to adapt in Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels.* Both *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *The Hudsucker Proxy* have narrating characters and *Barton Fink* deals quite specifically, in terms of theme, with the construction of stories. Each of these films conveys an intensely reflexive representation. The crisis of faith in absolute values of truth and authenticity are met head-on in texts which no longer assume that truth and authenticity are attainable. The self-consciousness of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen is not merely a method to undercut their own works but a technique which reflects the textuality of representation, and thus, history.

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[27] E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents," *American Review*, 26, Nov, 1977, p.217.
[28] Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective," *Critical Inquiry*, 12, Spring, 1986, p.506.

The Coen brothers succeed in disturbing the intrinsic contrariness of fact and fiction, truth and fabrication, real and unreal. They construct texts that are at once completely in tune with history but entirely fictional. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is meticulous in its recreation of Depression-era Mississippi, deploying a series of anchoring artefacts and characters within an intentionally fictional narrative. Yet, to be aware of fictionality does not require an exchange of the unreal for the real, rather it recognises that the real is always constructed, its temporal plot always narrativised, our understanding of it a matter of tone and perspective. The manipulation of chronology is exactly what is achieved when Moses (William Cobbs) stops the clock's gears (and the narrative action) in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the act saving the life of Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) by halting his suicide fall midstream. Moses not only disrupts the illusion of continuity but he also breaks out of character to address the audience: "Strictly speaking, I'm never s'posed to do this." It is not just the artificiality of *The Hudsucker Proxy* that this act reinforces but the whole nature of textual construction.

Postmodern representations do not seek to inscribe a nostalgic perspective on the past, but rather focus their attentions on pasts that are traditionally excluded from both fiction and history. Maureen Turim, however, tends to think that merely by revisiting older forms of representation postmodern texts also promote the unenlightened ideologies contained within:

> It has often gone unnoticed that the underlying structuration of desire here is not affected. That a number of the commercial feature films spoken about as postmodernist are retrograde in their portrayal of sexual difference and sexist in their portrayal of women is a matter of great concern for me.[29]

Turim's argument might be applied to *The Hudsucker Proxy* which so readily revisits the tenets of a genre—the Screwball Comedy—which arguably involves

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[29] Maureen Turim, "Cinemas of Modernity and Postmodernity," *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy*, Ed. Ingeborg Hoesterey, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991, p.188.

outdated assumptions on issues of gender and sexuality. But the accusation that *The Hudsucker Proxy* is nostalgic in both its aesthetic design and its values fails to do justice to postmodernism's critical devices. Irony and parody re-establish textual frameworks and generic conventions in a move that favours scrutiny rather than commemoration. Umberto Eco explains that irony is a key component in historical representation: "The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited, but with irony, not innocently."[30] *Barton Fink* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* each delve into issues of institutionalised racism. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* a Ku Klux Klan meeting becomes a parodied Nazi rally with overtones that recall *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939). *Barton Fink* also uses parody to delve into the cultural climate of a Hollywood system in which a Jewish hierarchy is conflicted by defiant pride and ostentatious self-degradation. In Barton's initial meeting with Jack Lipnick, the studio mogul refers to himself as "bigger and meaner than any other kike in this town." He later degrades Barton with similar vernacular. Postmodern texts, Joel and Ethan Coen's films included, are consistently tainted by accusations that they are innocent returns to bygone eras, more attuned to memorialising rather than criticising. But postmodernism is characterised by parodic and ironic re-examinations of the past and is a mode of return which favours subversion rather than nostalgia.

Many of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen might be described as "historiographic metafictions." This is a term established by Hutcheon to describe texts in which real events and characters are filtered through a fictional universe in order to both validate fiction and inauthenticate history. Here history is acknowledged as a textual construction that is available to multiple interpretations. A prevailing presumption of essentialism is that history's referents are authentic and fiction's are based in imagination. But postmodern texts instruct us that both history and fiction refer not to reality but other texts. *Barton Fink* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are the two most "metafictive" of Joel and Ethan Coen's films. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* suggests its context immediately with its visual technique, editing design and photography. The film opens with a frame

[30] Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, 1984, p.66.

that overlooks a barren field with the sounds of a chain-gang's incantation overlaid. The image is so de-saturated and sepia-toned it is almost black and white. As the camera pans to the working prisoners the image is gradually infused with colour dominated by a golden hue which suggests "the past." It is a romantic technique of nostalgia, yet the image of the tortuous conditions of the chain-gang is one of inhumanity. These contradictory sentiments are constant throughout *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and the discursive attitude to history is matched by the alternation of the "real" with the fictional.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is based on *The Odyssey* but the Coens also refer to "real" characters. Hutcheon contends that such an approach is consistent to historiographic metafiction: "In many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand."[31] Everett (George Clooney), Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) and Pete (John Turturro) happen across such characters as George "Baby-Face" Nelson (Michael Badalucco) in the middle of a crime spree and Tommy Johnson (Chris Thomas King) after selling his soul to the devil (Tommy Johnson recorded "Canned Heat Blues," while a legend suggested another performer, Robert Johnson, sold his soul to the devil). *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* authenticates its representation by referencing these real people and also contextualises the Depression-era setting through its attention to detail. And in validating fiction, the Coens are questioning history.

Barton Fink is a metafiction too, though it is more indirect about its authenticating material than *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. As previously noted, it is clearly accepted that the character of Barton Fink represents a Clifford Odets-like playwright, WP Mayhew stands in for Faulkner, and Lipnick is a combination of Mayer, Cohn and Warner. The setting is 1941 Hollywood and the representation of the studio lot is authentically rendered. Odets was a New York playwright who wrote about the suffering of the underclass. His work was an expression for the under privileged but he himself was from a wealthy family from whom he received significant financial support. In 1931, Odets became

affiliated with the New York Group Theatre, an organisation dedicated to presenting socially conscious works. Rather than elicit the romantic ideal of the left-wing artist, however, Joel and Ethan Coen utilise cinematic techniques to scorn the pomposity of Odets, Group Theatre and the literary highbrow that aspire to express the concerns of those they feel are under-represented. The Coens do not merely recall a person and a politically-inflected theatre movement for a nostalgic revelry (a charge that might befit *Guilty by Suspicion* [Winkler, 1991]), rather, they actively critique and undermine these topics through the use of irony and satire, and provide an alternative historical representation of a time, place and personality. The Coens comment on the past as they recreate it through its textualised remains.

Memory

> *In organizing its own intertextual field, each work of art also creates its own history of culture. This involves a restructuring of the entire stock of older culture. For this reason, we can say that a theory of intertextuality is a means for renewing our understanding of history, a history that enters the structure of the text as a dynamic and constantly evolving factor.* Mikhael Iampolski[32]

If, as Hutcheon argues, postmodern texts are obsessed with history, it is also true that they are obsessed with memories. Postmodern film exploits the recollections of audiences, utilising the vast resources of the spectator's remembrances to set up grids of interconnection to construct meaning. John Frow argues that "[m]oments are mediated by another moment, a memory or a metaphor which shapes them, endows them with a certain structure; this structure is part of their reality."[33] Each of the Coen brothers' films under analysis here—*Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—is pronounced in its use of remembered texts as a method by which to establish

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[31] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.114.
[32] Mikhael Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*, Trans. Harsha Ram, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1998, p.246.
[33] John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p.23.

significant and critical discourse. Memory and reality interrelate in the process of ordering experience. Giuliana Bruno claims that Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1981) constructs an environment in which the status of memory has changed from "Proustian madeleines" to "photographs," arguing that the postmodern viewer, like the replicants in Scott's film, is "put in the position of reclaiming a history by means of its reproduction."[34] Yet Bruno's contention is not simply a symptom of the postmodern malaise: history has only ever been accessible in its reproduction, whether it is in the oral narratives of the ancient eras or the literary texts that followed. What has changed has been the dominant mechanism for reproducing the past. Changes in technology have altered the way people access the past, though such changes have not revised the nature of history. History remains a textualised entity. Brigitte Desalm argues that cinema is attempting to break with its traditional realms of representation and exploit "the ethereal space of the memory; the infinite storage ability and communicative levels of the human intellect."[35] Desalm outlines a situation in which the spectator has a responsibility in the construction of a representation, one in which the reception of the text is a crucial site of making meaning.

Stam considers postmodern film to be a "cinema of allusions" stating that "[h]ere we find a recombinant, replicant cinema, where the end of originality goes hand-in-hand with the decline of utopias. In an era of remakes, sequels, and recyclings, we dwell in the realm of the already said, the already read, and the already seen; been there, done that."[36] The films of Joel and Ethan Coen are indeed allusive and intertextual, but they are also self-conscious. These films draw on the already said, not simply to restate it, but to rework and question it. The artist relies on the viewer's/reader's knowledge of historical representations and characters in order to challenge ideas about what might constitute historical authenticity. Barry Laga identifies *Barton Fink* as a text that "exemplifies a postmodern aesthetic in its relentless parodic gestures that attempt to interrogate

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[34] Giuliana Bruno, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*," *October*, 41, 1987, pp.73 & 74.
[35] Brigitte Desalm, "Barton Fink," *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Eds. Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen, Translated by Rory Mullholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001, p.121.
[36] Op. Cit., Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, p.305.

humanist assumptions concerning originality, authorship, history, and the real."[37] Laga detects the myriad intertexts that operate within *Barton Fink*, listing *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), The Old Testament, *8½* (Fellini, 1963), *Faust*, the Holocaust, Orson Welles and Roland Barthes, as just some of the references to be found in the Coens' film. This catalogue of intertextuality bolsters the concept that all representations are permeated by and contingent upon previous ideas, information, codes, practices, generic conventions and texts. Accordingly, a pursuit of pure origins will necessarily be in vain.

The intertextual connections that are made in each of the Coen brothers' films are elaborate and far-reaching. For Collins this is evidence of the "ever-expanding number of texts and technologies" which is "both a reflection of and a significant contribution to the 'array' – the perpetual circulation and recirculation of signs that forms the fabric of postmodern cultural life."[38] The various commentaries on the films of Joel and Ethan Coen suggest just how widely they cast their net of intertextual references. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is linked explicitly to the films of Frank Capra and Preston Sturges as well as Fritz Lang and Terry Gilliam. *Barton Fink* is acknowledged as reworking Odets' Hollywood experience, the Bible, Roman Polanski, Stanley Kubrick and the Holocaust. And *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is commonly associated with *The Odyssey*, Preston Sturges and the Depression. It is this "array" which Joel and Ethan Coen employ to exploit the memories of the viewer in their pursuit of ironic reinterpretation rather than nostalgic retrospection.

John Hill believes that since the 1960s "it has been common to note in Hollywood films an increasing stylistic self-consciousness, use of references to film history, and quotation from other styles."[39] Both *Barton Fink* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* encompass a widely discursive discourse with other textual representations, whereas *The Hudsucker Proxy*—perhaps the Coens' most

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[37] Barry Laga, "Decapitated Spectators: *Barton Fink*, (Post)History, and Cinematic Pleasure," *Postmodernism in the Cinema*, Ed. Cristina Degli-Esposti, Berghahn Books, New York & Oxford, 1998, p.198.
[38] Op. Cit., Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," p.246.
[39] Op. Cit., John Hill, "Film and Postmodernism," p.101.

postmodern film—is linked primarily to prior cinematic texts and aesthetics. Carolyn R. Russell declares that *The Hudsucker Proxy*:

> is the most insistent delegate in a progression of films which synthesize the aesthetic past. In virtually every frame of the film may be recognized what theorist Fredric Jameson has termed "the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a new global culture".[40]

It is to this point that Russell is arguing that *The Hudsucker Proxy* must then fall into the category of pastiche. But merely to recall past representations does not mean to do so without irony or without critical commentary. And even a film such as *The Hudsucker Proxy*—which so blatantly draws from a "dead style": the Screwball Comedy; and the "museum of a new global culture": the mythology of Capra—operates at a critical level with regard to these allusions. But *The Hudsucker Proxy* is not merely a film made from the pieces of other films and its references are not drawn solely from the domain of film history. This is exemplified when the Coens acknowledge "legitimate" history in their ironic summoning of the cultural image of J. Edgar Hoover. When Chief (John Mahoney)—the editor of Amy's (Jennifer Jason Leigh) newspaper—barks a series of suggested angles on a report on Hoover he proposes the question: "When will he marry?" The contemporary image of Hoover details a moral crusader who concealed his own homosexuality and transvestitism in a climate when such persuasions were considered moral deviations. The irony generated by the historical setting of the film and the viewer's contemporary knowledge creates a particular intertextual connection based on a double code. This example also highlights the responsibility of the reader to complete the text, to exercise its ironic component.

Hutcheon notes that intertextuality "replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of the textual meaning within the discourse of history itself."[41] John Biguenet notes that

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[40] Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2001, p.114.
[41] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.126.

in *Les Enfant Du Paradis* (Carné, 1945) there is a verbal exchange, similar in context to the J. Edgar Hoover quip, which references Monsieur Ingres' aptitude for playing the violin – which was, apparently dreadful (Biguenet suggests an analogy to Jack Benny and his fiddling). But Biguenet believes this reference is almost lost on modern audiences who know little of this cultural memory: "Unfortunately for Marcel Carné, he hitched his wagon to a dying horse. With each passing year, those lines of the film become ever more obscure."[42] And the same applies with the reference to Hoover in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. Its cultural currency will inevitably fade as the memory becomes more and more irrelevant to contemporary audiences. Notwithstanding, it remains as an historical document, a remembrance which constructs a bridge to the past and sets up a reference which alternates two perspectives of the past: one based in 1959 (the film's setting); and the other in 1993 (the year of the film's release). Textual meaning is consequently drawn from within the discourse of history itself.

It is typical for postmodern films to develop referential relationships chiefly to other films. Cinematic allusions demand an audience's vast knowledge of the cinema and its history. The apparently affable salesman that John Goodman plays in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* carries an allusion to his character and performance in *Barton Fink*, where he plays a seemingly easy-going insurance merchant. In both films Goodman's characters exhibit a thirst for violent turns and a potent desire to teach someone a lesson. Goodman's performances in each film suggest intertextuality can operate at the level of the actor. Postmodernism's most pronounced critic, Fredric Jameson, laments the deterioration of originality in the art of performance, contending "the very style of the acting can now also serve as a 'connotator of the past'."[43] George Clooney's performance as Everett in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a stylistic homage to Clark Gable and his amiable cad characters in films such as *It Happened One Night* (Capra, 1934) and *Red Dust* (Fleming, 1932). Clooney's physical appearance and verbal cadence, as well as his confident attitude, is designed to connote the past, exactly as Jameson declares, but not in the absence of originality, but rather as a deliberate allusion

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[42] John Biguenent, "Double Takes: The Role of Allusion in Cinema," *Play it again, Sam: retakes on remakes*, Eds. Andrew Horton & Stuart Y. McDougal, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p.133.
[43] Op. Cit., Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," p.68.

which informs the character and creates a series of ready-made signs. A critical review of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* declares that "George Clooney's performance as Everett, widely criticized as too broad and exaggerated, is a deliberate caricature of a man imitating everything he isn't."[44] The Coen brothers' here are using a memory in the same fashion that other filmmakers use a generic convention. The allusion is a sign which carries a meaning, evincing the intertextual unity of all texts. Allusion functions not simply to cite a knowledge of cinema's past but provides a kind of shorthand to meaning, it operates in the same way that any sign functions, based on a shared and understood precedent.

The Hudsucker Proxy may at first seem to be a film that is overly influenced by the components of other film styles, genres and intertexts, but its allusions are not limited to cinema. The intertextual web is strung in such a way that connections are drawn from a series of diverse sources. Early in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, when Norville finally secures employment, he is stationed in the mail room at Hudsucker Industries, situated in the bowels of the enormous company building. The mailroom is a darkly cavernous chamber that extends beyond the line of sight, its walls are lined with a labyrinthine arrangement of steel pipes representing the nerve-centre of a bureaucracy which winds its way to the executive offices. Norville's instructional introduction to the mailroom is a litany of double-talk and bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo. The scene is a material allusion to Gilliam's *Brazil*, a film in which a bureaucratic slip leads to a series of nightmarish misadventures. Gilliam constructs a universe that is so belaboured with organisation that it becomes distinctively chaotic, symbolised by a visual design which is both futuristic and primitive. The relationship between *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *Brazil* can be extended further to include George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*. Orwell's novel itself deals with a dystopian view of a future society ruled by a totalitarian regime. The state's stubborn reliance on a deficient bureaucracy is a major theme which reappears as the central motif in Gilliam's film. As this winds back to *The Hudsucker Proxy* the connections established through the suggestive imagery provides an immediate referent, or cinematic shorthand. The Coens' films are replete with cinematic allusions that identify the

[44] Rob Content, Tim Kreider, Boyd White, "*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," *Film Quarterly*, 55.1, Fall, 2001, p.46.

"useable past" as a way to establish a discourse with history and its textual representations. "Allusionism, at least initially," as Noël Carroll argues, "was an expression of this utopian urgency, this desire on the part of many members of the generations that grew up in the fifties to establish a new community, with film history supplying its legends, myths, and vocabulary."[45] Carroll seems somewhat melancholic in this description, almost as if such a desire was no longer valid or applicable, but it seems that Joel and Ethan Coen are applying this method with expertise. A cultural shift has not ended access to history but has merely changed the terms by which it is now received.

The changes in technology in the second half of the 20th century have compelled many of the changes in the reader/text relationship. Anne Friedberg believes that cinema and television are "mechanical and electronic extensions of photography's capacity to transform our access to history and memory" and has contributed to increasing "detemporalized subjectivities."[46] The advent of television has been closely followed by consolidating factors such as cable television, premium movie channels, remote controls, the internet and VCR/DVD ownership. This environment of accessibility to vast information networks induces significant anxiety amongst many commentators. Douglas Kellner argues that the current generation has been conceived in the sights and sounds of media culture, "weaned on it, and socialized by the glass teat of television used as a pacifier, baby sitter, and educator by a generation of parents for whom media culture, especially television, was a natural background and constitutive part of everyday life."[47] Media culture is often viewed as an all-enveloping ogre, the saturation of information through technology seen to contribute to the regression of society's intellectual and moral standards. Collins criticises such technophobic denunciations of media overload, declaring they:

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[45] Noël Carroll, "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)," *October*, 20, Spring, 1982, p.79.
[46] Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1993, p.2.
[47] Douglas Kellner, "*Beavis and Butt-Head:* No Future for Postmodern Youth," *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*, Eds. Peter Brooker & Will Brooker, Arnold, London, 1997, p.183.

> never ever [begin] to address the distinguishing features of recent popular narratives, namely the attempts to encounter directly that "overload", that semiotic excess, and turn it into a new form of narrative entertainment that necessarily involves altering the structure and function of narrative.[48]

It is to this point that an analogy between Joel and Ethan Coen and television's Beavis and Butt-Head, the archetypal postmodern viewers, can be encountered. *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993-1997) began as a series of short cartoons on MTV in the 1990s and then developed into a sitcom-length series in 1993. The program created a great deal of controversy due to the anti-social activities of its eponymous heroes.[49] Beavis and Butt-Head are a pair of middle-American teenagers who spend their days sitting in front of their television sets consuming and criticising the programs they watch. At face value it seems Beavis and Butt-Head are merely reflections on the dead-head drone image of the television watcher who becomes transfixed by the pixels and dispassionately absorbs all the messages that are broadcast (see David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* [1982]). Yet, in truth the two teenagers engage in a discourse with everything they see; they criticise and endorse certain values by criticising and endorsing particular representational forms, texts and concepts. And this is exactly the process adopted by Joel and Ethan Coen, and postmodern artists in general. Prior texts become a site in which new meanings might be constructed through the agency of parody, irony and other critical devices.

Cristina Degli-Esposti declares that today's generations are educated via the language of computers and television sets, and these "new generations have acquired their own system of reading and rereading the visual language embedded within postmodern texts."[50] Like Beavis and Butt-Head, the Coen brothers use the texts of the past and the relics of representation to create their own stories. *Beavis and Butt-Head* details a very postmodern environment in which an engagement

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[48] Op. Cit., Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," p.253.
[49] See Douglas Kellner, "*Beavis and Butt-Head:* No Future for Postmodern Youth," *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*, Eds. Peter Brooker & Will Brooker, Arnold, London, 1997, pp.132-191.

with new technology dictates one's involvement in discourse. Beavis and Butt-Head are obsessed mainly with music videos and popular culture programs and it is in their engagement with these texts that they express their ideas and interpretations of the present. Kellner argues that the media's representations are "appropriated by audiences, which use certain resonant texts and images to articulate their own sense of style, look, and identity. Media culture provides resources to make meaning, pleasure, and identity."[51] Beavis and Butt-Head express themselves via their shared experience of television and popular culture, their communication depending on an acknowledgment that each has the same resources to construct the meaning of their utterances. Like Beavis and Butt-Head, Joel and Ethan Coen produce a discourse that is heavily indebted to the shared experience of visual culture. Collins argues that information saturation (the "array") has called for new forms of representation that are conscious of everything that has gone before:

> the popular narratives of the 1980s and 1990s present a moral and physical landscape in a state of previously unfathomable change and...these stories just might be an attempt to make the chaotic, dissonant cultures of the later decades of the 20th Century somehow more manageable through this presentation of a new mediated landscape that can be successfully mapped out only by contemporary media, and not some antiquated notion of the well-made play.[52]

Collins is detailing a method by which postmodern culture achieves access to history. History has only ever been available through its textual remains, but the nature of those textual representations has changed. This fact is an underlying factor in the criticisms of postmodernism which focus chiefly on the prominence of the cinematic and the televisual in the construction of contemporary representations of history.

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[50] Cristina Degli-Esposti, "Postmodernism(s)," *Postmodernism in the Cinema*, Ed. Cristina Degli-Esposti, Berghahn Books, New York & Oxford, 1998, p.13.
[51] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, "*Beavis and Butt-Head:* No Future for Postmodern Youth," p.188.
[52] Op. Cit., Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," p.252.

The rampant allusionism and referentiality in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen place enormous emphasis on the viewer's ability to complete the text by drawing from an accumulation of remembered texts. Such a situation suggests questions of elitism in the use of allusion. Stam believes that a film like Lawrence Kasdan's neo-noir *Body Heat* necessarily "evokes the corpus of 1940s film noir in terms of plot, character, and style in such a way that a knowledge of film noir becomes a privileged hermeneutic grid for the cine-literate spectator."[53] The Coens' films also privilege the cine-literate viewer because the majority of references are drawn from film history. *Barton Fink* depends to some extent on an audience that can recognise the characters' connections to those in Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976) and Kubrick's *The Shining*. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* suggests an understanding foremost of Homer's *The Odyssey* but also draws on the films of Sturges. *The Hudsucker Proxy* relies squarely on a knowledge of the Screwball Comedy and the films of Capra. Russell claims that with regard to *The Hudsucker Proxy* "a more complex reading and true appreciation of the film is available only to the cineliterate viewer."[54] However, to not identify these sources does not mean the Coens' films are unfathomable. And, to know only cursory details of the alluded texts may be exactly enough to engage critically with the material. To know of, and understand, the Capra dynamic is not limited to those viewers who have seen his work. Capra has a prominent cultural currency and his ideology and values are often related in other forums. It may be enough for a spectator to be familiar with *The Simpsons* (1989-), or a film like *Accidental Hero* (Frears, 1992), or even *Mr. Deeds* (Brill, 2002) to become familiar with Capra, his work, and his legacy. The vast network of intertextuality is not just constructed upon a familiarity with particular key texts but rather with all texts which in one way or another refer to myriad other representations.

Every text depends on some prior knowledge of other representations. A genre is developed and canonised via the recognition of particular tropes and repeated conventions. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is the Coen brothers most literal genre film in its recreation of the themes, conventions and iconography of the Screwball Comedy. Thomas Schatz defines the Screwball Comedy as a genre that

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[53] Op. Cit., Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, p.211.
[54] Op. Cit., Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, p.92.

supports the status quo even when "it's espousing enlightened capitalism or enlightened marital-sexual relationships," and the genre is often distinguished by the romantic communion of a disparate pairing having overcome initial antagonism. Schatz also maintains that the morality of the characters is inspired by conventional ideals, "the hero's or heroine's traditional values and attitudes are attributed directly to a rural background and small-town sensibilities."[55] The application of this limited taxonomy to *The Hudsucker Proxy* is fairly straightforward as Norville arrives from Muncie, Indiana (read small-town, or "Chumpsville" according to Amy), falls in love with Amy who initially despises this corporate buffoon (read initial antagonism) but ultimately falls for his humble and modest value system based on humane ideals (read traditional values and attitudes). That *The Hudsucker Proxy* falls so neatly into the realm of an identifiable genre film is significant to the Coen brothers' agenda and not simply indicative of empty pastiche. Dan Harries notes that in parody such "anchoring is needed in order to ensure an established norm to play off of as well as to cue the viewer into a particular conventional viewing pattern."[56] It is therefore important for a parody to revisit and rework the traditions of a target genre or text in order to effectively expose the manner by which meaning is constructed.

Daniel Kothenschulte claims that despite *The Hudsucker Proxy*'s seemingly blank pastiche of the Screwball Comedy and the films of Capra it is a rather acute satire on the values associated with both representational forms. He maintains that one of the reasons for the critical and commercial failure of *The Hudsucker Proxy* was that it parodied a genre that is committed to romantic ideals, upsetting and alienating the genre's supporters. Kothenschulte believes that the Coens are less interested in the emotional connotation of convention and "more interested in the memory they expect to find in their viewer's consciousness, a memory so familiar it becomes almost a code, shorthand for feeling, which the viewer will greet with pleasure. It is precisely this gratification that the Coens deny their audiences."[57] Joel and Ethan Coen use the genre as a

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[55] Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1981, pp.155, 157 & 171.
[56] Dan Harries, *Film Parody*, B.F.I. Publishing, London, 2000, p.54.
[57] Daniel Kothenschulte, "*The Hudsucker Proxy*," *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Eds. Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen, Translated by Rory Mullholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001, pp.152 & 154.

means by which to examine its processes and to parody it. The effect is not simply to ridicule the genre and its representations but to identify the manner by which it reflects ideology, history and meaning. Writing on the use of allusion in film Carroll uses the revisionist Western as an example in which quotation can be used to identify ideological and social changes. The variations between the original and the reworking are, as he suggests, "indexes of changes in attitude toward certain American values."[58] And this is equally applicable to the Screwball Comedy, and the films of Capra, which are both truly American institutions. The Coens' satirical view represented in *The Hudsucker Proxy* dismisses many of the assumptions made in such representations and challenges the attendant values that these assumptions support. Through the use of irony, parody and subversion, the Coens expose these older representations in order to examine the ideologies upon which they were constructed.

Subversion

> *Where there is power, there is a resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.* Michel Foucault[59]

Charges that postmodernism is merely a mode of nostalgia with no critical agenda seem to be oblivious to the subversive potential of its application. To recall the past through its textual corpus is not to merely remember it, but also to challenge it. Hutcheon maintains "[t]o parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it."[60] To question a narrative technique, a narrational tool, a framework, or a genre's convention, is a challenge to history which is dependent on these textual forms for its ordering and existence. John Harkness is not convinced by the approach of the Coen brothers to the postmodern process of reworking representations as a means to investigating the past. Harkness argues that despite this perceived use of irony and subversion the

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[58] Op. Cit., Noël Carroll, "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)," p.60.
[59] Michel Foucault, "Excerpts from The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction," *A Postmodern Reader*, Eds. Joseph Natoli & Linda Hutcheon, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993, p.336.

Coen brothers' films suffer because they cannot trust in any reality outside of the textualised remains of the past.[61] But it seems that Harkness is underestimating the very real power and function of subversion. He is also ignoring the Coens' self-conscious acknowledgment of the past's relationship with textuality. Subverting the textual constructions of the past is precisely the approach taken by postmodern representations to strip these prior texts of any pretence that there is a "reality." Postmodernism is not suffering the loss of the "real" but teaching us that it never existed.

The films of Joel and Ethan Coen are intensely referential, they draw readily from prior texts as a point of reference and a means of allusion. But their films are also subversive, their quotations and allusions regularly carry satirical objectives. Correspondingly, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, as Kellner argues, both uses and abuses prior forms for similar reasons:

> In a sense, [Beavis and Butt-Head] are the first media critics to become cult heros [sic] of media culture, though there are contradictions in their media criticism. Many of the videos that they attack are stupid and pretentious, and in general it is good to cultivate a critical attitude toward culture forms and to promote cultural criticism -- an attitude that can indeed be applied to much of what appears on *Beavis and Butt-Head.* Such critique distances its audiences from music video culture and calls for making critical judgments on its products. Yet Beavis and Butt-Head's own judgments are highly questionable, praising images of violence, fire, naked women, and heavy metal noise, while declaring that "college music", words, and any complexity in the videos "suck".[62]

This last remark highlights the paradox which exists at the core of postmodern representations: the postulation that to recall certain forms is to endorse the values of the cited representations. Kellner goes on to say that "the series undercuts some

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[60] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.126.
[61] Op. Cit., John Harkness, "The Sphinx without a Riddle," p.129.
[62] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, "*Beavis and Butt-Head:* No Future for Postmodern Youth," p.184-185.

of its social critique by reproducing the worst sexist, violent, and narcissistic elements of contemporary life, which are made amusing and even likeable in the figures of Beavis and Butt-Head."[63] Kellner fails to outline exactly how Beavis and Butt-Head are made "likeable" but there exist more pressing problems in his assertion. To begin with, the distinction between *Beavis and Butt-Head* and Beavis and Butt-Head is blurred by Kellner's statements, as though the program automatically endorses the views of its characters. The characters in this case are two dim-witted adolescent boys with juvenile attitudes toward women, sex and violence. They are gross stereotypes of the teenager in modern society. Kellner is perhaps correct to question how Beavis and Butt-Head's values are perceived by the viewer. Though these characters are the agents for criticising the representations they are viewing, they are also the purveyors of some less than desirable satellite attitudes. And to this point, it is fair to say that there is a line the viewer must draw between recognising the validity of the satirical critique of cultural forms and the spurious and nonsensical beliefs of Beavis and Butt-Head. Perhaps it is more straightforward with the Coen brothers who would never be mistaken for promoting the ideals of Beavis and Butt-Head. Yet, like the cartoon characters, and to a lesser extent the cartoon program, the Coens are interested in recreating the forms of prior texts and representations in their critical attitude toward cultural forms. And the key to the subversive approach inherent in parody is to acknowledge that adopting the methods of past texts and frameworks is not the same as endorsing them. Hutcheon notes that this is a "strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine."[64] It is evident that the films of Joel and Ethan Coen traverse a fine line between being perceived as critical examinations of previous forms and as empty recollections of the past. But it is parody and irony which permits a critical inquiry: their take on history and the texts of the past is always inflected with the violence of parody and the potency of irony.

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[63] Ibid, p.185.
[64] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.4 (Italics in original).

Harries describes film parody as a "conservative transgression" suggesting that it "questions normative orders and, while it does indeed include that norm in its critique, provides a lasting dislodging of conventional limits."[65] The contemporary spectator is one who has become accustomed to allusion and parody to such a degree that it now comes in commodified forms. Vivian Sobchack declares "[w]e exist at a moment when identity, memory, and history are re-cognized as mediated and media productions – constructed and consumable images available for countless acts of recombination, revision, and recycling."[66] Almost every episode of *The Simpsons* is made up of a conflation of allusions which seek to parody old television programs, old films, representational forms and popular culture. So, for a viewer of *The Simpsons* the infamous television debates between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy are remembered through their parody in an archived Duff beer commercial. In this commercial Nixon's legendary anti-televisual image is lampooned. But the sequence also carries a satirical edge as visual image is shown to supersede the values of the democratic process. The Coen brothers tap in to that same vein which recognises that history is accessed through its images, its remembered texts, and as such these memories can provide a site for ironic reworkings which interrogate the past, its texts, and their ideologies.

The Hudsucker Proxy, far from being a mere recreation of the traditions of the Screwball Comedy, is a parody of Capra and his often maudlin films detailing naïve populist tales of social achievement. Capra's films are often recalled as overtly hopeful discourses on the ability of humanity to overcome all obstacles. Bill Mistichelli notes that the derogatory term *Capracorn* is often applied to his films: the expression "carries the implication of a rosy, unrealistic optimism about life and human nature... [Capra's] world is not tough or worldly wise enough to be realistic."[67] Capra's films espouse values related to the New Deal: compassion for one's neighbour, the directive that contentment is not found in wealth but in sensitivity, whilst always maintaining no conflict is irresolvable. The Coen

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[65] Op. Cit., Dan Harries, *Film Parody*, p.130.
[66] Vivian Sobchack, "Postmodern Modes of Ethnicity," *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*, Eds. Peter Brooker & Will Brooker, Arnold, London, 1997, p.115.
[67] Bill Mistichelli, "The State of the Union: Capra, Altruism, and the Sociobiologists," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 25, Fall, 1997, p.120.

brothers lay out familiar conventions which are designed to key the spectator into the knowledge that *The Hudsucker Proxy* is reworking the typical Capra film. Like Capra's hick-in-the-big-city films—*Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington* (1939)—the Coens' film has "Muncie-boy" Norville arrive fresh off the bus from Indiana. Like the characters in Capra's films—Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper) and Jefferson Smith (James Stewart)—Norville is then exploited by a rampant capitalist system which values money above morality. And, as in Capra films, the hero of *The Hudsucker Proxy* eventually succeeds over the perils of corruption. Russell believes Norville is a "quintessential Capraesque protagonist...a naïve country soul who struggles to maintain his integrity and individuality while caught in the maw of an institution which is inherently antipathetic to such an endeavor."[68]

While Russell is correct in identifying these familiar conventions, it seems she is missing the critical edge of the character when she describes Norville as quintessentially "Capraesque." For, in the tradition of postmodern representation, the Coens merely install these motifs to then subvert them. Unlike the protagonists of *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* or *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, Norville is not beholden to any value system, nor is he trying to expose and overturn corruption. He is a fool whose own ignorance (rather than idealism) makes him ripe for exploitation; he is not the repository of democratic optimism that characterises Capra's heroes. Deeds and Smith are "little men" battling against an unscrupulous system of venality; relying on righteousness and morality their idealism endures as a beacon in a realm of immorality. Norville however, is an ambitious but dim-witted business major from a backwoods university. He falls into an executive position as a corporate stooge and then insipidly discards his morality to abuse his newly acquired power. Hutcheon notes that in genre reworkings, the use of ironic intertextuality is not "a form of 'Temporal Escape', but rather a coming to terms with the existing traditions of earlier historical and literary articulations of American-ness."[69] The Coens install a pseudo-Capraesque hero to then distort him into an image which suits their critical agenda. The hope of the New Deal no longer prevails in the image of the protagonist, but rather the

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[68] Op. Cit., Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, p.113.
[69] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.133.

Coens focus on the incompetence exemplified in corporate collapse and failure. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is a period film that illustrates the very real concerns of a modern society disillusioned by corporate greed and incompetence.

Barton Fink is less a parody of the texts it mimics and more an ironic reexamination of history. It is both a critique of the Hollywood system then and now, and a reworking of the myth of the Left-wing artist of the 1930s. Kent Jones believes that the Coens "took great delight in debunking the Thirties enshrinement of the common man in *Barton Fink*."[70] Barton's fictitious broadway hit *Bare-Ruined Choirs* elicits a connection to Odets' actual play *Awake and Sing* with its poetic, earthy dialogue and social-realist commentary. Barton does not miss any opportunity to opine about his craft and his heady objectives. While meeting with Mayhew he surmises:

> I've always found that writing comes from a great inner pain. Maybe it's a pain that comes from the realisation that one must do something for one's fellow man – to help somehow to ease the suffering. Maybe it's a personal pain. At any rate, I don't think good writing is possible without it.

The Coen brothers satirise the pretension of those who claim to articulate for others incapable of speaking for themselves. Barton's pompous self-declaration as the scribe for the masses of suffering fellow men sounds like an exaggeration until drawn alongside Odets' own: "Great audiences are waiting now to have their own experiences explained and interpreted for them."[71] The subversion of the myth of the suffering playwright is apparent in the Coens' depiction of Barton as a pompous and self-absorbed author who is out of touch with the very people he declares that he is writing for and about.

It is notable that after Barton makes his inflated statement about the pain of writing Mayhew quickly adopts a sly grin and proclaims: "Hmm, me,...I just like making things up." Mayhew's statement is important in that it pricks Barton's

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[70] Kent Jones, "Airtight," *Film Comment*, Nov/Dec, 2000, p.49.
[71] Cited in Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers*, p.133.

preceding pomposity but it is also significant and relevant to the Coens themselves. Their films are enjoyable genre movies which rarely carry any pretence to great themes or importance. Eco observes that postmodernism reverses the traditional dynamic of high art and low entertainment. Eco argues that it is "possible to find elements of revolution and contestation in works that apparently lend themselves to facile consumption, and it [is also] possible to realize, on the contrary, that certain works, which seem provocative and still enrage the public, do not really contest anything."[72] The Coens use several cinematic devices to condemn Barton's attitudes and values and to debunk "the Thirties enshrinement of the common man." The visual perspective of *Barton Fink* involves an inconsistent subjective approach which presents the events generally as viewed by Barton, but with asides which represent an objective and critical point-of-view. That is to say that the viewer sees things through Barton's eyes until at crucial times the framing takes in images of which Barton is oblivious. When Barton meets Charlie (John Goodman) for the first time he relates his literary theories in his typical egotistical and arrogant manner. He repeatedly identifies people like Charlie ("the average working stiff") as the kinds of people he writes for and about. He proclaims to be interested in telling the stories of the common man. But each time Charlie tries to avail Barton with an anecdote—"I could tell you some stories..."—he is cut off mid-stream by Barton. The framing here is important as it conveys to the viewer the rejection endured by Charlie—his mouth drops, his face sags, and his eyes reflect a sense of insult—which goes unnoticed by the pontificating Barton. Lynn M. Thompson argues that "Barton is no more in touch with the common man than the 'phony insulated' writers he holds in contempt."[73] The Coens establish an ironic dichotomy as Barton's very words are undercut by the manner of the framing. This irony establishes an implicit satirical critique of the writers of the Group Theatre, like Odets, and their pompous endeavour to express the stories of the under-class.

By adopting the modes of the past the Coens are equipped to parody their assumptions, but also to expose their contrivances and to ensure their textuality is

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[72] Op. Cit., Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, pp.66-67.
[73] Lynne M. Thompson, "Giving Birth to the Artist Within: Barton Fink's Nod to Stephen Dedalus," *Spectator*, 12.2, Spring, 1992, p.54.

transparent. Harries identifies parody as a prime tool that can be "implemented as a technique to pry open the insularity of canons and to expose their 'constructedness'."[74] With *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the Coen brothers are highly self-conscious in the manner of their storytelling. To insist on exposing the devices of construction immediately cues the viewer to the fictionality not only of that text but of all texts. The Coen brothers' use of distancing narrational modes such as voice-over exposition in *Raising Arizona* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the direct address prologue in *Blood Simple* and *The Big Lebowski*, and the rigid application of generic convention in *Miller's Crossing* are all elements which foreground textual construction. But, the most obviously self-reflexive text in the Coen canon is *The Hudsucker Proxy*. Todd McCarthy bemoans the film's pastiche structure and artificial aesthetic: "rehashes of old movies, no matter how inspired, are almost by definition synthetic, and the fact is that nearly all the characters are constructs rather than human beings with whom the viewer can connect." But he then goes on to say that Tim "Robbins calls to mind Gary Cooper and James Stewart, but there's no authentic sweetness or strength underneath all his doltishness to make him seem like a good guy the audience can get behind."[75] McCarthy's problem here is that he finds *The Hudsucker Proxy* to be a rehash with characters who are constructs but then points out a very specific distinction between the Coens' film and those texts he compares it with. Postmodern discourse demands, in order to be understood, not the refutation of the already said, but its ironic rethinking. McCarthy's inconsistency—*The Hudsucker Proxy* is just like those prior films it draws from, but also specifically different—is crucial as it suggests not that Robbins fails to reflect authenticity, but rather that authenticity is unavailable. Like history, these texts are constructed and they are often constructed in a way which exposes their underlying ideologies.

Hutcheon observes that "self-reflexivity points in two directions at once, toward the events being represented in the narrative and toward the act of narration itself. This is precisely the same doubleness that characterizes all

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[74] Op. Cit., Dan Harries, *Film Parody*, p.124.
[75] Todd McCarthy, "*The Hudsucker Proxy*," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.118.

historical narrative."[76] The first meeting between Amy and Norville is perhaps the best example of the Coen brothers' attention to exposing the frameworks of construction in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. Amy first encounters Norville in a coffee shop, an event that is diegetically narrated by two cab-drivers, Lou and Benny. The cabbies observe as Amy undertakes a number of crafty deceptions in order to obtain Norville's attention. It will be her first involvement with her "mark" and the beginning of a series of newspaper stories in which she will rubbish his reputation – a direct allusion to Capra's *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*. The Coen brothers are acutely aware that the sequence in the coffee shop is a mass of narrative clichés. They seek to satirise the constructedness of the Classical Hollywood film by drawing the viewer's attention—through the narration of Lou and Benny—to its obvious conventionality. Lou: "Enter the dame." Benny: "There's one in every story," is overlaid as Amy sits down at the counter next to Norville. The pair of narrators go on to describe every move made by Amy to secure Norville's attention:

Lou:

She's looking for her mark,

Benny:

She finds him,

Lou:

She sits down and orders...

Benny:

...a light lunch.

Lou and Benny then describe the various schemes and scams employed by Amy in attempt to obtain Norville's attention and sympathy. When he finally heeds Amy's presence, the cabbies cynically narrate the action in perfunctory tones:

Benny:

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[76] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.76.

He notices,

Lou:

She's distressed,

Benny:

He's concerned.

The scene detailing Amy's swindle is composed of one long-take and is framed from across the counter using Lou and Benny's point-of-view which mirrors the audience's visual perspective. Lou and Benny are therefore stand-ins for the enlightened viewer who is intensely aware of the modes of construction that are contained in the films of Capra which *The Hudsucker Proxy* mocks. The purpose of self-reflexivity in postmodern representations is to de-naturalise classical modes of representation and to expose them as cultural constructions. What is significant in this scene is the way Joel and Ethan Coen expose the idealism of Capra's narratives, the suspension of ethics and the formulaic construction. The Coens investigate the methods of the social comedy with a satirical agenda, to study its devices and examine how meaning is constructed in relation to ideology. And it is to this point that the Coens are not merely revisiting a tired old genre.

With *The Hudsucker Proxy* the Coen brothers are most profound and most obvious in their attempts to expose the means of their own production. The film's diegetic world is paused as Moses places the handle of his janitor's broom into the cogs of the Hudsucker building clock in a "literalization of deus ex machina."[77] The result of this action in formal terms is beholden to both postmodern representation and to the art of parody. Parody is a form that ridicules the assumptions of texts and genres through the literalisation of those aspects which conventionally remain implicit and hidden in its framework. Actors break out of character and refer directly to cinema's institutions in a move which unsettles the text's illusory status, undermining the portentousness of the parodied representation. Moses' speech is ironic in that he addresses it directly to the viewer as if aware of the fictionality of the text that surrounds him. The dialogue

is unpretentious in its affable character and seemingly home-spun wisdom and ambiguous in that it hints that even Moses is not sure how the story will play out. The character of Moses stands in for the unconvinced spectator who is mindful of the artifice of all texts and thus already finds him/herself at one step removed from its conceits. The films of the Coen brothers are determinedly ironic in that they must be approached at two levels, one that identifies the gestures of the text, and the other that recognises the tools which are applied and employed to construct those gestures. The Coens are acutely aware of the processes that produce meaning, and it seems, they demand that their audiences be aware of this too.

Ideology

> *Novels do not depict life, they depict life as it is represented by ideology.* Lennard J. Davis[78]

Postmodern interrogation and deconstruction, whether it be through artistic representation or critical inquiry, has exposed the frameworks that persist in fiction and history. By revealing the modes of production it is possible to investigate how particular kinds of representation support values and sustain assumptions that exist within a culture. Catherine Belsey argues that postmodernism "now displays truth as a linguistic tyranny which arrests the proliferation of meanings, assigns values and specifies norms."[79] Postmodernism is often criticised as apolitical, as promoting emptiness, a loss of meaning, and as such, a waning of history. Stam argues that postmodernism represents the end of meaning as television programs and films "are relentlessly reflexive, but almost always within a pervasively ironic stance which looks with bored distaste at all political position-taking."[80] Stam distinguishes postmodern texts from the modernist films of Jean-Luc Godard which, he argues, employ reflexivity for more overtly political objectives. These criticisms are, however, merely an

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[77] Op. Cit., Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, p.110.
[78] Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels, Ideology and Fiction*, Methuen, New York & London, 1987, p.24.
[79] Catherine Belsey, "Towards Cultural History," *A Postmodern Reader*, Eds. Joseph Natoli & Linda Hutcheon, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993, p.555.

extension of the discrimination postmodernism suffers for its intermingling of mass entertainment (ie. television) with high culture. Postmodern films like those of the Coen brothers, resonate with a valid and vital critical approach to modern life which often carries a significant political agenda. These films seek to make meaning out of past representations using parody and irony as tools in the deconstruction of ideology. Hutcheon declares that where self-reflexivity and historical actuality clash, as in *Barton Fink* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a study of representation becomes "not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and the past."[81] The films of Joel and Ethan Coen provide this very investigation of the modes of representation, interrogating the nature of ideology using reflexivity, irony and subversion.

The Coen brothers' films draw attention to their own devices: they are self-conscious and reflexive. This process of manifesting the tools of textual production at the surface of the representation exposes more than simply the methods of reproduction, it also provides the means to critique the forces inherent in dominant modes of construction. E. L. Doctorow declares that "history shares with fiction a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning, and it is the cultural authority from which they both derive that illuminates those facts so that they can be perceived."[82] Doctorow's contention invokes a study of history as a textual entity in which ideology is apparent in the means of production. The use of reflexiveness, such as that exemplified by Moses' direct address and his halting of time in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, is the type of technique that challenges the seamless character of fiction and history as implied by the realist narrative. The Coens' adoption of such distancing techniques does not result in a disconnection from history. Rather, an undeniable relationship with history is established by the way it directs the viewer's attention to the conventions and latent ideology reflected in the seamlessness of the textual design. It is perhaps no wonder that postmodern representations are often

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[80] Op. Cit., Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, p.303.
[81] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.7.
[82] Op. Cit., E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents," p.229.

mistakenly considered to be copies, imitations, plagiarised texts and empty pastiches of older forms. To adopt a system which installs and foregrounds a framework in order to scrutinise it, these representations must reflect the texts they critique. This is the paradox of postmodernism: representations are positioned within the system to expose its premises as ideological compositions.

The Hudsucker Proxy is the most obvious example of a Coen film that installs a mode of production in order to scrutinise its structure and the ideology that it supports. By transplanting the format of the Capra film to a somewhat unwelcome setting, and through repetition and difference, the values endemic in the Capra film are critiqued. For Schatz, Capra's films "are among the last genuinely transparent, straightforward celebrations of American life that Hollywood produced."[83] But Vito Zagarrio qualifies this assessment by noting that Capra's "populism, sticky-sweet optimism, and paternalistic demagogy [mask] a superficial democracy that fades, on close examination, into a substantially reactionary attitude."[84] Capra's films are highly effective in stimulating the interests of mass audiences while transferring a sense of "American-ness" and the values of democracy in a stubbornly pleasing format and structure.

The protagonists in Capra's films are sympathetically drawn to maximise viewer empathy. Characters such as Longfellow Deeds and Jefferson Smith are idealistic and principled, they are symbols of integrity in a world constantly imperilled by corruption. The casting of upstanding Hollywood leading-men Gary Cooper and James Stewart, respectively, confirms Capra's agenda. With *The Hudsucker Proxy*, Joel and Ethan Coen are less righteous in their representation of Norville and more sly about his motives. He does not come to New York with the noble intention of political reform, but rather to find success in the vibrantly capitalistic system. Smith and Deeds are "holy fools," men whose guileless naïveté induces others to exploit them, though ultimately their earthy and homespun values triumph. But Norville is no holy fool; just a simpleton with few

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[83] Op. Cit., Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p.185.
[84] Vito Zagarrio, "It is (Not) a Wonderful Life: For a Counter-reading of Frank Capra," *Frank Capra: Authorship and the Studio System*, Eds. Robert Sklar & Vito Zagarrio, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1998, p.66.

redeeming features. When he "graduates" to the executive floor of the Hudsucker organisation he quickly adopts attitudes of superiority, made all the more disreputable by the viewer's awareness that he is not a business achiever, but rather a corporate stooge. For Kothenschulte, Norville is less a Capra hero and more "a Preston Sturges character, a figure distinctly lacking in superhuman ethical qualities who becomes a hero purely because of external circumstances."[85] By disrupting the typical order of the Capra universe the Coens also expose what is essential to the design of his films and illuminate their elemental ideologies. Capra's films promote an idealised vision of a democratic system that flourishes with the simple application of "old-fashioned" values imported from the small towns where such tenets typically prosper. The Coens are engaging with the historical context of Capra's films—a context conceived in the shadows of New Deal politics—by employing postmodern techniques which reject totalising forces that seek to fuse the diversity of cultural experiences into a single and universal myth. *The Hudsucker Proxy* promotes the notion that the messages of Capra's films are now irrelevant, their values no longer tenable, and a reclamation of their political ideals impossible. The transition of values in the films of Capra and those in *The Hudsucker Proxy* provide an index to the changes in values in the political and social climate of American culture. The historical investigation in *The Hudsucker Proxy* resides not in the accuracy or authenticity of its setting, design or positioning of events, but rather in its exposition of the values related to the texts it parodies.

Both *Barton Fink* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* explore moments in time that really existed, and construct settings which are based upon actual locales. One of the chief concerns in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is the cultural significance of radio in Depression-era America and its relation to the political climate. Bruce Lenthall describes wary contemporary intellectuals as circumspect about radio's power. These commentators feared that radio and mass communication would lead to the circulation of uniform mass culture and the concentration of social power in the hands of a select few. They also feared the

[85] Op. Cit., Daniel Kothenschulte, "*The Hudsucker Proxy*," p.168.

damage that the medium might do to an already waning democracy.[86] This kind of unilateral concentration of power is represented in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in the figure of Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel (Charles Durning), the incumbent Governor of Mississippi, who maintains his position through his access to and control over the broadcasting airwaves. Jerome Davis, a contemporary critic during the emergence of radio broadcasting in the 1930s, claimed that "[w]hoever owns the agencies for the distribution of ideas is most likely to control the people. Radio today ranks as perhaps the most important force for the dissemination of ideas in American life."[87] Radio becomes the crucial tool in Pappy's gubernatorial campaign allowing him to reach larger audiences than his opponent. When Pappy's campaign advisers question his unwillingness to "press-the-flesh" with his constituents Pappy chides them by declaring that his campaign is centered on "mass communicatin'." These same campaign advisers register their impressed reaction to Pappy's opponent's method of campaigning—he has a large broom and a midget, meant to symbolise his twin objectives to clean up the state and look after the little man—but it seems Pappy realises the futility in such small-time theatrics. And it is radio which eventually proves to be the master-stroke ensuring Pappy retains his governorship as the consolidating events of the hoe-down, where Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall) is revealed as a racist, are broadcast over the airwaves.

The Coens' depiction of radio both acknowledges the power of the medium as a conduit of information and also reflects an optimism in its democratic potential. It is the conductor of the music of the Soggy Bottom Boys and ensures their song "A Man of Constant Sorrow" becomes a hit. Radio's potential as a communicator of mass entertainment is portrayed by the Coens as having commendable character: the success of the record ensures that Everett, Pete and Delmar are finally pardoned by Pappy. Radio also transmits information to the masses, and it is through this medium that Stokes' racist rhetoric is made public and available to the constituency. The radio is then a guarantor of a more immediate and less adulterated democracy than other media. These examples

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[86] Bruce Lenthall, "Critical Reception: Public Intellectuals Decry Depression-era Radio, Mass Culture, and Modern America," *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, Eds. Michele Hilmes & Jason Lovoglio, Routledge, New York, 2002, pp.42 & 51.
[87] Jerome Davis, *Capitalism and Its Culture*, New York, Farrar, 1935, pp.315-316.

submit that radio fosters mainly positive consequences which run contrary to many of the concerns presented by the contemporary intellectual establishment who viewed the medium as influencing waning standards in artistic expression and journalistic integrity. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is eloquent in depicting the domestic positioning and cultural and commercial impact of radio in the home of Americans in the 1930s. The film is instructive as it tells of the rise of radio during this era, the Coens relating it to the current (televisual) media culture as characters are seen to be frozen around radio sets.

Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us* (1974) shares many similarities to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* but its perspective on the burgeoning medium of radio is more pessimistic. *Thieves Like Us* follows three escapees from a Mississippi prison as they are hunted by the law whilst making their way across the countryside. Their journey is annotated by the invariable presence of radio, the voices overheard often providing an ironic commentary on the action. Altman presents radio as a transmitter of information and entertainment, but also of mind numbing advertising, ugly propaganda and sensational serials which corrupt the image of reality. Altman frames the crimes committed by his protagonists with radio serials such as *Steve Gibson of the International Police*, *The Shadow* and *Gangbusters*. Kate Lacey notes that the Thirties was the "great era of the serial drama and the soap, whose continual narrative strategy of crisis and recovery fitted the time so neatly."[88] Altman overlays the representation of a robbery with an instalment of *Gangbusters*, the crime and the serial contrasting in concerns. The actual crime is omitted by Altman's obscuring of the action, he keeps the camera trained on the outside of the bank. Meanwhile, the audio accompaniment is a melodramatic narration in which G-men are "marching against the underworld." Clearly there is a juxtaposition between the reality of the "real" crimes and the sensationalising of the events in the serial. The matching of the theatrical narration in the radio program and the ordinariness of the actual crime being committed presents an apt discourse on the distinctions between fiction and reality. Later, when the youngest fugitive Bowie (Keith Carradine) is killed, his

[88] Kate Lacey, "Radio in the Great Depression: Promotional Culture, Public Service, and Propaganda," *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, Eds. Michele Hilmes and Jason Lovoglio, Routledge, New York, 2002, p.27.

death scene is characterised as unnecessarily violent and sensational. The act conflicts with Bowie's simplicity and ordinariness, a criticism of the blood-thirstiness of a public fed excessively sensational story-lines in radio serial. In *Thieves Like Us*, radio culture is a noxious concoction of thrilling serial drama and indoctrinating public addresses. It is notable the extent that both *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Thieves Like Us* engage with history in their exploration of radio culture. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* works with Altman's film, its themes and focus are explicitly linked, and it explores the changing attitudes toward mass media as it relates to political and social development.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is a text rife with allusion, potent with aesthetic pleasures and steeped in moments of spectacle, but it is always engaging with history and ethical inquiry. David Harvey argues that "aesthetics has triumphed over ethics as a prime focus of social and intellectual concern, images dominate narratives, ephemerality and fragmentation take precedence over eternal truths and unified politics."[89] Harvey describes a postmodern environment obsessed with system and sign rather than ideology and meaning. The saturation of information in the postmodern age has cultivated an audience increasingly aware of the conventionality of signs, forcing a rupture between the sign and its referent. The argument follows that to depict history as a series of signs displaces it from its reality. The sign is repeated so often—the past is articulated by the texts of the past—that soon its link to the entity to which it refers becomes so tenuous it is lost: "First, Baudrillard says, the image reflected reality: then it masked reality, then it marked the absence of reality. Now, in the final phase, the image bears no relationship to any reality, but has become it's own 'simulacrum'."[90] The sign becomes confusing or obsolete, as its relationship to the referent diminishes. A joke which is told in one context might then be retold, and retold, and eventually removed from its original context so that the punch-line becomes confounding and nonsensical. Yet, while this is a legitimate concern, the textuality of history dictates that this has always been the case: "Past events are given *meaning*, not *existence*, by their representation in history. This is quite the opposite of

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[89] David Harvey, cited in John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p.53.
[90] Op. Cit., David Morley, "Postmodernism: The Rough Guide," p.62.

Baudrillard's claims that they are reduced to simulacra; instead, they are made to signify."[91] Joel and Ethan Coen seem fully aware that the current environment of the image-dominated sign has become so thoroughly conventionalised in the form of visual tropes and precedents that their initial relevance and meaning begins to abate. But this meaning can be restored and satirised, ridiculed and parodied in a new text.

At the beginning of *Barton Fink*, the titular character is persuaded to make the trip out to Hollywood to try his hand in the film business as a contract writer. This initial scene is followed by a transition from New York to Los Angeles which is marked with a simple image: a crashing wave. It is an uncomplicated representation but it carries with it a highly complicated and vital series of purposes. Here the sign is ridiculously elementary—a blue wave crashing into a rock—but it immediately cues the viewer to the belief that the film's action has changed locales from New York (a city with its own "signs") to Los Angeles. Russell states that "[a] cut to the bluest of ocean waves cresting against a large rock signals Barton's decision and the film's transition to Hollywood."[92] That the viewer will make this connection highlights the concept that all signs are conventions and all communication is dependent on these conventions for ultimate understanding. The sequence is heavily ironic for the transition from New York to Los Angeles is marked by this single scene which lasts about a second. It is so superficial and contingent that it demonstrates the standardisation of the sign. Collins contends:

> The self-referentiality that is symptomatic of communication in techno-sophisticated cultures, is a recognition of the highly discursive, thoroughly institutionalized dimension of all signs. At this point these signs become doubly referential, referring to a "really real" world, but also to the reality of the array, which forms the fabric of day-to-day experience in those very cultures. It is the individual negotiations of

[91] Op. Cit., Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.82.
[92] Op. Cit., Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, p.70.

> the array that form the delicate process of not just maintaining but constantly rearticulating cultural memories.[93]

Jean Baudrillard has suggested that "[a]ll of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could *exchange* for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange – God, of course."[94] But, Baudrillard's attribution of the sponsor of meaning and its relationship with the sign is a fallacy, for it was man who invented both. The Coens' parody of the highly-conventional sign which represents Los Angeles in *Barton Fink* does not remove the meaning from the sign, rather it changes it. It still carries a meaning, but a different one. The ironic composition of the sign represents its normal meaning and a second code acknowledges its cultural construction. Ethan Coen both endorses this suggestion and undercuts it with a slightly contrary statement. At first he suggests that he and Joel had constructed other transitional scenes which were "more conventional" but then goes on to say that they did not use them because "[a]ll we needed was a rock on the beach."[95] The viewer is aware enough to translate the most abstract sign into very real meaning. The postmodern approach from Joel and Ethan Coen highlights history's dependence on textuality. The abstraction of reality depicted by an image of a rock on the beach is so thoroughly coded that it almost goes unnoticed, thus supporting the postmodern conviction that our understanding of the world is conditioned entirely on such mediated signs.

History is a series of mediated signs such as the rock on the beach that marks Barton's transition from New York to Los Angeles. To recognise how history is constructed is to discern how meaning is made, how truth is achieved and the underlying ideologies which compel certain truths to the forefront to be deemed as "authentic." Joel and Ethan Coen's films are often censured for their refusal to engage with the "real," reproached for failing to commit to moral or ethical positions and chastised for their perceived unreality. But the truth, evident

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[93] Op. Cit., Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," p.255.
[94] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Second Edition, Edited with an Introduction by Mark Poster, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, p.173.

in Levy's pointed condemnation, is that the Coens are victims of a critical establishment which considers visual documentation—film and television—to be unworthy conveyers of the past. The Coen brothers do know too much about film: they know enough to recognise the conceits of its processes and to detect the values that such systems are designed to support; and they know enough to subvert and criticise these systems in order to construct a valid and important engagement with the past, encapsulating very effective and substantial moral and ethical explorations. The films of Joel and Ethan Coen are not only historical, they are alsc exceptional documents of the present.

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[95] Michel Ciment & Hubert Niogret, "A Rock on the Beach," *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*, Ed. Paul A. Woods, Plexus, London, 2000, p.101.

4. Performance

When all the mysteries are solved, when all the facts are brought together and the plot explained, one mystery remains – the actor, the continuing human being, whose body has existed before us in all those separate moments. Leo Braudy[1]

In one of the most iconic moments in film acting two characters wrapped in heavy coats slump in the back seat of a moving sedan, the camera's frame drawing them close together. The two men speak about murder, loyalty, violence and betrayal. It is the famous "taxi-cab" scene from *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954), the scene in which Marlon Brando utters the immortal words: "I coulda been a contenda." It is a notable cinematic moment precisely because it is a remarkable instance of actors acting. Trying to define what constitutes modern acting, and what good acting consists of, is such a problematic task that this example from *On the Waterfront* provides a fine opportunity for scrutiny and investigation. It is undoubtedly a clear illustration of method acting as both performers—Brando and Rod Steiger—utilise restrained gestures, and apply changes of vocal tone and facial expression to convey their interior states. James Naremore contends the result is "a feeling of almost hallucinatory, over-heated naturalism, a sense of hysteria held in check by the tiny enclosure and the muttered New Yorkese."[2] Yet, this suggests less about the quality of the performances of each of the actors and more about the mechanics of acting for the camera: how technique, convention and signification collaborate in making meaning. What makes this a moment of powerful acting meriting particular attention is less apparent. And this is the problem that confronts attempts to theorise performance in film: how do we talk about "good" acting? Performance is a vital dimension of the affective power of cinema, and as such it both beckons and complicates the desire to understand film acting.

A study of acting in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen seeks to demonstrate the significance of performance in making meaning and question the contribution

[1] Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*, Anchor, New York, 1977, p.184.

of the performer in the construction of a cinematic text. *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* each contain notable performances and thereupon invite speculation on the nature of acting and its role in the filmmaking process. Yet, these films also demonstrate just how difficult it is to quantify acting as a cinematic device. By initially bracketing the amorphous realm of performance within theories of sociology constructed by Erving Goffman it becomes apparent that acting for the cinema and "acting" in real-life carry telling connections. The Coen brothers are particularly interested in exploring the limits of identity through performance, focussing on characters who are deceptive and counterfeit. This analysis acknowledges the performances of identity, sociology theory maintaining that an authentic persona is a fallacious concept, a theme redolent throughout the films of the Coen brothers and particularly evident in the three texts under scrutiny. Subsequently, the issue of responsibility in the construction of a film performance is interrogated. A performance in a film is a notoriously unstable entity, it is a malleable object in a film's construction always at the mercy of the filmmaker and therefore readily available for mutation and modification. Examining concepts like the Kuleshov effect and the coded conventions of acting it is apparent that the performer performing, and filmmaker organising performance must work together to create meaning in a film. And, finally the role of intertextual, extra-textual and cultural factors in the reception of performance suggests a further element in the making of meaning in relation to film acting. The Coen brothers' regular use of particular performers, investment in "typage" and exploration of cultural images demonstrate their broad utility of performance in film. Like many of the great filmmakers of the past, the Coens are particularly adept at arranging performances in a unique manner.

Many famous filmmakers have exhibited a canny use of performers in several different ways, ranging from Alfred Hitchcock's almost exclusive employment of "film stars" to Vittorio De Sica's reliance on non-actors. Doug Tomlinson argues that Robert Bresson denies his performers purposeful expression, noting that the director referred to his actors as models.[3] Bresson

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[2] James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p.210.
[3] Doug Tomlinson, "Performance in the Films of Bresson: The Aesthetics of Denial," *Making Visible the Invisible: an anthology of original essays on film acting*, Ed. Carole Zucker, Scarecrow Press, New Jersey, 1990, p.365.

challenged the proposition that naturalism was the optimum mode of cinematic expression while also elevating the significant role of the filmmaker in the construction of a performance. Sharon Marie Carnicke notes that "film as a performance medium poses a major new question for acting theorists: who is the creator of filmed performance?"[4] And this is an important question to consider when framing an analysis of the way filmmakers *use* actors in their films. Joel and Ethan Coen are bold filmmakers with an approach which is consistent along a range of texts, their use of actors important in the construction of their films. As such, a critique of acting in their films must deal doubly with the role of the performer *and* the influence of the director, exploring the limits of collaboration. Hitchcock's famous dismissal of actors as merely cattle highlights the manner by which many artists and observers consider actors to be nothing more than signifiers. When Gianfranco Bettetini suggests that the film actor appears within the "communicative relation between the author and spectator as a component sign element who confers, with the image of his body and his actions, the value of credibility upon the universe invoked by the film," he illustrates the uncertain position of performance in film.[5] Bettetini nominates the actor as a sign but then acknowledges the actor's owner authority in conferring meaning. Naremore's seminal monograph (*Acting in the Cinema*) is interested in celebrating the status of the player's contribution to the text's artistic merit. With distinctive filmmakers like Joel and Ethan Coen and prominent actors such as John Turturro, Steve Buscemi, Frances McDormand and Jeff Bridges the opportunity arises to investigate the collaborative dynamic between the filmmaker and the actor and to explore the position of performance in film and film theory.

The taxi-cab scene in *On the Waterfront* is significant not only for its famous acting performances but also because the scene is "covered" in Joel and Ethan Coen's *Miller's Crossing*. In the Coen brothers' film, Tom Reagan and Eddie "the Dane" Dane are seated in the back of a moving car. The Dane takes the opportunity to question Tom's loyalty to underworld kingpin Johnny Caspar, expressing doubts over Tom's inclination to assassinate a lowly grifter. In this

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[4] Sharon Marie Carnicke, "Lee Strasberg's Paradox of the Actor," *Screen Acting*, Eds. Alan Lovell & Peter Krämer, Routledge, London, 1999, p.76.
[5] Gianfranco Bettetini, *The Language and Technique of the Film*, Translated by David Osmond-Smith, Mouton, The Hague, 1973, p.88.

"interrogation scene" the performance of Gabriel Byrne is even more restrained, even more low-key and restricted than that of either Brando or Steiger in *On the Waterfront*. Byrne rarely alters his gaze, which is fixed on the unseen side window of the vehicle; his voice remains impassive and indifferent and his face reflects little of his interior concerns. The keen viewer will note, however, minute transformations in Byrne's eyes as the Dane articulates veiled threats, which the viewer and Tom recognise possess a certain urgency. The Dane on the other hand, while restricted in gesture, is overt in his intentions, his antagonistic demeanour and forceful rhetoric exists entirely on the surface.

The interrogation scene from *Miller's Crossing* is an exhilarating moment in cinema which seems to breathlessly sweep past the viewer. But when such moments are ensnared, separated, confined and then examined the elements that make them powerful and significant seem to gradually surface. And it is through an attentive examination of the codes, conventions and signs of performance in film that extraordinary moments become accessible. The Coens often write for specific actors and rigorously story-board their films, suggesting their keen awareness of the qualities they require of the performances. Such an approach places the performance into the category of cinematic device, suggesting connections to framing, editing and lighting. Yet, unlike these tools, performance has not readily been prone to deconstruction. It is often considered an amorphous and inscrutable element of the filmmaking process. Describing, appraising and theorising performance is obviously a difficult assignment that seems prohibitive to examination. Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros approach the problem as indispensable to the task at hand: "It is a question of how to *describe* performance in film, and this question is enmeshed with (yet also needs to be differentiated from) the difficulty of how to describe those filmic moments/scenes/sequences that one is analysing."[6] To be sure, with actors and acting signifiers, there exists a whole history of codes and conventions that make meaning in film. But where an actor, a body and a presence is concerned, there is ample doubt that identifying signs in performance offers a satisfactory analysis. Stern and Kouvaros suggest

[6] Lesley Stern & George Kouvaros, "Descriptive Acts: Introduction," *Falling for you: essays on cinema and performance*, Eds. Lesley Stern & George Kouvaros, Power Publications, Sydney, 1999, p.5 (Italics in original).

that in "trying to understand the way that performative modes may elicit sensory responses from viewers (not just visual, but also auditory, tactile) it is not enough to delineate dramaturgical codes and actorly conventions."[7]

To deal with performance is to examine the manner by which code and convention operate to confer meaning. Moreover, a study of acting should explore those moments in which the performance seems to exceed description and where conventional analysis is inadequate to account for the power or success of a scene or moment in film. The texts of Joel and Ethan Coen are significant to a study in film acting on two levels. Firstly, the performances in their films are often celebrated for their quality: Frances McDormand won an Academy Award for her leading role in *Fargo* and John Turturro was decorated with the award for best actor at Cannes for his title performance in *Barton Fink*. At another level, the Coen brothers' films often explore the role of performance in everyday life. While characters in their films are rarely traditional actors they often "play roles" in the diegetic reality of the texts. The point at which these two notions of performance merge—acting in film and acting in real-life—assists in demonstrating how codes and convention work to create the "right" meaning even when it is occasionally the "wrong" impression. The way in which characters in the Coen brothers' films regularly manipulate and deceive those around them illustrates the means by which actors make meaning in fiction and in a self-reflexive move explores how characters work to signify in the "real world." By looking at how people typically construct performances in everyday life, how actors construct performances in fictional representation and how factors beyond the text impact on the reception of performances it is possible to identify key themes and approaches that flow through the films of the Coen brothers.

Presentation

> *All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.* Erving Goffman[8]

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[7] Ibid, p.12.
[8] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1959, p.78.

Tom, in *Miller's Crossing*, cynically maintains: "Nobody knows anybody – not that well." It is an acknowledgment of the way in which the characters in the film habitually deceive others and misrepresent themselves. Sociologist Erving Goffman argues that people in real-life put on a performance, they play at being themselves. And when a performer is convinced by his own act, and the observers are also convinced, then only the sociologist will doubt the "realness" of what is presented.[9] Goffman is suggesting that in our socialised manner we construct an identity which is not inherent in any human being, hence "nobody knows anybody – not that well." In *Miller's Crossing*, Tom is praised in the final scene by his boss and close friend Leo for the manner by which he has orchestrated a gang-war in order to systematically eliminate all of Leo's enemies. Yet, Tom himself seems unsure of his motives. And the confusion that he has created and the havoc that he has perpetrated, finally induces an identity crisis upon which the Coen brothers' film enigmatically concludes.

The films of Joel and Ethan Coen, particularly *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, explore the way in which performances are constructed in everyday life. *Miller's Crossing* takes the issue to its logical conclusion wherein the self-consciousness of performance ultimately alienates Tom from his "true self." But in these films there is also a more overt and practical consideration, questioning how characters create different persona for themselves as they try to deal with difficult situations. Goffman states:

> The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.[10]

In *Fargo* several characters try to construct identity through performance. Carl and Jerry both manufacture for themselves alter egos—Carl as master criminal,

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[9] Ibid, p.28.
[10] Ibid, p.245.

Jerry as deceptive car-salesman—in which they hope to maintain control over others. Often they fail. Freddie Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub), the eminent attorney in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, bases his legal strategies on illusions and fabrications, reflecting his own character which is groomed, plucked and contrived for what he dubs "the big show." Goffman's notions of performance in everyday life provide a suitable basis by which to explore the way the Coen brothers represent acting in acting, how they demonstrate "bad" acting and how they (perhaps in vain) seek to represent the genuine essence of a character.

Goffman argues that ordinary social intercourse is itself assembled as a scene is assembled, "by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. Scripts even in the hands of unpractised players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing."[11] In the world of *Miller's Crossing* there is a script that only one character knows. Tom plays the central role in the drama that unfolds, manipulating his performance in order to win respect or alternatively discredit himself depending on the situations as they arise. Tom is the key player and his performance is integral to his chief aim – to reinstate Leo as the only power-broker in the corrupt town. Consequently, Geoff Andrew describes the situation in *Miller's Crossing* in terms that emphasise deception: "everyone is on the make, and apparent loyalty may really be betrayal, friends 'is a mental state' (to quote Caspar); [and thus] trust can only be based on a perception of people's characters."[12] Leo, Caspar, and Verna all misread Tom at some point in *Miller's Crossing*, proving the film's central thesis: "Nobody knows anybody." It is part of Tom's design that he keeps everyone else in the dark and his plan operates on the basis that everyone *believes* in the Tom that he presents to them. As such Tom inflects his actions with characteristics which support the illusions he is constructing. Even when he is telling the truth, such as when he confides to Verna that he aided Bernie's escape from the clutches of Caspar, he fabricates facial gestures and vocal modifications that Verna will use later to doubt the authenticity of his claims.

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[11] Ibid, p.78.
[12] Geoff Andrew, Stranger Than Paradise: Maverick film-makers in recent American cinema, Prion, London, 1998, p.176.

Goffman notes that the general characteristics of a presentation "can be seen as interaction constraints which play upon the individual and transform his activities into performance." These characteristics include "sufficient self control" designed to maintain a working consensus, "idealized impression" in which the performer accentuates certain facts and conceals others, and "expressive coherence" to guard against disharmonies that might jeopardise the whole performance.[13] When Tom "deceptively" relates the truth to Verna regarding her brother's whereabouts—a method that invites doubts necessary to his overall designs—he dismisses the idealised impression in favour of an image of untrustworthiness. However, though he constructs a tainted impression of himself his intentions remain fixed on his chief objective: to rid the town of each of Leo's enemies. Goffman makes the point that individuals aware that they are being judged upon appearance, will seek to present an exterior signification which they believe is most suitable. These individuals:

> need only guide their action in the present so that its future consequences will be the kind that would lead a just individual to treat them now in a way they want to be treated; once this is done, they have only to rely on the perceptiveness and justness of the individual who observes them.[14]

To describe any of the characters in *Miller's Crossing* as "just" would be an anomaly. But in the context of Tom's manipulations a just person is one who will read him the way he wants to be read and who reacts in kind, and therefore fulfils a role in Tom's elaborate scheme.

In the films of the Coen brothers the analogy between real-life and drama is readily apparent in the way characters attempt to construct their lives, especially in the way they seek to manufacture favourable roles for themselves. Riedenschneider in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is the most prominent example of a theatrical character. Riedenschneider's working practice, his legal magic show, has all the hallmarks of a theatrical production, he even describes a pair of

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[13] Op. Cit., Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p.72.
[14] Ibid, p.242.

potential legal defences as "Story A" and "Story B." Jerry and Carl in *Fargo* are much less sure of their performances, as if they were rank amateurs. George Toles argues that "[t]hey trust in their ability to manipulate others and their knowledge of how to simulate attitudes that will work for them."[15] While Toles' assertion is true, Jerry and Carl are blissfully unaware of the fragility of their performances. Jerry puts on a brave face and attempts to execute an abduction plan that he describes as "real sound" and "all worked out." Yet the plan spirals out of control almost as soon as it has been implemented. Carl is the chief kidnapper employed by Jerry and when they first meet he presents a performance as a tough guy, employing argumentative language and intimidating posturing, but ultimately he will be exposed as unworthy of the role.

Carl's faith in the theatricality of his own performance is exposed shortly after the failed ransom exchange in which a gunshot has left a deep gash across his jaw. It is at this point that Jerry's ridiculous abduction plan has reached its nadir: Wade is dead, Jean has been murdered by Carl's psychotic partner Gaear and there is a host of dead bodies on the highway between Brainerd and Minneapolis. Mikita Brottman argues the injury sustained by Carl to his jaw is significant in that it reflects the failure of the kidnapping scheme as well as drawing attention to his reliance on language for authority: "[Carl's] constant stream of talk is an obvious attempt to compensate for this failure, and that of his own body, by creating a pathetic veneer of control."[16] On returning to the hide-out Carl thrusts open the door, immediately issuing the comment: "You should see the other guy!" Carl delivers the line of dialogue with such enthusiasm and such relish that it is clearly implied that he has been rehearsing it for some time. Notably, the subdued Gaear does not say anything to invite this comment from Carl and merely gazes passively at his disfigured face. Even more notable is the manner by which Carl blurts out the line, as though standing on the required cue from his partner. Carl is so eager to apply this witty and theatrical rejoinder that he fails to wait for the set-up, leaving Gaear no time to utter the necessary question: "What happened to you?" This moment demonstrates how in everyday

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[15] George Toles, "Obvious Mysteries in *Fargo*," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 38.4, Fall, 1999, p.654.

[16] Mikita Brottman, "'Kinda Funny Lookin': Steve Buscemi's Disorderly Body," *The Coen Brothers' Fargo*, Ed. William G. Luhr, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p.83.

life people attempt to project themselves into dramas (or comedies). It is a vain desire to possess the ready-made responses to anomalous predicaments, a hope of manufacturing command over difficult and confronting situations.

The representation of actors "acting" is nothing new or particularly significant in and of itself. It is common for characters in films to feign ignorance of a situation or affect knowledge they do not possess to fool other characters. Naremore notes that sometimes "we are as much taken in by these performances as the characters in the drama; sometimes we know that a character is behaving falsely because the plot has given us that information; and sometimes we can see indications of deception in a player's expression even when these signs are invisible."[17] In John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988), pseudo-terrorist and master thief Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) is captured by John McClane (Bruce Willis) only to pretend to be a fellow victim and hostage, affecting an American accent to corroborate the fabrication. Gruber's deception is apparent to the viewer and the dramatic tension of the scene is constructed upon the question of whether McClane will also see through the charade. In such a case the viewer is in a privileged position, with the knowledge of who Gruber really is, and can adjudicate on his performance and identify his methods of deceit. Yet, in other situations the viewer is not privy to the required information and must rely on other cues to the genuineness of a performance.

Where the viewer is aware of Gruber's performance, and his true character, in *The Man Who Wasn't There* the audience is not always apprised of the characters' true intentions. Whether Ed (Billy Bob Thornton) is in league with a legitimate businessman in Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito)—the salesman who offers him a partnership in a dry-cleaning enterprise—depends greatly on the reading of Polito's performance. Tolliver's physical presentation is the first cue to doubt his authenticity, he sits in the barber chair and cautions Ed to delay his haircut until he removes his toupee. As Ed begins cutting what remains of Tolliver's real hair he listens to the salesman's hard-luck story (visiting Santa Rosa for a business deal that has ultimately fallen through). Tolliver then informs Ed of the revolutionary advantages of dry-cleaning technology employing the

familiar language of a salesman: "It's called dry cleaning. You heard me right, brother." And Ed bites, agreeing to provide the capital for the enterprise. Later, he wonders whether Tolliver was genuine in his claims: "Was he a huckster, or opportunity, the real McCoy?" And the viewer, who is exclusively linked to Ed's point-of-view, is also unaware of Tolliver's ultimate motives. Ed meets with Tolliver two more times, first to devise a contract and then to deliver the money. The second visit offers more clues to Tolliver's true intentions. When Ed hands over the cash Tolliver emits a telling proclamation: "Whoa Nelly!" Polito's physical representation of Tolliver as lip-licking, heavy breathing and profusely sweating, as well as his rapid speech, suggests his desire to secure a deal swiftly before the opportunity passes. Ed seems to recognise the dangers and directly challenges the entrepreneur: "Say Creighton, you're not going to screw me on this?" Tolliver's angry repudiation of Ed's insinuation seems to verify the legitimacy of the enterprise, his forthright manner and provocative invitation for Ed to seek legal counsel calms Ed's doubts. Ultimately the viewer never knows the true intentions of Tolliver – whether he is a huckster or for real. Tolliver may be a genuine businessman with benevolent intentions or a cunning grifter with a deceptively convincing performance. Ed's doubts of Tolliver's character develop from his attempts to read his performance. Whether that reading is accurate remains unknown as Tolliver soon disappears from the action.

In *Miller's Crossing*, Tom is the focus of attention and his performance is open for scrutiny. Despite this scrutiny he remains an enigma to the viewer as well as to all the characters who encounter him. Tom is the greatest actor in the entire Coen canon simply because as close as the viewer is to him his motives remain inscrutable to the very end. Tom seeks to protect Leo by defecting to Caspar's regime and destroying it from within, planting deceptive notions of treachery in each of the major players' minds. Only Tom is aware of his true intentions. Tom must control his performance with extreme discipline and Byrne is obliged to do the same. Goffman notes:

> Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to

[17] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.70.

> control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan.[18]

Clearly this is Tom's intention, to have others implement his plan by manipulating their impressions. Caspar describes Tom as "the man who walks behind the man, whispers in his ear," casting him as the perennial manipulator. Little does Caspar know that not only does Tom whisper in Leo's ear, and then Caspar's, but in just about everyone else's as well. Tom (like Jerry in *Fargo*) places himself under extraordinary pressure to maintain a performance consistent with his ultimate goal.

Tom risks immediate death with every move he makes – the danger to his well-being is unmediated. Goffman identifies the very real ways in which the stage does not resemble real-life: "A character staged in a theatre is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man."[19] As such Tom is under enormous pressure to maintain his performance, his life being the price for an unconvincing presentation. Elizabeth Burns argues that for "a person who plays a number of roles, as most people in modern society are obliged to, strain and conflict arise from the irreconcilable nature of some of these modes of conduct and expression."[20] Tom's aptitude in controlling all the roles he is playing assists in his ability to stay one step ahead of his enemies. He does not have the opportunity to lapse in any of his performances, and when he does his safety is endangered with disturbing immediacy. In the interrogation scene, spoken of earlier, Tom remains resolutely passive when confronted by the Dane's knowledgeable account of his activities. Later, when these two characters seek out Bernie's corpse in the forest at Miller's Crossing (to verify that Tom has

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[18] Op. Cit., Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p.15.
[19] Ibid, p.246-47.
[20] Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality: A study of convention in the theatre and in social life*, Longman, London, 1972, p.132.

murdered the grifter, which he has not) Tom vomits as his nerves overwhelm him. The Dane recognises this as evidence that there will be no body amongst the trees to corroborate the impression fostered by Tom. With a gun pointed at his forehead by a psychotic and vindictive enemy the stakes of Tom's performance become intensely apparent. Ultimately, to the surprise of both Tom and the Dane, a decomposed corpse is found that resembles Bernie and Tom is spared his execution. Tom's true self is exposed in its most overt representation in this sequence. His vomiting and silence and his inability to evade the Dane's logical conclusions reveal to the viewer the most naked impression of Tom. Mostly, Tom controls any inconsistencies, and the only time his performance is in true jeopardy is when the Dane has him in his clutches. Somewhat ironically it is something beyond Tom's control—the discovery of another body resembling Bernie (the corpse of Mink planted by Bernie himself)—which saves his life and confirms his performance.

Tom's good fortune is merely a minor aspect of the ultimate success of his surreptitious scheme. Tom's accomplishment relies heavily on his intestinal fortitude, his ability to ride out his performance to the very end. He is a masterful actor. Yet, the Coen brothers also maintain affection for the many "bad" actors who populate their films. That is not to say that the Coens employ poor performers to appear in their works but they write characters who are required to act in certain ways which undermine their credibility. They are the unconvincing performances that transpire frequently in their films. Lesley Stern identifies a similar notion in Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* in which the superior actor of modern times, Robert De Niro, is required to play a character, Rupert Pupkin, with limited performing capabilities. Stern notes that as viewers "[w]e take pleasure in the virtuosity of [De Niro's] performing of bad acting so well and with such consummate relish."[21] The films of Joel and Ethan Coen frequently deal with incompetent characters not far removed from Pupkin. William H. Macy as Jerry in *Fargo* is required to expressly represent his character's "poor" performances. With his "real sound" abduction scheme spiraling out of control Jerry is still required to perform his day-to-day tasks as a car salesman. However,

[21] Lesley Stern, "Putting on a Show, or the Ghostliness of Gesture," *Senses of Cinema*, 21, July-August, 2002, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/21/sd_stern.hmtl

he is beset by monumental distractions and his routine salesman techniques are delivered without conviction or enthusiasm. With one particular customer Jerry is staring off into the distance as he delivers his routine as rote: "Yah, ya got yer, um, this is loaded here, this has yer, independent, uh, yer front-wheel drive, rack-and-pinion steering, anti-lock brakes, alarm, radar... ." Macy, like De Niro in *The King of Comedy*, provides a performance at two levels that initially appear to be irreconcilable – that is, the good performance of a character giving a poor performance.

Goffman has identified a similar dichotomy that exists in everyday performances, insisting that the "expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he *gives*, and the expression that he *gives off*."[22] Goffman is contending that the individual will give an impression via traditional means of communication, but will also *give off* impressions based upon ostensibly unconscious modes of communication such as unintentional speech patterns, involuntary body movements and expressions. Macy's acting performance in *Fargo* demonstrates the gulf between that which is asserted and that which is accepted. In an early scene Jerry successfully applies a sales technique of relentlessness when he convinces a stubbornly reluctant customer to accept the hidden costs of a rust preventative sealant. Carolyn R. Russell contends that the sad-faced, though triumphant, expression worn by Jerry at the conclusion of this scene is indicative of these two-levels of meaning: "Macy brings to such moments more nuance than can be digested in a single viewing; the look is a wonderfully ambiguous hint of what lurks beneath Lundergaard's meek exterior."[23] Carl is also a desperate actor, evident as he clutches for the right way to project himself into a confident portrayal of a criminal tough guy. When he threatens to shoot Jerry's wife, Jean, he does so with a lack of conviction comparable to a bad actor delivering unconvincing lines of dialogue. Like Macy, in these moments Buscemi emphasises the incompetence of his character by demonstrating his inability to deal with challenging situations. This demonstration

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[22] Op. Cit., Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p.14 (Italics in orginal).
[23] Carolyn R. Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2001, p.119.

depends on Buscemi acting like a character who cannot adequately perform the role he has chosen for himself.

Carl, in *Fargo*, tries to maintain an impression with his affected dialogue and posturing, but ultimately his role-playing is exposed as a façade. For both Jerry and Carl it is their powerlessness that proves to be their ultimate affliction. Burns contends that in real-life people try to produce themselves in their own drama, to hand out parts to some and to make sure that others play the parts of spectators. However:

> because there is no artistic control there is a certain amount of unpredictability, clumsiness and recalcitrance, among actors and audience. Climaxes do not always occur; scenes do not always "come off"; appropriate lines are not spoken; relationships often disintegrate, because, as in an improvisation, the actors dry up.[24]

Jerry puts a plan in place but try as he may not everyone will play their role. When Wade, Jerry's father-in-law, takes the ransom money to deliver to the kidnappers it is just one more unsolicited modification to Jerry's "real sound" plan, and his inability to control the circumstances around him ensures his performance is ineffectual. Carl's attempt to maintain an image of a tough guy criminal-type is a much more precarious proposition with more vital and immediate concerns. Jerry's already failing scheme becomes a complete disaster when Carl and Gaear are pulled over by a state trooper suspicious of their new car that Carl has failed to register correctly. Gaear's simple solution to the Trooper's inquisitiveness is to seize his head and fire a bullet into his skull. Unable to manufacture a more lucid reaction to the situation Carl's response to the blood spilling in his lap is to mutter "Whoa Daddy!" The appalled and terrified countenance worn by Buscemi in this scene betrays what might be considered Carl's true character, not at all up to the grim realities of the criminal world.

In *Miller's Crossing* a moment of equivalent drama occurs when Tom takes Bernie into the country-side to murder him. Tom has put the finger on

Bernie as a way to ingratiate himself into Caspar's organisation. Caspar tests Tom's loyalty by specifically requesting that he be the one to assassinate Bernie. It is in this moment that it might be argued that the viewer witnesses the authentic core of Bernie's character as his impending death draws out of him his most base survival petitions. Bernie becomes a groveling, shrieking, childlike supplicant, pleading for his life with mucus and tears streaming down his face and saliva spluttering from his mouth. Bernie beseeches and implores the apparently implacable Tom: "This is a dream Tommy. I'm praying to you. I can't die, I can't die out here in the woods like a dumb animal... I'm praying to you, look in your heart." It is this last refrain that becomes most significant as Bernie repeats it over and over with increasing desperation. It is at this moment that the viewer might reasonably believe they are witnessing the genuine Bernie, stripped of all pretences. Yet, as Tom repeatedly proclaims: "Nobody knows anybody – not that well." Tom releases Bernie, letting him escape on the understanding that he leave town and never return, thus maintaining Tom's recently secured reputation as Caspar's lieutenant. However, Bernie cynically exploits the situation threatening to expose Tom's deception of Caspar by "eating in restaurants." So when Tom finally has Bernie at the wrong end of a revolver again he does not hesitate in shooting him dead. Just prior to his murder Bernie again falls to his knees in a cynical reprisal of his earlier performance and again requests Tom to look into his heart. This move proves Tom's point about mutual estrangement, and brings into disrepute Bernie's earlier performance.

Tom's motives for killing Bernie remain unclear. Bernie damages his pride by exploiting his generosity but Tom is the victim of indignity and violation from many other characters. And, as Bernie says, "there is no angle in it" for Tom: he has nothing to gain from murdering Bernie now that Caspar and the Dane are dead and Leo's authority has been thoroughly reinstated. And in the final sequence when Tom and Leo converse about their current circumstances Leo maintains Tom got what he wanted. To which the latter replies cryptically and rhetorically: "What did I want?" James Mottram suggests that *Miller's Crossing* "is a film that revels in disguising the characters' true motives (even, we the audience, are kept second-guessing as to Tom's reasons for defecting to

[24] Op. Cit., Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality*, p.139.

Caspar)."[25] The film's theme of "Nobody knows anybody – not that well" extends to the viewer, who remains unaware of Tom's "true" character. Caspar's constant philosophising over issues of ethics within the criminal world is not insignificant. Caspar aspires to a criminal world that operates within an ethical framework: "Everything above board. So everyone knows who's a friend and who's an enemy." Caspar's wish is fanciful, especially in a nefarious environment populated by killers, grifters and gangsters who depend on techniques of deceit to stay alive. Such issues suggest there is no way of knowing the true identity of any individual, contributing to a world of grave doubts and unsettling suspicion.

For Tom the maintenance of his performance is designed to ensure that his true intentions are never revealed. He offers few clues in body language or vocal alterations to suggest any inconsistency in his demeanour. Goffman asserts:

> As members of an audience it is natural for us to feel that the impression the performer seeks to give may be true or false, genuine or spurious, valid or "phony". So common is this doubt that, as suggested, we often give special attention to features of the performance that cannot be readily manipulated, thus enabling ourselves to judge the reliability of the more misrepresentable cues in the performance.[26]

For both Tom and for Byrne (in his portrayal) the presentation requires extraordinary discipline, akin in some respects to non-acting. Linking Byrne's performance to that of Tom's diegetic role does not suggest a trivial significance but explores the manner by which dramaturgical discipline is crucial to a consistent performance in real-life. Goffman argues that the shrewd performer must be able to cope with significant contingencies as they occur, noting that a performance not only requires rigid attention but also keen imagination:

> A performer who is disciplined, dramaturgically speaking, is someone who remembers his part and does not commit unmeant gestures of

[25] James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, B.T. Batsford, London, 2000, p.61.
[26] Op. Cit., Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p.66.

> *faux pas* in performing it. He is someone with discretion; he does not give the show away by involuntarily disclosing its secrets. He is someone with 'presence of mind' who can cover up on the spur of the moment for inappropriate behaviour on the part of his team-mates, while all the time maintaining the impression that he is merely playing his part.[27]

This sociological assessment of "performance" particularly suits Tom, especially in the manner in which he maintains his presentation even in moments of crisis. When the Dane has interrogated "Drop" Johnson (Mario Todisco) he confronts Tom with the recently purloined information. Rather than depart from the impression he is maintaining, Tom improvises a response and accuses the Dane of beating a satisfactory story from Johnson. Tom must ignore the hazard confronting him and maintain his fostered appearance; any accidental or unmeant gesture will disrupt the image that he has constructed and expose any inconsistencies between the reality and the projection. Goffman explains that such differences force "an acutely embarrassing wedge between the official projection and reality, for it is part of the official projection that it is the only one possible under the circumstances."[28] At stake for Tom is more than mere embarrassment. This final confrontation with the Dane, witnessed by Caspar, is his last chance to depose the Dane and win over Caspar.

The Dane is the only character in *Miller's Crossing* who seems to have any inclination about Tom's true motives. He is Tom's most ardent observer, ceaselessly seeking out inconsistencies in his performance and perpetually checking the legitimacy of his claims. Goffman insists that exposing an inharmonious performance depends on the keen attention of an observer: "there seem to be facts about almost every performance which are incompatible with the impression fostered by the performance but which have not been collected and organized into usable form by anyone."[29] The interrogation scene staged in the

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[27] Ibid, p.210-11 (Italics in orginal).
[28] Ibid, p.60.
[29] Ibid, p.143.

back-seat of a sedan clarifies the Dane's agenda as he illustrates his interpretation of Tom's movements:

> I get you smart guy. I know what you are. Straight as a corkscrew. Mr. Inside-Outsky, like some goddamn Bolshevik, picking up his orders from yegg central. You think you're so goddamn smart. You join up Johnny Caspar. You bump Bernie Bernbaum. Up is down. Black is white. Well I think you're half-smart. I think you were straight with your frail. I think you were queer with Johnny Caspar. And I think you'd sooner join a ladies' league than gun a guy down.

The Dane's impeccable explanation of events and Tom's perceived motivation is delivered with his typical hateful antagonism. The Dane is the only character in *Miller's Crossing* who is equal to Tom, but not because he is powerful and ruthless. The Dane is Tom's equivalent because he has intelligently reduced Tom's performance to a matter of logical rationalisations and searched out its inconsistencies. The Dane is the kind of individual of whom Goffman is referring, the person who collects all the information and tries to demonstrate its incompatibility. Ultimately it is the quality of Tom's performance—a performance that convinces everyone but the Dane—which saves him from exposure, and as adamant as the Dane is he fails to debunk Tom's charade.

Along with the Dane only the viewer is privy to any suggestion that Tom is trying to manipulate those around him by suggesting different, and sometimes contrary impressions. *Miller's Crossing* is presented almost in its entirety from Tom's point-of-view and such close exposure allows the viewer to scrutinise Tom's motives and true intentions. John Ellis states that "what the film performance permits is moments of pure voyeurism for the spectator, the sense of overlooking something which is not designed for the onlooker but passively allows itself to be seen."[30] Tom often sits in his room alone, or with Verna sleeping nearby. These are moments in which the viewer becomes privy to Tom's silent sessions of thought as he ruminates over his situation. It is precisely in this

[30] John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video*, Revised Edition, Routledge, London, 1992, p.99.

kind of moment that Goffman contends the performer will be exposed for what he really is, stating "[b]ehind many masks and many characters, each performer tends to wear a single look, a naked unsocialized look, a look of concentration, a look of one who is privately engaged in a difficult, treacherous task."[31] Tom's isolation from the other characters, and his figurative isolation from the viewer, suggests that in these moments he is acting in an open and candid manner. Tom's preoccupation is profound in these sequences, often sitting rigidly, smoking a cigarette and staring intently before him, his face a picture of concentration. Goffman's words seem to fit Tom like a glove.

Yet, there are other moments in *Miller's Crossing* when the viewer might be apprised of Tom's core identity. Naremore remarks of the "public" and "private" expressions in acting, the former representing the expressive reaction witnessed by the film's diegetic community and the latter refers to the "disclosive compensation" of the performer who is letting on to the viewer the character's "true" inner feelings.[32] In certain moments the camera isolates Tom's face and his reaction to certain events. The close-up reaction-shot doubly consolidates the impression that what we see is real by firstly relating the emotion to the previous shot/s and also by isolating the actor's face and thus emphasising his/her emotional reaction. Dyer notes that if a reaction shot is "clearly signalled as being something that only we, the audience, have been permitted to see, then it is read as giving us an insight into the inner thoughts/feelings of that character."[33] When Caspar's child enters the room, interrupting a discussion, Caspar violently slaps the kid, berating him for disturbing his business conference. At the point Caspar strikes his son, the Coens cut to a close-up of Tom's face, registering his tangible astonishment. Such a reaction is designed solely for "us" and is implicitly unavailable to the diegetic characters. Earlier the audience witnesses Tom's startled reaction to Leo's refusal to entertain Caspar's request to murder Bernie. Tom's reaction suggests that he genuinely believes that Leo should not risk a gang war for "a sheenie" and that this stubborn response to Caspar will have dire consequences. Once again the reaction of Tom is designed solely for us and it is

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[31] Op. Cit., Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p.228.
[32] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, pp.190-92.
[33] Richard Dyer, *Stars*, New Edition with a supplementary chapter and bibliography by Paul McDonald, B.F.I., London, 1993, p.119.

implied that in this moment the most impenetrable character in *Miller's Crossing* momentarily lets down his guard. Goffman maintains that it is a common trait for human beings to deconstruct the gestures of others and given that many crucial facts lie concealed within typical social interaction "the 'true' or 'real' attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behaviour."[34] Somewhat ironically, to play a character stripped of pretence also requires a double-coding. In these scenes Byrne must perform the absence of performance. He must play the role of a character no longer playing a role, of a character devoid of affected projection. Tom's moments of "failure," in which he exposes true and potentially contrary emotions, are rare, and the discipline of his performance is generally maintained.

In *Fargo*, Jerry does not exhibit the kind of control demonstrated by Tom, and he often fails to regulate his performance with the same assurance. That Jerry habitually contradicts the image he is trying to foster is not unusual. Goffman argues:

> The expressive coherence that is required in performances points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves. As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulses with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs.[35]

Jerry often alternates between these two positions – the socialised self and the impulsive human. When the police finally track him down these two contradictory aspects of Jerry become clearly apparent. As the troopers knock at the door to apprehend him for his role in fraudulent deceptions and despicable murders, he initially feigns cordial cooperation and control. Moments later, the officers force the door and seize the fleeing Jerry who is attempting to abscond through a window dressed only in his underwear. As the policeman restrain him on the

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[34] Op. Cit., Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, pp.13-14.
[35] Ibid, pp.63-64.

motel bed Jerry screams and squeals – his feral nakedness has never been more evident. This scene recalls earlier moments that serve as glimpses of the "true" Jerry. Shortly after being humiliated yet again by his father-in-law—Wade misappropriating a commercial deal Jerry had been developing—he trudges despondently to his car and rancorously begins scraping the ice that has accrued on his windscreen. The onerous task eventually overwhelms him and abruptly he irately beats his frosted-over window with the scraper in a telling exhibition of petulance. Similarly, Jerry is witnessed inside his office, in long shot, picking up his desk protector and slamming it violently down. It is Jerry's reaction to the burden of maintaining a cheerful front as his scheme gradually spirals into disaster due to the incompetence of others and the absurdity of the scheme itself. On these two occasions Jerry is diegetically alone, his tantrums only witnessed by the viewer, the long shot framing suggesting a voyeuristic delight in observing such a private moment. In the real world such moments of inopportune intrusion must be carefully isolated by the individual lest they conflict with the impression they are under obligation to maintain. When Jerry has thoroughly destroyed the neat arrangements on his desk he quickly gathers himself and, then glancing through his office's glass walls, he confirms he has not been witnessed in such a public display of anger and frustration. These moments in *Fargo* expose the audience to the naked individual residing behind Jerry's calculated social character.

In Jerry's tantrums, and also in Tom's reaction shots, the viewer witnesses emotional revelation that is conferred through physical gesture. These are the conventions and codes that give meaning to the significant elements of the performance and they exist in cinematic representations and in real-life. While in the presence of others, individuals typically infuse their activity with signs designed to highlight and portray affirmative facts. Goffman contends that "if the individual's activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express *during the interaction* what he wishes to convey."[36] It follows then that the actor in a dramatic performance will also utilise particular codes or conventions as a means of transmitting meaning. Such an analogy works to further link performances in everyday life and in drama. This bond is constructed not only through the existence of a system of signification, but also

because the system depends on the understanding of an audience. Burns confirms that "a convention is simply a mutual understanding about the meaning of action, which includes gestures and speech."[37] Characters in films are constructed upon gestures and utterances: elements that give meaning to their character and understanding to their motivation. Even when overt gesture is absent, as is the case with Billy Bob Thornton's portrayal of the resolutely passive barber Ed in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the absence becomes an index of the character: Ed is a veritable nobody. No performance endures beyond its physical context as our inner activity is invariably resonate on the surface. Passivity is not analogous to emptiness and the bodily presentation is never simply static: it is always a reflection of inner movement.

Construction

> *...film is so vivid and the actor so large and so close that it is a common primitive response to assume that the actor invented his lines.* Pauline Kael[38]

An analysis of acting in the films of the Coen brothers must necessarily illustrate how an actor's performance works in concert with other film devices to create meaning. *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* demonstrate that the internal logic and organisation of a film depends on how performance is integrated into the text's design. Signs and conventions are the identifiable tools of film acting, enabling performers to make meaning in film. These conventions are understood by the audience as keys to information about character and plot. As such performance operates as a well defined and studiously operative signifier, constructing meaning that informs and develops the text. Performance relies on the actor's input and the method by which the actor interprets and illustrates a character. Naremore suggests:

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[36] Ibid, p.40 (Italics in orginal).
[37] Op. Cit., Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality*, p.28.
[38] Pauline Kael, *Raising Kane*, Methuen Drama, London, 2002, p.88.

> films depend on a form of communication whereby meanings are *acted out*; the experience of watching them involves not only a pleasure in storytelling but also a delight in bodies and expressive movement, an enjoyment of familiar performing skills, and an interest in players as "real persons".[39]

This "communication" depends heavily on the input of the filmmaker and his or her organisation of the performances in a text. The twin objectives—performer performing, and filmmaker organising performance—blend together to contribute to the film's meaning which is evident in the manner and style of narration.

With *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* Joel and Ethan Coen have favoured a largely naturalistic approach to performance. Characters are rendered in mostly realistic terms maintaining a sense of plausibility in the representation. Naremore contends that naturalism as a performance style is governed by the demands of verisimilitude, identifying the major characteristics as deliberate lapses in rhetorical clarity, signalled by overlapping speech and apparently spontaneous behaviour, careful attention to the accents and mannerisms of particular communities, and moments of expressive incoherence designed to indicate repression and psychological drives.[40] Lapses in rhetorical clarity are common in *Miller's Crossing*, the precise rendering of cultural characteristics in *Fargo* is obvious, and the association of social alienation with subterranean psychological states is apparent in the blank performance by Billy Bob Thornton in *The Man Who Wasn't There*.

Chris Berry asserts that "mainstream cinema engages realism as a style which hides and naturalises its own performed quality, making it appear present and full or 'real' to the spectator, rather than textual."[41] The characters in *Miller's Crossing* are all depicted as real, and while their construction is informed heavily by intertextual references to Dashiell Hammett, gangster movies and *film noir*,

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[39] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.2.
[40] Ibid, p.278.
[41] Chris Berry, "Where is the Love?: The Paradox of Performing Loneliness in Ts'ai Ming-Liang's *Vive L'Amour*," *Falling for you: essays on cinema and performance*, Eds. Lesley Stern & George Kouvaros, Power Publications, Sydney, 1999, p.149.

they remain characters who act and respond in naturalistic ways. Yet, there are varying degrees of what passes for realistic in the works of the Coen brothers. Joel and Ethan Coen's films adopt naturalistic tendencies in acting as an overarching design but they also gravitate toward extremes of performance. It is perhaps accurate to describe many of the characters they construct as just that – characters. In *Miller's Crossing* Jon Polito's interpretation of gangland upstart Johnny Caspar owes less to naturalism and more to a conglomeration of characters of film and literary reference. Polito is overt in his characterisation of Caspar; his attitudes and conditions are played out on the surface. When he is enraged he violently attacks his young son, when he is upset his eyes bulge, and he frequently postulates aloud detailing the ethical dilemmas that confront him in his day-to-day life. Byrne, however, portrays Tom as someone who rarely exhibits any surface details, and his psychological state must be interpreted from physical signification, through tell-tale eye movements and subtle expressions. The difference in the performances of Polito and Byrne equates directly with their division in character, the contrast in their values, intentions, desires and objectives. Here the performance style is integral in the text's construction and in the establishment of theme and intent.

The practice of acting carries a paradoxical host: "good" acting requires a suggestion of intention, but this exists within a regime that hides and masks the skill behind the desire to appear natural. It is just such an assertion that prompts Naremore to associate naturalistic acting with ideology, suggesting that "one purpose of ideology (as defined by most contemporary theory), is to seem the most natural thing in the world, understandable only in terms of common sense."[42] Naturalistic acting is designed to conceal the fact that actors produce signs and as such it disguises its own workings. The example of Polito and Byrne in *Miller's Crossing* is a case in point that lends credence to Naremore's analogy and demonstrates the processes at play. Caspar's overt method of dealing with people, his blustery style makes his intentions obvious: the film opens with his dissertation on what he plans to do to Bernie and why. Tom, on the other hand, manufactures signs in his presentation, hiding his chief intentions behind a series of false demonstrations. Tom's plan is to infect those around him with beliefs and

understandings which he rightly supposes will cause them to act in obvious ways. As real-life performers we are merchants of morality, that is we are always trying to manufacture a façade which will communicate the correct impression, the image we desire to convey. Acting, whether in film or real-life, is like ideology; it is often insidious in its designs and processes, and like ideology, acting is always available to deconstruction.

The Coen brothers regularly use acting styles of conflicting modes to construct meaning in their films, reflected in the twin performance dynamic of Polito and Byrne in *Miller's Crossing*. Andrew Pulver argues that a Coen trademark is "studied acting performances that layer unfussy naturalism alongside high-key grotesque."[43] In *The Man Who Wasn't There* Thornton's blank and passive Ed is opposed to James Gandolfini's richly textured impression of the jovial and aptly named "Big" Dave. The contrariety in acting technique is apparent in the dinner party sequence when "Big" Dave regales Ed, Doris (France McDormand) and Ann (Katherine Borowitz) with a frightful war story about a former war buddy who was eaten by starving Japanese soldiers. Gandolfini enthusiastically relates the tale hunched over the table with a broad grin on his face and delight in his eyes, moving his arms around to emphasise the story's chief details. Ed looks on unimpressed by the lurid story, his features remaining impassive and unaltered. Thornton depicts Ed as completely immune to the pleasures of "Big" Dave's (ultimately apocryphal) narrative of brutal wartime conditions and the barbarous cannibalism of the Japanese. A similar distinction is constructed between the brash and confident Freddy Riedenschneider and Ed when they first meet at Da Vinci's. As Ed sits submissively across the table, Riedenschneider systematically stuffs food in his mouth, barks orders and demands complete autonomy. Riedenschneider, like "Big" Dave, hunches over the table as he eats and relishes in the attention he is given as he discusses the tactical approach he will employ to defend Doris of the murder charge. These scenes corroborate the distinction in character between Ed and "Big" Dave, and Ed and Riedenschneider. The acting approach taken by Thornton, Gandolfini and Shalhoub is a crucial factor in establishing these important disjunctions.

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[42] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.1.
[43] Andrew Pulver, "Two of a Kind," *The Sunday Age: Agenda*, January 6, 2002, p.3.

During the dinner table sequence in *The Man Who Wasn't There* the moral convictions of the characters and their identities are evident in their physical gesturing, communication techniques and facial expressions. As "Big" Dave (and thus, Gandolfini) delights in his audacious story he is supported by Doris' (and McDormand's) excited reception of the tale. Ed (Thornton) sits passively watching on with no visible interest in any aspect of "Big" Dave's yarn, matched by Ann's (Borowitz's) expressionless performance (no hint of emotion is evident in her face or body). Ultimately, these characters who are linked by their physical presentation in the scene will also be associated in more personal relationships. Ann relates a mysterious tale to Ed detailing an incident in which a spaceship visited her and "Big" Dave, taking the latter away for scientific examination. Ann seems to find an important connection to Ed and trusts him with her less than convincing tale. "Big" Dave and Doris are intertwined by their extramarital affair, of which Ed is aware simply because a "husband knows." What Ed knows is how to read a person, how to identify what they are by the presentation they give off.

The Coen brothers use their actors to construct meaning in their films, positing the question of who, ultimately, is responsible for performance in film. Acting in film, as opposed to acting in everyday life or in a theatrical medium, recognises that the location of a performance is integral to its analysis. The performances of Byrne, McDormand, Buscemi, Macy and Thornton in the films of the Coen brothers do not exist in a vacuum. Rather these performances occur within the textual boundaries of each film, working in conjunction with other cinematic devices to create meaning. A film performance is a construction, it is brought to being by an actor and a director. Editing, lighting, framing and sound design are just some of the elements used by the filmmaker to manipulate an actor's interpretation of a character. The authority over an acting role becomes contentious because a director has at his or her disposal a number of cinematic tools to control and change the tenor of an actor's performance. Joel and Ethan Coen are industrious filmmakers with a celebrated approach to manipulating the worlds they create. They call on a series of diverse devices to change, alter and transform their creations into something unusual and unique. They are puppet-masters more than storytellers. Due to their obsessive control and self-conscious

approach to filmmaking, the performances in their films become exercises in authorial manipulation.

The famous Kuleshov experiment provides an effective illustration of how the director can regulate the nature of a performance using cinematic devices. Lev Kuleshov demonstrated that the editing of a sequence had a significant bearing on the audience's interpretation of a performance. A shot of a man's face followed by a shot of a bowl of soup would signify the man's hunger. This concept is known as the Kuleshov effect and it demonstrates the perilous position of a performance in the construction of film. Naremore posits Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) as a performance text that explores the concepts of the Kuleshov effect within a classical narrative framework. *Rear Window*'s concept, that of a suburban voyeur spying on his neighbours, is precisely arranged in order to explore the way reaction shots and editing create meaning in a performance. James Stewart (as L. B. Jeffries) plays the temporarily injured photographer with a fascination for the activities of his residential neighbourhood. Stewart acts in reaction to the events that he witnesses. His expressive reactions—recoiling in fear, smiling with appreciation, smirking with lustful desire—give meaning to the various "scenes" and "characters" he witnesses across his apartment courtyard: a possible murderer, an often forlorn woman being romanced by a suitor and a sensually figured young blonde, respectively. Naremore notes that Hitchcock manipulates the acting styles by modifying the visual perspective of each scene: an extreme long-shot depicts Jeffries' natural perspective, a medium-shot represents a view augmented by binoculars, and the close-up viewpoint of a high-powered telephoto camera lens. Each perspective carries a different acting mode: the long-shot requires a broad presentational style, the medium-shot allows a more subtle expressiveness and the close-up compels a representational style that emphasises ambiguity and uncertainty.[44] Hitchcock's approach not only identifies the manner by which film technique alters and modifies acting styles but it also reveals the overriding power and authority available to the filmmaker and his/her capacity to reconstruct a performance in a multitude of ways.

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[44] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, pp.241-43.

Walter Benjamin declares that the optical manipulation of the film camera inevitably leads the viewer to identify not with an actor but with the camera itself.[45] Benjamin's assessment clearly places the onus for constructing meaning on the filmmaker and not the performer, acknowledging the role the director has in guiding and controlling the viewer. Such an assertion becomes apparent in *Fargo* when the audience witnesses Carl's failed attempts to tune the television in the hideout cabin he and Gaear are using while they wait for Jerry to gather the ransom money. As Carl repeatedly pounds on the television, uttering a series of a profanities directed toward the recalcitrant picture, the Coen brothers cut away to a series of shots of Gaear sitting motionless, staring at Carl and the television, and of the hooded Jean (actually played by Kristin Rudrūd's body double) who sits unmoving on a nearby chair. These are a series of medium-shots, each slowly zooming toward the actors. The shots alternate between Carl, Gaear and Jean but it is the performance of both Stormare and Rudrūd's body double that is of significance. In both cases their bodies and faces (or lack of access to the face) suggest an absence of expression. The inference created by the editing process depicts Gaear's emotionless psychosis by way of his cold stare. And Jean's cool terror is registered merely by the steam created as her warm breath contacts the frosted air. The soundtrack of rumbling music, Carl's violent pounding and furious verbal barrage accompany the images and infuse in them the terror experienced by Jean and the torment of Gaear's mind. In each case the direction transcends the performance, creating understanding through the application of cinematic devices and conferring meaning on the acting. Here the understanding of the scene is guided by the camera, as predicted by Benjamin, and the actor's gestures are seen to be subordinate to the filmmaker's mechanical tools.

Naremore contends that the camera's mobility and tight framing of faces, its aptitude in giving the focus to any player at any moment, means that films tend to favour reactions.[46] This avowal suggests the dominance and authority of the filmmaker in constructing performance as well as declaring that film acting requires a particular kind of regulation in order to converge collaboratively with

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[45] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, Edited with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, Translated by Harry Zorn, Fontana, London, 1973, pp.230-231.
[46] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.40.

the cinematic apparatus. That is, film acting must work within the boundaries of filmmaking and operate in a manner that is cognisant of the limitations and allowances of a film text. Mary Ellen O'Brien declares that the film actor must be aware of the "psychological effect of the editing techniques that will influence the audience" noting how cinema acting necessarily differs from other forms of performance.[47] The reaction of Tom witnessing Caspar's assault on his son, or upon hearing Leo's dismissal of Caspar's request, are instructive examples because in each case Byrne's expression works in concert with the direction of the Coen brothers, the timing of their cutting and the placement of their camera. Here the filmmaker and the actor collaborate to regulate the meanings projected. In film, collaboration is required to give an impression, whereas in real-life the individual can govern his/her own presentation. Goffman notes "[i]f we see perception as a form of contact and communion, then control over what is perceived is control over contact that is made, and the limitation and regulation of what is shown is a limitation and regulation of contact."[48] In the scenes involving Tom contact is regulated by Joel and Ethan Coen, choosing what they want the audience to view, and the impression insinuated is constructed by Byrne who must *react* in an appropriate manner: his eyes widen and his jaw slackens, registering the astonishment of what he has just seen. Yet, despite the unity of Byrne's reaction with the direction of the scene his performance will necessarily remain at the mercy of the filmmaker. And it is for this reason that the quality of performances in the films of the Coen brothers may be analysed as an unbroken theme throughout their works.

Mario Falsetto develops a similar estimation of Stanley Kubrick, arguing that in his films actors are authorial devices equivalent to frame composition, lighting design, editing and sound.[49] An analogy might be drawn to Joel and Ethan Coen who impose on their films a comparable level of control to that of the notoriously fastidious Kubrick. As the spectator sees the character unfolding he/she may glean information from not only the words and facial gestures used by

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[47] Mary Ellen O'Brien, *Film Acting: The Techniques and History of Acting for the Cinema*, Arco, New York, 1983, p.79.
[48] Op. Cit., Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p.74.

the actor, but also through the director's intercutting of other images, such as a hand gesture, or the reaction of another face. When Tom puts the final components of his grand plan into place he contacts Bernie and terrorises him with the menace of exposure. Even though this threat is a key ingredient in Tom's scheme he clearly takes some personal satisfaction and gratification in tormenting the treacherous Bernie. Yet, Byrne's voice remains moderate, if a little rushed, as he cuts off Bernie's desperate protests, and it is only through the framing that the viewer is encouraged to discern the pleasure Tom takes in inverting Bernie's betrayal. As he speaks, the Coens frame Tom's hand squeezing a damp rag. As the noose tightens around Bernie's neck, Tom squashes the rag in his muscular hand, wringing the moisture into a basin at the foot of his chair. All the tension and antagonism that Tom is relieving is represented in this manual gesture and the Coen brothers hold this shot for an extensive duration to emphasise its point.

When Tom squeezes the wet rag in his hand the gesture is instructive in projecting his psychological and emotional state. Even though the framing has fragmented Byrne's physical presence, Tom's character remains intact and accessible to the viewer. Robert Bresson developed a similar strategy of fragmenting his actor's bodies, but he did not invest in these images the same kind of perceptual access. Tomlinson believes Bresson "developed a visual strategy for the presentation of performance which involved the denial of both the actor's and spectator's habitual access to emotional and psychological properties of character."[50] And to demonstrate this strategy Tomlinson cites as an example the moment in Bresson's *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé* (1956) when the protagonist breaks a spoon, an instrument he is using to scrape an opening in his prison cell door. The moment is presented from a neutral perspective: the prisoner's hands working on the door as the spoon breaks. Bresson does not follow the occurrence with a shot which might detail the prisoner's emotional response to the setback, rather he maintains the focus on the unresponsive hands as they remain passively prone. Tomlinson notes that a close-up of the actor's face

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[49] Mario Falsetto, "The Mad and the Beautiful: A look at Two Performances in the Films of Stanley Kubrick," *Making Visible the Invisible: an anthology of original essays on film acting*, Ed. Carole Zucker, Scarecrow Press, New Jersey, 1990, pp.328-29.
[50] Op. Cit., Doug Tomlinson, "Performance in the Films of Bresson: The Aesthetics of Denial," p.368.

would have constituted a "standard cinematic presentation,"[51] granting the performer an opportunity to suggest his character's frustration and providing the spectator with a strong sense of identification.

Thornton's performance in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is the closest analogy to a Bressonian representation in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen. Like the hero of *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé*, Thorton's Ed Crane relates to the viewer using a dull and expressionless voice-over monologue, the tone of which offers little in the way of character revelation. Bresson's narrator in *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé* is shy and guarded and his disclosures merely impart factual information while avoiding editorial commentary or embroidery. In *The Man Who Wasn't There* Thornton delivers his character's dialogue with resolute indifference, maintaining a monotone vocal range throughout. Ed's voice-over confession is delivered without passion or feeling, and when he does suggest emotion he quickly dismisses it with an apathetic qualification. During his dinner gathering with "Big" Dave and Ann, Ed concedes to the viewer a suspicion that his wife and her boss are having an affair: "Sometimes I had the feeling that she and "Big" Dave were a lot closer than they let on. The signs were all there plain enough. [pause] Not that I was going to prance about it mind you...It's a free country." The monologue accompanies a shot of Ed, framed from behind, with no visual access to his face. As such the scene operates in a typical Bressonian manner as the standard emotional identification is denied at the level of direction and also performance.

Joel and Ethan Coen use the character of Ed and the performance of Thornton almost as a prop within the film's design. He is a passive character and Thornton invests in him no emotional sensibilities by which the audience may identify. A director can use an actor as just one more term of rhetoric. In relation to Kubrick's use of Ryan O'Neal in *Barry Lyndon* (1975), Falsetto suggests notions of character are frequently conveyed not by O'Neal's acting, but by other formal strategies: "Through such devices as voice-over narration, blank facial expression and stiff presentation, slow zoom and other framing strategies, [*Barry*

[51] Ibid, pp.380-82.

Lyndon] creates an essentially de-dramatized style of presentation."[52] With *The Man Who Wasn't There* the Coen brothers have created a central character, and Thornton has manufactured a lead performance, that also defy the tenets of typical dramatic representation. Ed's passivity and Thornton's blank acting compel the film's creators to discover other means for conveying the emotion and meaning of the text. As such *The Man Who Wasn't There* is a particularly technical film, more so than any other Coen brothers' work. It is shot in monochrome black and white, softening the contrast to draw out deep greys. The Coens often manipulate the speed of scenes, and the lighting is designed to create complex and convoluted shadows, while many sequences are shot as virtually silent montages accompanied by Ed's narration. Such a level of technical involvement seems to imply a reduction of the role of the performer in *The Man Who Wasn't There.* However, as previously outlined, acting must harmonise with the direction, there must be something raw to work with. Dyer notes that "[p]erformance is defined as what the performer does, and whether s/he, the director or some other person is authorially responsible for this is a different question altogether."[53] Ultimately, the collaborative aspect of filmmaking (a necessarily cooperative art-form) is the key to the creation of a strong and memorable performance and the quality and vitality of its representation.

Barry King acknowledges the relative position of author and performer but offers no argument for the collaborative nature of the arrangement. Rather, King posits the actor as signifier with his contention that imitation erases identity and "[s]uch obliteration returns the project of intentionality to the level of the narrative itself which is usually 'authored' reductively in terms of the director's or playwright's 'vision', rather than as a meaning emergent from a collective art of representation."[54] King's appraisal of cinema as a singularly authored art-form is highly contentious, for even though the director controls the means of signification, ultimately he or she must rely on the assistance of others in achieving any vision. But King's argument identifies a particularly crucial aspect

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[52] Op. Cit., Mario Falsetto, "The Mad and the Beautiful: A look at Two Performances in the Films of Stanley Kubrick," p.336.
[53] Op. Cit., Richard Dyer, *Stars*, p.145.
[54] Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, Ed. Christine Gledhill, Routledge, London & New York, 1991, p.170.

of performance in the arts: its natural link to signification and convention. Performance is perhaps the most vexed of all cinematic signifiers. Acting must adhere to the grounded rules of code and convention but must also concede the influence of intertextuality, extratextuality and the subjective responses of the viewer. Performance in film clearly operates at the level of signifier; meaning is constructed through the reiteration of familiar tropes and gestures. But as with the parody and subversion found elsewhere in their filmmaking approach, Joel and Ethan Coen manipulate performance to regularly exploit the viewer's knowledge of the codes of the past to discover new ways in which to present complex characters and manifest intricate themes.

In *The Man Who Wasn't There* the Coens have attuned the performance styles in specific ways to blend with the nature of the representation. In several scenes Ed narrates his thoughts, retrospectively, of the events that have led him to his fateful position – awaiting execution on death-row. In these moments the Coen brothers' camera surveys different scenes as Ed details them with typically banal verbal descriptions. As such the performances of the actors in these moments are altered to accommodate a less naturalistic representation and to express in a more obvious manner than is typical of the classical method of "invisible" acting. Naremore identifies a similar approach taken by Cary Grant in the famous crop-duster scene in *North by Northwest* (1959). Naremore nominates Cary Grant (especially in his collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock) as a particularly "Kuleshovian" actor because he is more concerned with the mechanics of performance than feelings, more interested in timing than psychological projection and has a mastery over small, isolated reactions.[55] In the crop-duster sequence Grant's character is attacked in a secluded cornfield by an anonymous pilot in a biplane. The scene is played out in relative silence with the sound of the aircraft's engine and the pilot's guns punctuating the eerie quiet. Hitchcock cuts the scene together in a vibrant and intense manner with several shots of Grant endeavouring to evade the precarious danger that confronts him. Naremore notes that Grant's performance in this case must operate in accord with the film's direction and provide a presentation akin to low-key pantomime: "These are not

[55] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.224.

complicated moves, but they hardly need to be. Grant's job is to find elemental postures and expressions that will fit neatly and clearly into the montage."[56]

While no similar sequence occurs in *The Man Who Wasn't There*—there is certainly nothing quite as exciting as a mysterious plane attacking a vulnerable man—the Coens do employ montages that require the same kind of elemental acting. When Ed wakes from unconsciousness after a car accident, he discovers he has been falsely charged with the murder of Tolliver. Ed then relates in narration an abridged coda detailing how he was charged and detained on suicide watch, and how Riedenschneider mounted a legal defence. These events are presented in montage, offering the visual equivalents to Ed's verbal descriptions. In most cases Thornton's voice overlays the scenes, although, on occasion the diegetic sounds penetrate through his narration. But mostly the actors in these scenes must perform their roles without the assistance of vocal elucidation. And as such, the mode of acting in these moments is highly elemental and basic. As Riedenschneider mounts his defence, Ed explains the audacious lawyer's legal strategy while the actor playing Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub) performs broadly with his hands and arms. In these scenes there is nothing subtle about the gestures as they unequivocally denote the impressions they are intended to convey. All the while, Ed sits in his chair, looking on blankly, Thornton assuming facial expressions of limited significance.

Both Shalhoub's and Thornton's performances rely heavily on the audience's acceptance of a series of signs and codes that have acknowledged meaning. Chris Berry acknowledges that "[t]o act or perform implies the repetition or at least citation of previous actions or patterns of behaviour, for without an element of repetition or citation acting cannot be recognised, decoded and understood by spectators."[57] It is these conventions that guide the viewer's understanding of both character and narrative and organise the reception of a text. Joel and Ethan Coen's approach to such coded organisation in relation to performance is especially important in the way that they refuse to adhere strictly

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[56] Ibid, p.228.
[57] Op. Cit., Chris Berry, "Where is the Love?: The Paradox of Performing Loneliness in Ts'ai Ming-Liang's *Vive L'Amour*," p.147.

to the rules of convention. Much of the power of Ed's fateful misadventure in *The Man Who Wasn't There* depends on the audience's vexed impression of Creighton Tolliver. The text's organisation fails to resolve a central question in the film: Is Tolliver swindling Ed? Such ambiguities are common through the Coen brothers' works with Tom's motives remaining oblique throughout *Miller's Crossing* and Jerry's financial crisis left unexplained at the conclusion of *Fargo*. Dyer argues that Montgomery Clift's character in *The Heiress* (Wyler, 1949) is not directly signified as "deceitful," the onus is placed on the viewer to ascertain the nature of his character based upon our own perceptions of the impression that he gives off.[58] Ultimately, the viewer is apprised of the true nature of Clift's character. With Tolliver, in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the audience is not afforded this kind of resolution (he is killed off-screen before crucial information becomes available). Understanding Tolliver and reading Tom, through the performances of Polito and Byrne respectively, depends on the viewer's educated interpretation of signs, not just cinematic/theatrical conventions, but also typical social codes. Dyer notes that spectators use methods of inference to determine the motives of character based upon "the universals of human nature."[59] And in respect to Tom in *Miller's Crossing* and Tolliver in *The Man Who Wasn't There* the elusive signs that do not necessarily disclose accurate character information represent the Coen brothers' subtle method for gently subverting classical cinema's reliance on revealing all with standard and stable signifying codes.

Performance in film, as opposed to disclosure in literature, suffers the complex problems of conveying emotion and attitude without direct access to a character's interior exposition. The novel is often regarded as more faithful to character; devices such as authorial annotation and internal monologue afford the reader access to a character's interior in a way unavailable to theatre, film and other forms of performance fiction. It is generally acknowledged that cinema poses certain limits on the representation of interior states, instead relying on behaviour and surface as a guide to emotional and attitudinal conditions. Such an argument promotes a sociological influenced analysis, with Goffman's studies of the presentation of self in everyday life being particularly effective in critiquing

[58] Op. Cit., Richard Dyer, *Stars*, p.145.
[59] Ibid, p.118.

and examining film performance. But in addition to performance signs, a filmmaker employs other cinematic devices to exhibit a character's interior state. The most overt of these is voice-over narration. In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, Ed speaks directly to the viewer, explaining the nature of his predicament and lamenting the forces of fate that have driven him to a position on death-row. A filmmaker may also use elements of framing, editing, lighting and sound as techniques by which to convey character information to the viewer.

King suggests "films tend to re-site the signification of interiority, away from the actor and onto the mechanism," arguing that "the projection of interiority becomes less and less the provenance of the actor and more and more a property emerging from directorial or editorial decision."[60] In *Fargo*, Joel and Ethan Coen use alternative devices, largely independent of William H. Macy's performance, to convey information about Jerry's emotional condition. Shortly after he has been tormented and humiliated by Wade in a business meeting, Jerry trudges forlornly to his car in a snowbound parking lot. The image is shot from a high angle, Jerry's small figure set against the blinding white background connotes his crestfallen response to yet another abasement at the hand of his father-in-law. Here the codified signs of the cinema, a high overhead shot representing a character's defeat, operates as a guide to Jerry's emotional condition. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson acknowledge that the meanings attributed to framing techniques are not stable and not absolute and signs must be interpreted in the context of the individual text.[61] But, the significance in this moment in *Fargo* is relevant to the way in which cinematic codes and social codes are both responsible in constructing and conveying character in film. Here the collaboration of the actor and the filmmaker is made explicit.

Reception

At the same time, it is undoubtedly the case that, in academia and in society at large, the acting profession has attracted so much attention

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[60] Op. Cit., Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," p.177.
[61] David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, Fourth Edition, MacGraw-Hill, New York, 1993, pp.211-217.

precisely because some of its members have become celebrities, and not because of a widespread interest in the craft of acting itself. There are good reasons, then, for linking the study of acting to the study of celebrity. Peter Krämer[62]

The contribution of the actor and his/her collaboration with the filmmaker are the central elements in the creation of a performance in film. The actor calls on the audience's recognition of social and generic conventions to create a surface presentation that offers cues to understanding and interpreting interior states, while the director applies this presentation using several cinematic devices, controlling the impression that is conveyed. However, other factors, not entirely controllable by the actor or filmmaker, can impact on the reception of performances in film. Here the intertextual, extratextual, and cultural elements that are connected to a performer or performance are responsible for influencing the way particular performances make meaning. Joel and Ethan Coen are canny artists who are aware of how the elements outside of the text can impact on its meaning. Their knowledge of popular culture, film history, literature and music has been integral to the way they construct films and this is clearly evident in the way that they cast, shoot and portray particular performances. *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* each possess elements beyond the performances themselves that directly and deliberately affect the viewer's response to the text.

The films of Joel and Ethan Coen often draw on cultural and social meaning established in other works to inform their own. Citation and intertextuality are key components of the performances in their films. In *Blood Simple*, M. Emmett Walsh's role as the seedy private investigator Loren Visser is directly informed by his performance as an equally reprehensible parole officer in *Straight Time*. And, Jeff Bridges' casting as The Dude in *The Big Lebowski* is clearly linked to his previous role as an indolent wanderer drifting aimlessly through a corrupt world in *Cutter's Way*. Noël Carroll insists that "[a]llusion, specifically to film history, has become a major expressive device, that is, a means

[62] Peter Krämer, "Bibliographical Notes," *Screen Acting*, Eds. Alan Lovell & Peter Krämer, Routledge, London, 1999, p.170.

that directors use to make comments on the fictional worlds of their films."[63] And, with Visser and The Dude, the Coens are effectively remaking previous performances of both Walsh and Bridges, respectively, using them to shape their own vision. But it is not only possible to draw intertextual cues from the texts of others, they are equally valid when they appear from within an artist's own work. The prime example in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is Freddy Riedenschneider as played by Tony Shalhoub, harking back to Shalhoub's own performance as movie producer Ben Geisler in the Coen brothers' *Barton Fink*. In both films Shalhoub plays a domineering, blustering character whose verbal bluntness hypnotises those to whom he speaks. In each case Shalhoub's character eats lunch with the film's protagonist, systematically shoving food into his mouth as he barks out orders and advice. The idea that a fast talking Hollywood producer (with an explicit practical agenda) and a smooth-talking Sacramento litigator (more interested in creating illusions than in seeking justice) are two sides of the same coin serves as an appropriate reproach for both fields of endeavour. Joel and Ethan Coen seem concerned not with recreating a realistic depiction of the character, but rather in a recreation of a notable performance from a previous film. Here the memory of things past informs the reception and interpretation of the present text.

Joel and Ethan Coen repeatedly cast specific actors, creating recurrent connections between their films. Sophie Wise argues that when a filmmaker draws from a regular cast of performers the "actors are effectively reworking and continually refining their gestures and idiolects over successive films. Within this circuit of recycling, previous performances provide subsequent performances with a past."[64] Wise's thesis refers specifically to Hal Hartley's use of an ensemble of regular actors in his films. The Coen brothers, themselves, have repeatedly cast Frances McDormand, John Turturro, John Goodman and, in particular, Steve Buscemi in many of their films. Buscemi has appeared in *Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*. The viewer's memory of Buscemi's appearance in these films, and in other films throughout his

[63] Noël Carroll, "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)," *October*, 20, Spring, 1982, p.52.
[64] Sophie Wise, "What I like about Hal Hartley, or rather, what Hal Hartley likes about me: The Performance of the (Spect)actor," *Falling for you: essays on cinema and performance*, Eds. Lesley Stern & George Kouvaros, Power Publications, Sydney, 1999, p.251.

career will impact on the reception of his later performances. When a filmmaker engages with a spectator's recollection of an actor, performances work allusively and beyond the boundaries of any single film. Buscemi's casting in *Fargo* cleverly evokes the actor's collection of previous roles, giving his character an immediate signification that compels the viewer's instantaneous impression. In films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1993) and *Mystery Train* (Jarmusch, 1989) Buscemi plays hysterical characters distinguished by an open desperation and comical frenzy. Thomas Doherty develops a shrewd evocation of the persona of Buscemi, suggesting he "is to weasly punks in Nineties neo-noirs what Strother Martin was to prairie scum in Sixties Westerns."[65] In *Fargo*, Buscemi plays Carl as an incompetent, though determined criminal, with a grim rage that is bubbling under the surface. Such a characterisation recalls his performance in *Reservoir Dogs* in which he plays Mr. Pink, a tightly-wound career criminal, despairing as a perfect scheme deteriorates explosively around him. Such a connection becomes even more apparent when Carl berates a toll booth official who demands the minimum fee for parking in a garage. The famous opening sequence in *Reservoir Dogs* details Mr. Pink's stingy policy on tipping waitresses. Here, a previous text infiltrates the present text to register an instantaneous meaning that arrives in the form of a totally abstract sign.

An insinuated connection in a performance may be less clear than a typical intertextual association, and may privilege the knowledgeable members of the audience while neglecting the less savvy viewer. Naremore notes that Martin Scorsese's cameo appearance in *The King of Comedy* "flatters parts of the audience, making them feel privy to 'secret' knowledge."[66] A similar effect is constructed in many of the films of the Coen brothers in the casting of Frances McDormand who, while a fine actress in her own right, is also Joel Coen's wife. Knowledge of this relationship will necessarily influence the way in which viewers interpret her performances. Some viewers may revel in the way McDormand is cast as an unfaithful wife with a racist streak in *The Man Who Wasn't There*. Similarly, Naremore notes that the real-life relationship between Robert De Niro and Diahnne Abbott may offer an "ironic twist" to the scenes they

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[65] Thomas Doherty, "*Fargo*," *Cineaste*, 22.2, 1996, p.47.
[66] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.271.

share in *The King of Comedy*.[67] Interpretation is crucial to the reception of a performance and the potential connections that might be constructed by the viewer. James Gandolfini's appearance in *The Man Who Wasn't There* came shortly after his role in the acclaimed television series *The Sopranos* (1999-). And Gandolfini's performance as "Big" Dave in *The Man Who Wasn't There* seems affected by this newly formed celebrity. In *The Sopranos*, Gandolfini plays Tony Soprano, a suburban mob boss who balances a life in the gritty criminal world with the pressures of raising a family, the obvious disharmony produced forcing Soprano to seek psychiatric support. The generic discord of a tough criminal character in the vulnerable environs of a psychiatrist's office contributes significantly to the television series' appeal and fascination. It is then important that in *The Man Who Wasn't There* Gandolfini is placed in a familiar situation when he relates his unhappy circumstances—involved in an affair with a married woman and victim of extortion threats—in a confessional manner to Ed. Gandolfini's whimpering disclosure is delivered with the same measure of pathetic self loathing mixed with unpredictable hostility that distinguishes his character in *The Sopranos*.

Intertextuality depends on the viewer's particular awareness of associations that can be constructed between a performer and the role s/he plays in a film. Yet, other details arise out of a performance, not directly related to the text, which influence an audience's response to and reception of an actor's work. A performer's particular skills or an actor's unique physical appearance can offer an instantaneous meaning that impacts on the character's depiction and the text's construction. Where Buscemi's casting as Carl is important as it establishes an immediate response in relation to his role in *Reservoir Dogs*, his physical appearance is also significant to the role. His performance in *Fargo* in particular—his facial features are gloried over by the camera—is typical of what Kuleshov terms "typage." Kuleshov argues that actors should suit the role they play, in a physical manner, because manipulation, such as with make-up, will lead to obvious theatricality. Kuleshov's thesis supports the notion that the ultimate objective of cinema is the recreation of reality. He suggests:

[67] Ibid, p.267.

> owing to the technique of film actors being quite distinct from that of theater actors, and because film needs real material and not a pretense of reality—owing to this, it is not theater actors but "types" who should act in film—that is, people who, in themselves, as they were born, present some kind of interest for cinematic treatment.[68]

A running joke in *Fargo* relates to Carl's unique physical appearance, described by several witnesses as "kinda funny lookin'." Buscemi *is* kind of funny looking, he is goggle-eyed, pale-skinned and exhibits prominently crooked teeth. He is atypical of a film star, the antithesis of perfection. As such, he typifies the character he is playing, embodying Carl in a very real, physical sense.

Joel and Ethan Coen's cultural representation in *Fargo* emphasises verisimilitude, reflected in their approach to actors. The casting of both Peter Stormare and John Caroll Lynch are loaded moves that invest in their respective characters an inherent signification. King explains that with typage, "the actor becomes the most rudimentary form of the sign, the ostensive sign in which the substance of the signifier is the substance of the signified."[69] Lynch plays Marge's average husband, the aptly named Norm. His physical appearance is the quintessence of banality – an expressionless face, bald pate and marginally overweight slouch. Lynch is the perfect physical representation of ordinariness. Stormare on the other hand has a distinctive countenance, vivid shock of pale blonde hair and hulking body shape. More important to Stormare's characterisation is how his appearance, as well as his accent, works with his character's expected traits. Stormare is a Swedish actor whose appearance and manner in *Fargo* reflects his character's Scandinavian heritage; a key component of the cultural design in the film. The fact that Stormare was cast *specifically* because the Coen brothers wanted a Swedish actor to play a part amongst all these characters of Scandinavian descent[70] exemplifies Kuleshov's agenda that the role should accommodate the actor and not the other way around.

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[68] Lev Kuleshov, "Art of Cinema," *Kuleshov on film: Writings by Lev Kuleshov*, Ed. Ronald Levaco, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974, pp.63-64.
[69] Op. Cit., Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," p.176.
[70] Josh Levine, *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers*, ECW Press, Toronto, 2000, p.124.

Stormare's casting based upon specific physical and personal attributes is suggestive of the Coens' insistence on performers and performances that complement their own scripted vision. Buscemi's first film with the Joel and Ethan Coen was *Miller's Crossing* in which he was cast as the frenetic parasite Mink. Mottram reports that Buscemi was cast in the role because he was able to read the character's lines faster than any other actor.[71] In this circumstance the Coen brothers cast an actor because he exhibited a particular skill, a talent that made him both particular and also appropriate in the role. Naremore contends that some performances are "structured so as to give the audience a chance to appreciate the player's physical or mental accomplishments."[72] In *Miller's Crossing*, Mink's hyper-sensitive condition and rampant paranoia is reflected in his conversational style and language. While in the Shenandoah Club, Tom gently taunts Mink, compelling the latter into ever more hysterical fits of anxiety. Mink's speech eventually degenerates into an incoherent ramble of accelerated double-talk. The Coens exploit Buscemi's dexterous ability with the long and difficult recitation to great effect.

Although the Coens have made critically successful films and have worked with well-renowned performers, they rarely work with actors who might be regarded as prominent film "stars." But, the employment of moderate stars and recognisable actors remains an important element in the way their films construct meaning. Dyer contends that stars possess both a sociological and semiotic significance in film, arguing that actors "are part of the way films signify."[73] Both Gabriel Byrne and Albert Finney are, to the conversant film viewer, both instantly recognisable as prominent British actors. This directly impacts upon the reception of their performances in *Miller's Crossing* as Irish gangsters. Billy Bob Thornton is a minor celebrity, performing in a number of independent films, starring in his own well-received production of *Slingblade* (1996) and working with notable filmmakers such as Mike Nichols, Carl Franklin, Sam Raimi, Jim Jarmusch and Oliver Stone. With these last three directors Thornton appeared in *A Simple Plan*

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[71] Op. Cit., James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, p.128.
[72] Op. Cit., James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p.26.
[73] Op. Cit., Richard Dyer, *Stars*, p.1.

(1998), *Dead Man* (1995) and *U-Turn* (1997), respectively. And in each case he appears physically distinct and unusual. Thornton has developed an acting persona of great variance, his chameleon-like transformations identifying him as a performer who can play radically against type. And thus, in *The Man Who Wasn't There* the Coen brothers have used Thornton in a role where he is required to totally delimit his usual approach to performance and present a character without character. Representing a character without tangible expressive qualities guarantees that Thornton's typical performance traits are proscribed and the viewer may take some pleasure in seeing him in a contrasted role.

Even when using actors with a less prominent celebrity status the Coen brothers exploit cultural stereotypes to sustain the performances in many of their films. Cultural conventions are utilised, appropriated and subverted as a method in constructing crucial signifiers that can be instantaneously received by the audience. As such the reception of performance depends on the keen collaboration of the actor and the filmmakers. These cultural conventions are what Goffman might nominate as the "personal front" of an individual. This refers to the elements of a person's physical presentation that convey immediate information about their character: sex, age, racial characteristics, size, looks, posture, facial expression and bodily gestures, to name but a few.[74] The Coen brothers' articulation of the Jewish bookmaker Bernie Bernbaum—his "personal front"—caused a minor controversy upon the release of *Miller's Crossing*. The representation of the character emphasised the hackneyed image of Jewishness: Turturro's dark swarthy features are accentuated by the moody lighting, eye make-up and his ostentatious costume (an exotic long, dark overcoat matched with a foppish bowler hat). These physical features complement his character's stereotypically Jewish persona expressed by his deception and betrayal: a reimagining of Shylock as a 1920s gangster. Josh Levine highlights several significant questions that confront the viewer of *Miller's Crossing*:

> Perhaps the more interesting question is, why did the brothers choose Turturro? Why would they, like [Spike] Lee, choose a non-Jewish actor for the role when a Jewish actor might have been more

> convincing to the audience? Did they actually hope to trade in on the fresh memory of Turturro's earlier performance in the Spike Lee film [*Mo' Better Blues* (1990)], so that the audience might bring negative feelings to the character of Bernie? Was it because Turturro's physical appearance—his oddly shaped head, his small eyes, his notable nose—played to certain old stereotypes of the ugly Jew, making him another Shylock or Fagin?"[75]

Levine has astutely reckoned on the manner by which the Coens have mingled the intertextual connection to Spike Lee's film with the extratextual reference of the cultural stereotype of the fictional Jew. Joel and Ethan Coen's depiction of Bernie is important in *Miller's Crossing* because in this film the brothers seek to construct characters from their ethnic properties: the Italian Caspar, the Irish Tom and Leo, and the Jewish Bernie and Verna. Through the performance of the actors, and in their rendering by the Coen brothers, there exist several pressing cultural issues that cannot be ignored. The representation of ethnicity in *Miller's Crossing* must be recognised for its unwavering recreation of racial stereotypes that is not always satisfactorily justified by deference to postmodern playfulness. Such an issue invites a greater interrogation of the cultural contexts of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen.

The stereotypes of *Miller's Crossing*—and *Fargo* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, for that matter—highlight an important element of the performance in the films of the Coen brothers: they are always filled with significance. But an overriding aspect of the acting in the works of the Coens is its reliance on skilful performers. Gabriel Byrne is a well known character performer who has made no lasting impression on Hollywood, or appeared in any blockbuster entertainments. Billy Bob Thornton is more well known than Byrne but is not necessarily considered a bankable star. And in *Fargo*, the lead role is shared between Steve Buscemi, Frances McDormand and William H. Macy, none of whom are star actors, even if many scholarly film buffs would recognise them as fine cinema performers. John Ellis claims that "[u]nderperformance is not a question of

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[74] Op. Cit., Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p.34.
[75] Op. Cit., Josh Levine, *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers*, p.69.

restraint or lack of histrionics. It is a question of producing the effect of behaving rather than performing."[76] It is perhaps this assessment that explains why Byrne's acting in *Miller's Crossing* and Thornton's performance in *The Man Who Wasn't There* are so effective and spells out some of the reasons that contribute to the often indefinable category of "good" acting. The quality of the acting in *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* demonstrates the craftiness and calculation of Joel and Ethan Coen, filmmakers who are acutely aware of the power of all of cinema's apparatuses.

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[76] Op. Cit., John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, p.104.

5. Culture

"The world is full of complainers. 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 man of the year – something can always go wrong. Go ahead, ya know, complain, tell your problems to your neighbour, 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, and down here, you're on your own."
Loren Visser (M. Emmet Walsh) *Blood Simple.*

Linking film analysis to the broadly-based discipline of cultural studies has opened up fertile angles by which to approach film theory and history. The structuralist and semiotic theory that dominated academic approaches to cinema through the 1970s and into the 1980s tended to focus too closely on the film text and its formal components, denying a methodical investigation of the contexts of a film's production and reception. Andrew Tudor defines cultural studies as "a deterministic analysis which largely equate[s] culture with ideology and which [gives] analytic primacy to texts and to systems of discourse."[1] Marrying this notion of culture and its relationship with ideology to film texts provides a basic methodology for the exploration of the contextual aspects of filmic representations. Media texts engage with ideological values and systems of morality emulating the cultures from which they are produced. Media reflects the social domain it represents, Douglas Kellner views media culture not as an instrument of domination, but as a "*contested terrain* reproducing on the cultural level the fundamental conflicts within society."[2] Films take the natural materials of social history and of cultural discourses and assemble them into representations which are themselves historical events and social forces. Kellner notes that cinematic works provide "information about the 'psychology' of an era and its

[1] Andrew Tudor, "Film and Sociology," *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Eds. John Hill & Pamela Church Gibson, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p.193.
[2] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Routledge, London & New York, 1995, pp.101-102.

tensions, conflicts, fears, and fantasies."[3] Film texts provide the necessary resources for analysing the contexts of their production and reception, facilitating an understanding of how films refract a society's issues and a culture's dilemmas through representation. For example, many Hollywood films suggest that money and success are important, that heterosexual romance is desirable and that marriage and family are the proper social forms. And, in these films American values and institutions are presented as being basically reasonable, compassionate and beneficial to society. A cultural approach to film analysis reads film texts as cultural events in which the actual struggles of contemporary society are considered, played out and worked over. And, though the films of Joel and Ethan Coen are often criticised for failing to develop ethical or moral positions their works clearly exhibit a critical engagement with the cultural contexts from which they are produced. The Coen brothers' highly stylised "Hayseed Trilogy"—*Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—demonstrates that regardless of setting, aesthetic or technique, their films not only acknowledge culture but comment critically on the social issues inherent in these representations.

While confirming that sociological readings of cinema need not be the sole approach to film studies Robin Wood nevertheless argues for "the importance of seeing works in the context of their culture, as living ideological entities, rather than as sanctified exhibits floating in the void of an invisible museum."[4] Media and ideology are inexorably entwined: all representations are ideological. Films are artifacts, they represent the ideologies that surround and impact upon their production. *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are three films that appear to be saying nothing about the environment from which they have sprung, yet still engage with their political and social contexts in varying ways. These works are important to the thesis that Joel and Ethan Coen's films are ideologically significant, despite the prominence of artifice and self-reflexivity, precisely because they adopt a knowing attitude to their own fiction.

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[3] Douglas Kellner, "Hollywood Film and Society," *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Eds. John Hill & Pamela Church Gibson, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p.355.
[4] Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p.2.

Wood argues "the alibi of realism masks ideology,"[5] but the notion that realism is a façade that obscures the constructedness of ideological texts is inverted in the films under discussion. Joel and Ethan Coen's representational forms favour stylisation and artificiality, yet this does not negate the very tangible political and social issues being examined and critiqued in their films.

The Coen brothers are often described as independent filmmakers,[6] this moniker best describing the nature of the funding and production of their films. The Coens have maintained complete creative control over all of their films and thus a true sense of independence.[7] However, their works are often characterised by a loose adherence to generic convention and their technique and style usually conforms in a general sense with the codes of mainstream cinema. As such, their independence is not interrelated with any systematic alternative to the dominant aesthetic paradigm or a challenging of the very structures of narrative cinema. This positions them as independent practitioners working within the film business. But this only describes a part of the overall design of the Coens' relationship with Hollywood. While the Coen brothers often construct texts within familiar generic frameworks and apply typical narrative and narrational devices to their works, this is customarily qualified by an ironic disposition toward these dominant systems of representation. Independent cinema, in some respects, is characterised by a relational dynamic with Classical Hollywood film, especially in the way that it seeks to expand the parameters of cinema as a whole. The Coen brothers' films often utilise the conditions of typical genre fare but they always take these conventional constructions into new territory. In this respect Joel and Ethan Coen develop an affinity with filmmakers of the ilk of Robert Altman. Like Altman, the Coens deconstruct Hollywood genres, challenge American mythologies, and explore dominant ideologies in order to produce complex texts that unsettle our relationship with controlling cultural forms.

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[5] Ibid, p.206.

[6] See Geoff Andrew, *Stranger Than Paradise: Maverick film-makers in recent American cinema*, Prion, London, 1998 – for a positive description of the Coens' independent credentials; and Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, New York University Press, New York, 1999 – for a sceptical analysis of the Coen brothers' position in the American independent film scene.

[7] The Coen brothers' most recent release, *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), represents a break with this tradition. With this film the Coen brothers' involvement in the writing process followed the

The films of the Coen brothers and other artists camped on the fringes of Hollywood tradition explore the potential of a cinema that challenges as it reassures. Formal radicalism can often harm its own objectives by failing to access the audience members it is seeking to reach. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner bear this in mind when they maintain that "[m]ost Hollywood liberals and leftists seem to accept [Arthur] Penn's fate, working within the traditional representational formats (image, narrative, and character) while tinkering critically or playfully with the generic and action conventions."[8] This is a telling viewpoint not only because it describes the way the Coens also manipulate convention, but because Arthur Penn, like Altman, seems to have a direct (though rarely acknowledged) influence on the Coen brothers' films. Jeff Evans finds a connection between *Raising Arizona* and Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Evans regards the banjo music, focus on regionalism, dialect, motif of infertility, and moral estrangement from a dominant culture as associations worthy of remark. He believes the Coens "create a link between *Bonnie and Clyde*, which so profoundly spoke to the individualistic drop-out impulse of the 1960's, and their [own] *Raising Arizona*, which has as its matrix correspondingly self-absorbed Yuppie values of the 1980's."[9] Altman and Penn are two American filmmakers who have paved the way for the kind of independent expression utilised by the Coen brothers in contemporary cinema.

The forms of alternative and independent cinema are not always considered capable of challenging the status-quo and interrogating the mainstream. Philip John Davies and Paul Wells argue that there is little distinction between blockbuster entertainment and more independent, personal films: "Whether 'High Concept' or 'My Concept', what characterises many of these film and film-makers is an apoliticised or taken-for-granted political stance that either

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development of a screenplay by Robert Ramsey and Matthew Stone; and Brian Grazer co-produced the film with Ethan Coen.

[8] Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1988, p.270.

[9] Jeff Evans, "Comic Rhetoric In *Raising Arizona*," *Studies in American Humor*, 4.3, 1996, p.40.

implicitly endorses the Reagan years, or ignores them altogether."[10] This contention is problematic for it suggests that it is possible to be apolitical, dismissing the fundamental notion that all representations carry a necessary political and social currency. Criticism of the Coen brothers for ignoring real-life issues is habitually associated with claims that their films are paradigms of postmodernism. But it is precisely the postmodern strategy of "use and abuse" and "install to subvert" that ensures the critical element in the Coens' employment of familiar modes of representation and genre. The application of conservative and typical modes of address are often the most effective means to originate a subversive critical commentary because it guarantees the engagement of the audience. This contention envisions the potential for subversion as available within the actual devices of the mainstream. The argument that Hollywood films are complicit in the maintenance of hegemonies, employing a system of conventions and codes to promote dominant ideologies while marginalising radical discourses and general unconventionality, is thus deemed to be fundamentally flawed.

It is the Coen brothers' ironic application of customary conventions and traditional modes of address that reveals the cultural issues evident in their films. The contextual elements relating to politics, race, gender and class in *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are laid open by a multi-perspectival ideological critique which emphasises the relations between culture and economic power. This approach applies analytical schema from cultural studies, gender studies, and theories of race and class. Such a diagnostic critique employs history and social theory to scrutinise cultural texts and uses cultural texts in turn to elucidate historical tendencies, conflicts and anxieties. Exploring the contexts of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen not only acknowledges culture but comments critically on the social issues of that reality. Looking at aspects of politics and society in relation to *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona* focusses on the impact of the Reagan Administration, from the reinstatement of conservative attitudes through to the promotion of individual enterprise as a

[10] Philip John Davies & Paul Wells, "Introduction," *American film and politics from Reagan to Bush Jr*, Eds. Philip John Davies & Paul Wells, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2002, p.4.

means to the American Dream. And in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the context of a political system in crisis (after the 2000 Presidential election sapped its credibility and questioned its democracy) is refracted in a hillbilly Depression-era musical in which a gubernatorial election suffers its own crises. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* also explores the racial divisions and economic realities of the United States, one review astutely noting that the "Coens have sneakily taken on the least saleable subject of our time – the whole messy tangle of class, family and race."[11] Despite suggestions that Coen brothers' films are artificial constructions with no relation to the real world it would seem that even their most synthetic texts are indelibly marked with the cultures that contextualise them. Politics, society, gender, family, race and ethnicity are all prevalent issues that bear scrutiny in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen.

Politics and Society

> *Well in my book you either do it right or you get eliminated... greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, for knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind...* Gordon Gecko (Michael Douglas) *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987).

> *God has intended the great to be great and the little to be little... [T]he man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live.* Henry Ward Beecher[12]

These two quotes, the first attributable to a fictional character, the second to a 19th Century American clergyman, share in common a frank and candid illustration of the nature of capitalism in the United States. Linked to Visser's cynical recitation (referenced at the beginning of this chapter)—"nothing comes with a guarantee...something can always go wrong...down here, you're on your

[11] Rob Content, Tim Kreider, Boyd White, "*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," *Film Quarterly*, 55.1, Fall, 2001, p.42.
[12] Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years*, W. W. Norton and Co., New York & London, 1991, p.112.

own"—the issue of what it takes to survive in America is made paramount. Each quote, in its own way, does away with the platitudes of freedom, prosperity, success and reward and reduces the concept of the American Dream to a game of survival, a game in which the loser is eliminated. Visser, Gecko and Beecher each couch their descriptions of success in terms of individualism and self-support, rejecting community dependence and the values and protection guaranteed by brotherhood. And, it is the utterance attributed to Visser that is the basis for Georg Seesslen's argument that *Blood Simple* is an anti-American film,[13] an assertion that confers upon the film a political and social reading.

Seesslen's proclamation that *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* strategically represents the "worst image of this 'democracy' one can imagine,"[14] and James Mottram's analysis of *Raising Arizona* as exploring the contradictions of the American Dream that both encourages and hampers its own accessibility[15] demonstrate the willingness of some commentators to seek and uncover political subtexts in the films of the Coen brothers. These readings acknowledge the assertion that art is a representation of the world, and it therefore holds an essential association with the culture that constructs that world. Stuart Hall's contention that "[r]eality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language; and what we know and say has to be produced in and through discourse," acknowledges a valuable link to Mikhael Bakhtin's work.[16] Bakhtin's theories demonstrate that art is not a representation of reality but a representation of the world's languages and discourses. His work endorses the supposition that art is social, precisely because the discourses that art represent are themselves social.[17] This claim ratifies the view that film does not record reality but rather it *re-presents* its portraits of reality in the codes, myths and ideologies of its social environment using the distinct signifying apparatus of the medium. A political reading of a film examines how the internal constituents of texts either

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[13] Georg Seesslen, "*Blood Simple*," *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Eds. Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen, Translated by Rory Mulholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001, p.62.
[14] Georg Seesslen, "*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Eds. Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen, Translated by Rory Mulholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001, p.226.
[15] James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, B.T. Batsford, London, 2000, p.45.
[16] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, Eds. Meenaleshi Gigi Durham, & Douglas Kellner, Blackwell, Malden, Mass. & Oxford, 2001, p.169.

encode relations of domination and hegemony, acting mainly to advance the interests of more powerful groups at the expense of others, or oppose the dominant ideologies, institutions and practices. Alternatively, a political analysis may examine how a text contains a contradictory mixture of both levels of address creating a contested domain of domination and resistance. Such readings, Kellner argues, depend on situating media culture in its "historical conjuncture and analyzing how its generic codes, its positioning of viewers, its dominant images, its discourses, and its formal-aesthetic elements all embody certain political and ideological positions and have political effects."[18] It is this approach—one that acknowledges the formal, thematic and narrative components of a text—that proves fruitful when examining the films of Joel and Ethan Coen and exploring their political and cultural agendas.

As argued in chapter three (History) the assertion that the Coen brothers exhibit a postmodern relationship with culture—one where the accessibility of the real seems to slip further away as representation becomes the only reality—is the basis for the contention that their films carry no political inquiry or social critique. Corrigan outlines this attitude to postmodern forms in his monograph, *A Cinema Without Walls*:

> one of the persistent debates and concerns within studies of postmodernism is the very possibility of a truly political position in a cultural landscape where the reception of ideology through opaque and shifting media surfaces seems to disallow thoughtful engagement, provocation, or social reading itself.[19]

Corrigan's uncertainty is not uncommon, and it is this kind of approach that Emanuel Levy employs when dismissing the Coen brothers as shallow formalist filmmakers who construct sealed universes that fail to engage with the real

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[17] See Robert Stam, "Bakhtin, Polyphony, and Ethnic/Racial Representation," *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, Ed. Lester D. Friedman, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991, pp.252-275.
[18] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, p.56.
[19] Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J., 1991, p.197.

world.[20] Therefore, it is significant that the Coen brothers' postmodern representational forms, specifically reflected in their application of irony, provide the means for the cultural inquiry in their films. The discrepancy between what is presented and what it actually represents frequently operates as the critical element in the Coens' texts. This method of representation is evident in the dramatic irony that is found in *Blood Simple* as simple miscalculations lead to murder, in the structural irony of *Raising Arizona* that presents a working-class view of a middle-class American Dream, and in the cosmic irony of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* where a poor dupe is repeatedly denied his wish to remarry his wife by a mocking fate. But such elements of irony also suggest the double-meaning and implicit commentary in these texts, in which a subtext is always available and often productive in the film's analysis.

The ironic and satirical substance found in the Coen brothers' films is most often evident within their formal design. Jonathan Rosenbaum believes that formal procedures "are always grounded in political decisions of one kind or another, whether we choose to recognize them or not."[21] Exploring the aesthetic decisions of a filmmaker is important on two levels. First, it acknowledges the power and significance of various modes of address, recognising that particular approaches to representation carry ideological meanings. Second, it further vindicates the supposition that a film need not be overtly political in order to harbour social significance. For Kellner, "to fully explicate filmic ideology and the ways that film advances specific political positions, one must also attend to cinematic form and narrative structure, to the ways that the cinema apparatus transcodes social discourses and reproduces ideological effects."[22] This assertion is more liberal than a theoretical position held earlier in his collaboration with Michael Ryan (*Camera Politica*) where they contend that the Classical Hollywood style legitimates the images represented: "The conventions habituate

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[20] Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, New York University Press, New York, 1999, pp.222-23.
[21] Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movies as Politics*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1997, p.4.
[22] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, p.67.

the audience to accept the basic premises of the social order, and to ignore their irrationality and injustice."[23]

But a qualification of this position seems in order, a qualification that is evident in the construction, and in the reception, of the films of the Coen brothers. The Coens' works most often adhere to a classical system of address with subtle variation. This process of use and abuse functions as the Coens' critical endeavour illustrated in their parodic treatment of genre and convention. Ryan and Kellner write that, in their view, Hollywood forms are "ideological" because they "replicate the figures and narratives that constitute the very substance of those values, practices, and institutions that shape a society of domination."[24] In this case, by ideological, the authors mean hegemonic. Ryan and Kellner blame the basic codes of classical cinema for this dominating agenda, citing a broad process of rhetorical replication that mirrors the dominant cultural paradigm that is inherent in the system of address. They include devices such as the male quest narrative, camera positioning that endorses individual identification, domestic mise-en-scène, shot continuity and contrapuntal editing as the chief examples. While this argument is persuasive—specifically in the way it analogises these technical and narrative devices to cultural values associated with hegemony: individual success, metaphors of freedom, synecdochic privileging of efficiency over democracy, and so on—it fails to take into account the subversive potential of the exposition (and foregrounding) of the classical system. An analysis of textual representations that acknowledges the power of subversion must take into consideration the audience's ability to critically evaluate the tone of the text and to decide whether to accept the premises of the classical system as sincere, or as parody. By playing with and gently altering the dominant modes of representation Joel and Ethan Coen augment the ideological values associated with these tools. In Kellner's later text *Media Culture*, this kind of potential is acknowledged, evident in the claim that "a critical cultural studies should not only critique dominant ideologies, but should also specify any utopian, oppositional, subversive, and emancipatory moments within ideological constructs which are

[23] Op. Cit., Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica*, p.1.
[24] Ibid, p.267.

then turned against existing forms of domination."[25] Such a determination is a pure theoretical underpinning of the manner by which the Coens use irony in their application of classical conventions.

To demonstrate this thesis it is necessary to begin with the end. Kellner maintains that the traditional Hollywood happy ending "serves to validate dominant socio-political values – as it always did."[26] But Carl Plantinga points out that "[w]e must be sceptical of ideological formalism, of the claim that any formal strategy, considered independently of propositional content and rhetorical purpose, has an inherent ideological significance."[27] The endings of both *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* call into question the validity of the conventional happy ending, not by denying it outright, but by ironically inverting its characteristics. In *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the male hero is attempting to fabricate or maintain the image of the normal family, suffering all manner of trials and tribulations along the way. In each case the ending is tactically ironic as the heroes achieve a closure that is not wholly ratified, suggesting that the "happiness" is either fleeting, fallacious or misguided. In *Raising Arizona*, H.I. dreams into the future of a world in which he and Ed are enjoying the company of adult children and adolescent grandchildren in an archetypal image of familial contentment. This image is hokey and overblown, the photography emphasises the shimmering dream-quality which points to the rhetorical overstatement of the scene. John Fiske, interrogating the workings of television, regards moments like these as representative of excess, suggesting *"[e]xcess as hyperbole* works through a double articulation which is capable of bearing both the dominant ideology and a simultaneous critique of it, and opens up an equivalent dual subject position for the reader."[28] The Coens both subtly and brazenly double code the values associated with the happy ending by, in the first case, presenting the contented offspring depicted in the dream as looking more like the progeny of the couple's perverted and deviant neighbours Glen and Dot (indicating H.I. may have eventually taken up Glen's offer for a bout of wife

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[25] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, p.111.
[26] Ibid, p.82.
[27] Carl Plantinga, "Notes on Spectator Emotion and Ideological Film Criticism," *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Richard Allen & Murray Smith Eds., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p.375.
[28] John Fiske, *Television Culture*, Routledge, London & New York, 1987, p.91 (Italics in original).

swapping as a solution to Ed's infertility).[29] And secondly, the Coen brothers completely undermine the convention by adjourning H.I.'s idyllic vision with a punch-line—"I don't know...maybe it was Utah"—that both suggests H.I.'s dream is an impossible proposition as well as satirising the family values associated with the conservatively religious state of Utah. In this case the happy ending that seems so typical comes to a cynical conclusion. This not only dishonours the purpose of the prognostication but also belatedly demonstrates the workings of the happy ending device through its overt portrayal and ironic denial.

In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Everett is seeking a reunion with his ex-wife before she remarries. In the tradition of the text upon which the film is ostensibly based, *The Odyssey*, Everett's journey is hindered and impeded by a series of setbacks and obstacles. When, belatedly he has found Penny and won back her favour he is still denied the consummation of marriage as Penny refuses to wed without her original wedding ring, which remains un-found at the film's conclusion. The happy ending that seems to have occurred in the reunion of Everett and Penny is frustrated by this simple device and remains denied right to the very end. In this case there is a qualified response to the tenets of the happy ending as it relates to the restoration of the family in its typical conception. Wood speculates about the subversive possibilities available in a classical narrative structure, and muses over the crucial issue of "tone":

> If a given narrative does move toward the restoration of the patriarchal order, what is the work's attitude to that restoration? The order itself may, after all, have been called into question and undermined, its monstrous oppressiveness exposed. The attitude to its restoration, then, need by no means be one of simple optimism or endorsement: it could be tragic or ironic. Tone is a phenomenon with which semioticians appear to have great, if unacknowledged, problems, which they ignore rather than resolve.[30]

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[29] I am indebted to Tom Milne's reading of these characteristics in the scene – Tom Milne "Hard on the Little Things: *Raising Arizona*," *Sight and Sound*, 56, Summer, 1987, pp.218-219.
[30] Op. Cit., Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, p.246.

Wood uses several Alfred Hitchcock films as examples to support this proposition, citing *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Rear Window* and *Strangers on a Train* (1951) as texts that all move toward the construction of the heterosexual couple and the restoration of patriarchal normality. Yet, Wood claims that these texts leave the audience with "a feeling of tension, frustration and emptiness rather than satisfaction (let alone plenitude)," the films having "systematically dismantled the order that is perfunctorily (some might say cynically) restored."[31] Wood's account of the subversive machinery of Hitchcock's technique, though, remains unclear as he fails to establish exactly what leads the audience into feelings of "tension, frustration and emptiness," neglecting to explain the formal practices employed by the director to manufacture these emotions. Yet, it seems Wood is outlining the same kinds of attitudes to the "happy endings" of Hitchcock's films that are evident in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen. By defining the issue as one of "tone," Wood is declaring that, in some respect, these moments of subversion are subjective and volatile, and anything but guaranteed. Such an observation accounts for the diametrical readings that are bestowed upon the films of the Coen brothers, either acknowledging the irony of their tone or simply receiving the representations with sincerity.

Seesslen acknowledges the ironic tone of *Blood Simple* when he concludes that it is anti-American, adopting a cynical reading of the Coens' depiction of American values. Both *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona* were written and filmed during the Reagan Administration and their subtexts and themes are unerringly related to the political issues that arise from that context. Ronald Reagan was a two-term President of the United States, his impact on American policy and economics was substantial and has continued long after the conclusion of his administration. Reagan's presidency was characterised by the denunciation of "big government," an emphasis on minimalist state interference and the free market and the scrapping of welfare programs. He was also responsible for endorsing expensive defence initiatives, a supply-side economic policy that favoured spending, the promotion of "family values" developed in close collaboration with the New Right and the encouragement of entrepreneurial endeavours linked to policies that promoted self-dependence. The effects of the

[31] Ibid, p.246.

Reagan Administration are represented in different ways in *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona*, and each film emphasises different social issues. *Blood Simple* is interested in exploring the topic of individualism and self-reliance: "you're on your own." In Reagan's first term his administration was responsible for welfare cuts and regressive tax policies that cost working class families $23 billion, while the wealthier were $35 billion better off. Welfare programs associated primarily with the poor and indigent—foodstamps, child nutrition, aid to families with dependent children, and low income housing—were systematically reduced or terminated.[32] In Reagan's America you were certainly on your own. *Blood Simple* exhibits a sharp representation of the jungle survivalism that characterised the policies of the emerging neo-conservative economic order.

Raising Arizona, while undoubtedly covering similar territory to *Blood Simple*, is affected necessarily by the attitudinal changes that occurred as Reagan's policies faltered. The doubling of the national debt, a series of embarrassing financial scandals, the Iran/Contra affair and the 1987 stock market crash created a mood of despair and distrust in which the values associated with the administration were coming under heavy analysis. Such scrutiny is reflected in *Raising Arizona*'s narrative of a small-time hero's bitter struggle to stay afloat in an era of economic recession and debilitating social crisis. In 1987 more people were in desperate need of support from the federal government than ever before and the liberal belief that the state should provide assistance was again prominent in American culture. Ryan and Kellner note how text represents context, and vice-versa, declaring "[b]y 1987, the era of the hero was over, both cinematically and politically. The patriarch had proven to be a duplicitous coward, the entrepreneur a conniving con artist, and the warrior a pusillanimous bully and a bumbling incompetent."[33] This definition of the era constructs an analogous paradigm for the characters and themes present in *Raising Arizona* from H.I.'s enfeebled attempts at playing the father to his stolen son, to Nathan Arizona's questionable business practices and ruthless capitalism, through to the biker/warrior who, like all bullies, is "especially hard on the little things."

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[32] David James, "Is there Class in this Text?: The Repression of Class in Film and Cultural Studies," *A Companion to Film Theory*, Eds. Robert Stam & Toby Miller, Blackwell, Malden, Mass., 1999, p.183.
[33] Op. Cit., Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica*, p.297.

With its characters imprisoned in private discourses and Darwinian themes of survivalism and self-dependence *Blood Simple* explores the anxieties that counter the idyllic manifestations of the American Dream. Wood describes such a concern as "the fear, scarcely unfounded, that continually troubles the American (un-)consciousness that democratic capitalism may not be cleanly separable from Fascism and may carry within itself the potential to become Fascist, totalitarian, a police state."[34] *Blood Simple* operates as a critique of America's faith in an economic and political system that nourishes competition and success by pitting individuals against one another. Haynes Johnson describes the people who made up Reagan's advisers and policy-makers as supporting self-reliance and independence, ideals that are remarkably similar to those Visser promotes in the monologue that opens *Blood Simple*. Johnson writes:

> These men around Reagan were a familiar American type, self-made men who espoused rugged individualism, free (that is, unfettered and unregulated) enterprise, and a belief in the survival of the fittest. They were Social Darwinists who had made it out of poverty. So could others, if they were worthy. If not, well, then to each his own and to each his own fate.[35]

The opening words of *Blood Simple*, so similar to Johnson's description, are played out against images that punctuate the sentiments of Visser's speech. The vision is of expansive bitumen roads that are surrounded by a sparse and featureless wilderness. These images, in collaboration with Visser's assertion—"down here, you're on your own"—are the initial cues to *Blood Simple*'s central theme: these characters are travelling alone in a morally empty universe with no refuge in sight.

Much of *Blood Simple* turns on the pre-credit sequence and the words voiced by Visser, and much depends on how they are interpreted through the

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[34] Op. Cit., Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, p.169.
[35] Op. Cit., Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years*, p.72.

remainder of the text. Geoff Andrew observes astutely that it would seem possible to argue that the opening monologue is:

> just a clever, colourful pastiche of the 'hard-boiled' style of classic crime writers like James M. Cain (an influence, certainly, on the film) and Dashiell Hammett, were it not for the fact that *Blood Simple* then proceeds to illustrate the thesis that "you're on your own" with all the rigorous logic of a philosophical syllogism.[36]

Andrew's contention is evident in the characters' relations, in the narrative processes and in the film's formal design. The two lovers, Ray and Abby, repeatedly misinterpret the statements, questions and declarations that they offer one another, eventually generating such distrust that their relationship soon founders. Visser and Marty form a bond—the latter contracting the former to kill his wife and her lover—based upon a trust that is underpinned by that most pure of stimulants: money. Not surprisingly, this relationship is destroyed through acts of suspicion, betrayal and ultimately murder. The isolation of the characters from each other is emphasised by the Coens' formal representation. The characters are regularly seen in separate locations and when these characters are presented together, they are often situated in separate frames. The Coens use a system of alternating editing (shot/reverse-shot) to compound the segregation of the characters. When this system is modified and two characters are framed together the moment is typically disrupted. When Ray attempts to confess to Abby the part he played in the concealment of Marty's body, believing all the while that Abby is responsible for Marty's murder, the moment is broken by the over-emphasised sound of a newspaper crashing into a wire screen-door. Ray declares that he can't eat, nor sleep and ultimately reveals to the bewildered Abby: "The truth is...he was alive when I buried him." This scene is characterised by an immaculate example of the shot/reverse-shot pattern that works to accentuate the character's ever growing isolation. But when Ray makes that final declaration any opportunity for clarity or revelation is frustrated as the newspaper crashes into the door, shattering the portentous silence. All the formal elements—the framing, the

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[36] Geoff Andrew, *Stranger Than Paradise: Maverick film-makers in recent American cinema*, Prion, London, 1998, p.167.

performances, the editing and the aural devices—conspire to maintain the isolation of the characters.

Both *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985) explore many of the same themes of individualism, self-sufficiency and self-dependence found in *Blood Simple*. Kellner declares that Rambo is a "supply-side hero, a figure of individual entrepreneurialism," and points out that *Top Gun* demonstrates that in "the Reaganite universe, only the elite succeed and the faint-hearted must fall by the wayside...only the winners succeed and everyone else is a loser."[37] Moreover, the heroes of *Top Gun* are the kind of "highly competitive young people to spur the economy to new entrepreneurial heights," and the film is a "celebration of competition and winning as the supreme values" that promote "proper(ly capitalistic) social values, while perpetuating the myth of the American Dream."[38] The Coens adopt a contrary view of the American Dream, there are no winners in *Blood Simple*. At the end of the Coen brothers' film the confused and alienated characters have all perished, except for Abby who remains unaware of the depth of her own isolation. Abby succeeds at remaining alive only because of her ignorance; chance and fate play a dominant role in her survival and her only reward is solitude. Ryan and Kellner argue that the ideological system that idealises a certain way of life—here the concept of the American Dream, and all that it stands for—depends largely on the metaphoric conception of these ideals. This is reflected in the supposition that to more effectively "sell" principles of greed and wealth they are better relayed as ideals such as "freedom" and "enterprise." Ryan and Kellner favour a metonymic approach to ideology that exposes the falsity of its claims: "It is an anti-ideological representational form in that it acts to deconstruct the pretensions of ideological meanings like 'freedom' by anchoring them in material contexts."[39] Under this system films like *Top Gun* and *Rambo* would be indicative of a designing hegemony that seeks to conceal the realities of its principles behind a layer of pleasurable images and narratives that demonstrate the power and rewards associated with success. *Blood Simple*, on the other hand, represents a

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[37] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, pp.66 & 77.
[38] Ibid, p.82.
[39] Op. Cit., Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica*, p.15.

deconstructive text that determines to make evident the material realities of these ideals by removing their masks of deception. Hence, individualism breeds deceit and terror rather than success and glorification.

By 1987, advocates of Reagan's supply-side economics were forced to confront its limitations, its detractors arguing that the emphasis on individualism and government deregulation meant a return to dog-eat-dog and survival-of-the-fittest dynamics. *Raising Arizona* is set during the decline of Reaganite America and is concerned with the urge to dream the American Dream while being trampled by an unforgiving and uncharitable social system. The narrative trajectory of *Raising Arizona* is determined by H.I. and Ed's inability to conceive or adopt a child and Mottram declares that the Coens "underpin the film with an anti-Reagan sentiment that suggests [their] childlessness was maintained as much by economic, as biological, factors."[40] And this observation recognises the two most significant topics in *Raising Arizona*: the first is the economic problems that affect the characters in the film, and the second is the conception and importance of family in 1980s American society. Joel and Ethan Coen's film is about the contradictions and untruths at the heart of the American Dream, but it also engages with derivative issues in Reagan's America: the New Right and family values.

Raising Arizona's narrative of a small-time crook and his policewoman wife striving to start a family in 1980s America offered substantial opportunity for a satirical investigation of the traditional approach to family and morality established by the New Right. The New Right was a political lobby that favoured conservative values cutting across the spectrum of cultural issues:

> What gave the movement coherence was a "politics of return," the combined call to return to pre-New Deal, pre-social welfare economics (with its faith in the free market), to the traditional, male-supremacists family (in which children were disciplined and women subservient to men), to fundamentalists religious values (especially as allied with the "right-to-life" movement and with an eschatology that

> equated the Second Coming with the destruction of the Soviet antichrist), and to a time when the United States was the most powerful military nation on earth.[41]

Raising Arizona forecasts its interest in satirising the New Right in the prologue sequence in which a portrait of former Arizona Senator and one-time Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater appears on the parole-board office wall. Goldwater had a profound effect on the Reagan presidency; he was responsible for marshalling the ideological forces that would characterise the great shift in national political power that occurred with Reagan's inauguration. The New Right is represented in several ways in *Raising Arizona*, particularly in the desire Ed and H.I. have for producing a child to complete their family. But it is also present in the depiction of a land devoid of security, welfare systems and hope, and filled with opportunism, individualism and rampant greed.

Leonard Smalls, the leather-clad biker who haunts H.I.'s dreams, explains the rationalist approach to economics that characterises the world of *Raising Arizona* when he haggles for a fair price for the return of Nathan Arizona's abducted baby. For Smalls it is market economics that determines the equitable compensation for his services. If someone was to offer more for the child, then it will be their request which is met. It is, according to Smalls, a matter of "simple economics." *Raising Arizona* details the problems for those who want to "stand up and fly straight" in Reagan's America, focussing directly on H.I.'s ambition to put his life of crime behind him and cash-in on the American Dream of family, job and home. But H.I.'s aspirations are frustrated, he believes, because of that "son-of-a-bitch Reagan in the White House." *Raising Arizona* examines the idea that no one associated with supply-side economics had any idea in the least just what effect it would have on the lower classes. The theory was that by "rewarding the wealthy, by redistributing the wealth, by encouraging risk takers through tax breaks and incentives, they would in the end benefit everyone in society."[42] The incantation that the Republicans favoured in justifying this inequitable social

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[40] Op. Cit., James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, p.48.
[41] Op. Cit., Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica*, p.11.
[42] Op. Cit., Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years*, p.111.

system was that a rising tide lifts all boats. However, H.I. and Ed are not being elevated by this tide, but drowning as its waters envelop them without pity. The social conditions of this America prove too difficult for H.I. to contend with, the Coens piercingly criticising the administration's hard-heartedness.

Although *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is set during the economic depression of the 1930s it has less in common with the political and social interrogation that takes place in *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona*. Nevertheless, it is a more overtly political text than either of these films simply because of the political campaign represented in the narrative. However, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is an historical film, being set in Depression-era Mississippi seems to suggest its "distance" from a contemporary context. But the Coen brothers' hayseed musical illustrates the thesis that a film will always be a representation of its time. Ira Bhaskar states that "[t]he 'powerful deep currents of culture' are indeed demonstrably palpable if we are sensitive enough and take the suggestions of Bakhtin and Barthes to read narrative as cultural signification."[43] And the politics presented in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are necessarily tied to the contemporary social and cultural issues that marked the end of the Twentieth Century. The Coen brothers' film details two candidates vying for the governorship of Mississippi: Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel and Homer Stokes. Stokes is represented as a bigoted hypocrite; the reform candidate in the election he also presides over Ku Klux Klan meetings. The image of Stokes—round glasses, snivelling visage and bald pate—in conjunction with his reactionary rhetoric recalls in a general way the persona of Kenneth Starr (Independent Counsel on the Whitewater investigation of President Bill Clinton). The analogy is complemented by the image of Pappy as a puffy, overweight hillbilly governor with the gift-of-the-gab and a proven way of harnessing his own popularity for political gain. Stokes is to Pappy, what Starr was to Clinton. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* adopts a cynical view of unscrupulous politicians, displaying contempt for venal politicos and their selfish motives. Pappy has no platform except to ensure his re-election. Tellingly, when Stokes' veil of civility is removed and he is exposed as a racist fraud and intolerant prude it is Pappy who pounces,

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[43] Ira Bhaskar, "'Historical Poetics,' Narrative, and Interpretation," *A Companion to Film Theory*, Eds. Robert Stam & Toby Miller, Blackwell, Malden, Mass., 1999, p.401.

announcing: "Goddamn, opportunity knocks!" Pappy alights the stage where the Soggy Bottom Boys have been playing and declares: "It looks like Homer Stokes is the kind of fella who wants to cast the first stone." That the election campaign should come down to issues of prejudice and intolerance suggests that this community has tired of public-lynchings and moral crusades based upon antiquated conservative values. That these kinds of attitudes were being reflected in the political climate of Washington at that very time is no surprise. Alan M. Dershowitz argues that Starr exacerbated a crisis in the constitutional stability of American politics "in his haste to turn a sexual encounter and cover-up into impeachable crimes."[44] Stokes, like Starr, seeks elevation through a similar exposition of a scandal, in this case a racial one, that merely serves to reveal his own bigotry. Stokes fails to convince the public and is ridden out of the hoedown on a rail.

The cultural relevance and social contextualisation of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is not merely represented in the allegory of a salacious topical affair in American politics. The Coen brothers' film details the intricacies of a 1930s gubernatorial campaign, focussing on the tactics and strategy of both candidates as they attempt to curry favour with the state's constituency. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* looks closely at the centrality of the media in political campaigning, focussing chiefly on issues of image and opportunism. At the commencement of the Twenty-First Century these factors were becoming increasingly integral to political success and civil achievement. Kellner describes politics in the modern era as:

> becoming a mode of spectacle in which the codes of media culture determine the form, style, and appearance of presidential politics, and party politics in turn becomes more cinematic and spectacular...US presidential politics of the past several decades can be perceived as media spectacles, in which media politics becomes a major constituent of presidential elections, governance, and political success or failure.[45]

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[44] Alan M. Dershowitz, *Sexual McCarthyism: Clinton, Starr, and the Emerging Constitutional Crisis*, Basic Books, New York, 1998, p.36.
[45] Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, Routledge, London & New York, 2003, p.160.

Pappy is the incumbent Governor of Mississippi and Stokes is his rival candidate; their campaigns provide a backdrop to the picaresque adventure of the film's heroes, Everett, Pete and Delmar. Significantly, it is not the politics of either candidate that achieves deliberate attention, but rather the effort each makes to sell himself to the electorate. Pappy relies on the power of mass communication to campaign for re-election. Stokes, on the other hand, travels in the back of a pick-up truck with a microphone and a loudspeaker. Mottram describes Stokes as an innovator in this context, "[h]is campaign truck, complete with midget, is out pounding the tarmac, foreshadowing the song-and-dance that accompanies any modern-day political rally in the States."[46] While certainly rustic and primitive, Stokes' techniques are effective both in transmitting his message in simple terms and of reaching his target audience. His campaign truck is viewed from the perspective of a farmer working in a field, the farmer's attention maintained by the spectacle. This is the incipient version of the spectacle politics that Kellner determines has matured at the end of the century where "presidencies in the United States are staged and presented to the public in cinematic terms, using media spectacle to sell the policies, person, and image of the president to a vast and diverse public."[47] Curiously, while Pappy has adopted a more advanced and sophisticated means of reaching the people—radio broadcasts, or "mass-commincatin'" as he puts it—he is trailing in the polls and in danger of losing his governorship. Pappy acknowledges the importance of perception in electioneering, stating: "That's the goddamn problem, right there. People think this Stokes has got fresh ideas. He's *au courant* and we're the past." Pappy's campaign suffers because it lacks imagination and showmanship, his advisers and campaign team are ineffectual and witless, their ideas merely rehashes of what they have seen Stokes pull-off – one adviser even suggesting they market incumbent Pappy as the candidate for reform!

In the modern-age of a media culture that defines itself by consumption, image, appearance and the need to sell oneself, an increasing reliance has been placed on the use of media handlers, focus groups and pollsters to achieve

[46] Op. Cit., James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, p.159.
[47] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, p.160.

political success. Importantly, Stokes is characterised as a racist goon with a supreme lack of tact and charisma. The success of his campaigning is attributed to Vernon T. Waldrip (Ray McKinnon), a sophisticated electioneering manager with a highly evolved campaign strategy. Waldrip is the suitor to Penny and the rival to Everett. He is "bona-fide" according to Penny, his work in her eyes is respectable and secure. It is telling, then, that his job is to build an illusion around a gubernatorial candidate—to sell him to an unsuspecting constituency—despite his knowledge that Stokes is also a Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon. Eventually Stokes is exposed for the fraud he is and his bigoted attitudes are broadcast for everyone to hear, and Waldrip's advice only casts Stokes deeper into the mire. Stokes' KKK rhetoric and political speeches associate his politics to extremist racism, mirroring the morality of modern-day politicians and the ever present scandal that implicates many of them in compromising positions. Kellner suggests that the "blending of information and entertainment in the media culture during the Clinton years, the fierce competition for audiences, and the rise of the Internet and cyberculture all made for a volatile media mix and feeding frenzy that exploited the topic or scandal of the day."[48] It seems, for Stokes, the publicity that he sought so greedily as he canvassed the electorate proves to be his downfall. Stokes mixes his private prejudices with his public persona as he accuses the Soggy Bottom Boys of being miscegenated, integrated and implicates its members in the desecration of a Klan rally ritual. His misjudgment of the public's reaction characterises the volatile nature of spectacle politics and the importance of image maintenance in the modern age of information.

Despite these significant political subtexts in the films of the Coen brothers, such readings are often received with scepticism. Paul Watson makes the extraordinary claim that cinema and politics bear no relation, suggesting they do not entertain any specific, identifiable and socially important discourse with each other. For Watson, the critic who applies a political reading is in danger of simply applying a ready-made hypothesis on a text which invites no such analysis: "In effect this reduces cinematic representation to the protocols of interpretative logic: instead of using films to generate political criticism, criticism is used to generate

[48] Ibid, p.171.

the politics of films."[49] Watson's perspective renders redundant any interpretation of *Blood Simple* as a critique of the entrepreneurial spirit endemic to America capitalism, *Raising Arizona* as political satire, or *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* as explicating a crisis in democracy.

Similarly, David J. Rothman decries the idea of decoding politics, society and culture in film, suggesting that scholars are too ready to attribute social and cultural codes to representations without any empirical evidence. Rothman declares:

> to understand art, most poststructuralists argue that we must study the culture that produced it. In this view, art has no imaginative realm of its own but is utterly determined by political and cultural forces, which are most commonly understood in the American academy today to be race, class, and gender.[50]

Rothman's pessimistic view of cultural studies reflects a narrow conception of interrogations into the political and social implications of film texts. The aim of a cultural approach to film is not to ignore all other critical avenues to understanding film, nor to rely *only* on a contextualist approach to studying film, but to, at the very minimum, *acknowledge* the part culture plays in the production and reception of cinema texts.

Rothman's argument implicitly celebrates the "imaginative" component of art. This is significant because the films of Joel and Ethan Coen often employ imaginative schemes that seek to distance the texts from both reality and political inquiry. The Coen brothers favour artificial styles and framing devices which place their films at one remove from the real world. *The Man Who Wasn't There* takes place in a highly stylised *film noir* universe; *The Hudsucker Proxy* is set in a fantasy land of corporate high rises and beatnik bars that owes more to Preston

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[49] Paul Watson, "American cinema, political criticism and pragmatism: a therapeutic reading of *Fight Club* and *Magnolia*," *American film and politics from Reagan to Bush Jr*, Eds. Philip John Davies & Paul Wells, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2002, pp.25 & 37.

Sturges and Frank Capra than any "real" place; and *Miller's Crossing* reimagines a Dashiell Hammett book that was never written. These films are set within worlds of pure construction and artifice. Therefore it may seem easily argued that the contexts of the Coens' films are unimportant. It may also suggest that the films of the Coen brothers are politically neutral, ideologically irrelevant and socially insignificant. Yet despite their attachment to quotation marks, the Coen brothers do make films that reflect their contexts as well as exhibiting substantial political and social inquiry.

Gender and Family

> *What'm I talkin' 'bout?! I'm talkin' 'bout sex, boy! What the hell're you talkin' 'bout?! I'm talkin' 'bout, "L'amour"! I'm talkin' me'n Dot are swingers! As in "to swing"! I'm talkin' 'bout Wife-swappin'! I'm talkin' 'bout what they call nowadays: "open marriage"!* Glen (Sam McMurray) *Raising Arizona.*

The key domestic policy of the Reagan Administration was the family. The role of women in society and the reliance on family values were key initiatives of the New Right. Joel and Ethan Coen's 1980s films highlight many of the contradictions of the social policies of the Reagan Administration. These problems are tied up in the heavy emphasis that Reagan placed on values of individualism:

> Rather than looking towards collective ways of solving social problems—caring for the old or the sick, educating the young—the new right and its successors have placed their faith in the power of individuals and their families to identify, plan for and act upon the difficulties that face them.[51]

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[50] David J. Rothman, "Appendix A: The Poverty of Film Theory," *Hollywood's America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures*, Stephen Powers, David J. Rothman & Stanley Rothman, Westiew, Boulder, 1996, p.224.
[51] Nicole Matthews, *Comic Politics: Gender in Hollywood comedy after the new right*, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2000, p.10.

These issues find particular representation in *Raising Arizona* and its depiction of family life, female characters and gender relations. The analysis of family and gender are critical to the cultural studies of cinematic texts. Such a focus assists in determining definitions of "femininity" and "masculinity" during specific historical moments. Barbara Klinger asserts that "[i]n any era, representations of gender and sexuality respond to...social developments and discourses as they attempt to establish standards of deviant and normal sexuality and appropriate sex roles"[52] These topics are prominent in the films of the Coen brothers, particularly in the way *Raising Arizona* depicts the quest for a specific family image in Reagan's America and also, in how *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* interrogates the institution of marriage.

Where *Blood Simple* has been described as an anti-American film, *Raising Arizona* might be best described as an anti-New Right film. This text calls into question the logic of Reagan's policies on welfare and family, challenging the ideology that sustained these policies. Ideology is a rhetoric that bids to seduce individuals into empathising with the governing system of values, beliefs and behaviour. And this notion of rhetorical instruction is hinted at in H.I. and Ed's decision to start a family. After the recently-married couple has settled down in their home in suburban Tempe and have enjoyed the "salad days" that newlyweds are afforded, H.I. declares: "Ed felt that having a critter was the next logical step. It was all she thought about." For H.I. and Ed, their decision to bring a child into the world is based upon logic. Kellner's notion of ideology suggests it "presents historically constructed conditions as natural, as common sense and the way things are."[53] Significantly, the Coens do not merely challenge the logic of the couple's desire for a child, they also align its fulfilment with an horrific crime. H.I. and Ed are desperate to fulfil their ambition to have a child and be a family and their desperation evolves into recklessness when they steal a baby – the desire for common sense normalcy overwhelming ethics and morality. H.I. and Ed's version of familial success has at its foundation an abducted child, identifying the

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[52] Barbara Klinger, "Film History terminable and interminable: recording the past in reception studies," *Screen*, 38.2, Summer, 1997, pp.121 & 122.
[53] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, p.112.

overriding ethical incongruities that Joel and Ethan Coen discover in the American psychological landscape.

Family permeates all areas of life and social relations in *Raising Arizona*. H.I. and Ed's desire to add a child to their family is based solely upon conformity. This longing for conformity is criticised in the Coens' film and the fundamental mythical institution of the American Dream is questioned and eventually condemned. Joel and Ethan Coen satirise the common sense assumption that family ideals are a natural solution to social problems. Familial success is reflected in class dynamics, H.I. even describing his own lack of a child and Nathan Arizona's bountiful brood in a curiously aphoristic term: "But we thought it was unfair that some should have so many while others should have so few." Arizona is already a highly successful businessman, his prosperity is further validated by his fertility: a biological legitimation of Reaganomics. H.I. notes that Florence Arizona (Lynne Dumin Kitei) had been taking fertility pills, "and she and Nathan had hit the jackpot." That H.I. should describe the Arizona's successful child-making in economic terms emphasises the contention that class and social position play a prominent role in conforming to the ideals of Reagan's America.

Raising Arizona's focus on the centrality of the family in Reagan's America is reflected in several other cinematic texts of the time. This baby/family film *zeitgeist* is evident in a collection of texts mawkishly exploring the longing for a child and the promise of happiness brought about by family values. *Baby Boom* (Shyer, 1987), *Three Men and Baby* (Nimoy, 1987), *For Keeps* (Avildsen, 1988) and *Look Who's Talking* (Heckerling, 1989) each explore themes of family and child-rearing in late 1980s America. Interestingly, Ryan and Kellner contend that "family films become noticeably more popular at the same time as do fantasy adventures and romance films, a time when Americans' loss of confidence in the economy and in politics probably reached its nadir."[54] But where these films seek to comfort the masses as they suffer through the misery of an economic downturn and political crises, *Raising Arizona* offers little succour. For Ulrich Kriest *Raising Arizona* "stands out like an alien body in the midst of this trend because

the child-wish appears as a clear sign of heterenomous consciousness and because babies are treated as a consumer product that is in very short supply."[55] With *Raising Arizona* the Coens are not facing the contradictions and failures of Reagan's policies head on. Nathan Jr., the baby that H.I. abducts from the Arizona household, becomes a symbol of the potential for familial happiness for several characters, but tellingly this potential is never truly realised. As soon as he is introduced to H.I. and Ed's home (and he is literally introduced, H.I. welcoming Nathan Jr. with a vivid description of his mobile-home's various amenities) their lives quickly spiral out of control. H.I.'s prison buddies Gale and Evelle later abduct Nathan Jr. for themselves, though the responsibility of looking after a child acutely disrupts their incipient crime-spree. Even Glen and Dot hope to add Nathan Jr. to their dysfunctional family, Dot's children having grown "too big to cuddle." Where babies are a liberating solution to the chaotic lives of characters in films like *Baby Boom*, they are represented as deleterious to the ill-prepared characters of *Raising Arizona*.

Baby Boom explicitly plays out the fundamental conflict between family and economic success. Some films of the 1980s presented family ideals as a solution to social failure, while others depicted the responsibilities of family life as repressing individual autonomy and as an obstacle to the full development of personal liberty and prosperity. In the latter instance the encumbrance of dependants is viewed as frustrating entry into the economic sphere which is represented as an alternative world of abundance and opportunity. In John Hughes' *She's Having a Baby* (1988) the conflicting attitude to family is explored as Jefferson Briggs (Kevin Bacon) seeks out a life of prosperity and reward, while looking cynically at the traditional images of family that surround him. It is not until his wife almost dies in child birth that a shift is registered in his priorities, encouraging Jefferson to embrace the promised serenity of fatherhood and family life. Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith observe that the economic depression that followed the initial success of Reagan's administration undermined the kinds of narratives that valorised individual success and independence, reversing "this

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[54] Op. Cit., Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica*, p.165.
[55] Ulrich Kriest, "*Raising Arizona*," *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Eds. Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen, Translated by Rory Mulholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001, p.69.

polarity so that, far from being stigmatised, families become screens for American-ness, and it is the public sphere that screens the oppressive and atomising effects of capitalism."[56] Interestingly, *Raising Arizona* presents a subversion of both tendencies—individual prosperity and family success—by highlighting the ethical contradictions in each. Joel and Ethan Coen's film is a satirical treatment of the post-boom film as family becomes the ideal accessory to enter the privileged world of normalcy and conformity in America. But H.I. and Ed access the common sense of family through the criminal act of abduction. Once the family is established it immediately represses H.I.'s lifestyle and he feels the pressure of family life. Where family responsibilities represent an obstacle toward achievement and prosperity in other more ideologically typical texts, for H.I. his family life is brought into direct conflict with his desire to rob convenience stores. Which ever way H.I. turns—toward family life, or toward his natural inclination to earn a living—he is on the wrong side of the law. This perverse dynamic comes to a head when, desperate for cash but even more desperate for his own identity, H.I. sticks-up the local Short Stop store while purchasing a packet of Huggies as Ed and the baby wait in the car.

When Ed witnesses H.I.'s misbehaviour from her position in the car, she drives away, leaving him to fend for himself as police cruisers arrive at the store. Shortly, she hears gunfire, and pangs of pity and feelings of remorse compel her to return and rescue H.I.. When she does, the couple have a spirited argument that brings many of the conflicts of family responsibility and natural inclinations under scrutiny. Ed censures H.I. for jeopardising the baby and endangering the family, declaring: "I'm not gonna live this way, H.I.. It just ain't family life!" H.I. responds: "Well, it ain't Ozzie and Harriet." That H.I. should construct his symbolic ideal family in an image of nostalgic popular culture—*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, a radio show and then long running television program during the 1950s—speaks not only of the manifestation of ideology in general, but also of the manner by which common sense was fostered in the Reagan era. Alan Nadel describes the Reaganite 1980s as:

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[56] Jude Davies & Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film*, Keele University Press, Edinburgh, 1997, p.24.

> a culture full of people looking up, just as they do in movie theaters, physically and socially, chronically weighing themselves on a set of invisible scales, taking their own measure, looking for ways to prove to themselves that they have "improved." But tellingly, their mode of proof, like the "proof" they see on a screen, is completely external, based less on logic than on narrative, less on criteria than on display.[57]

And Reagan administered the United States like an actor, drawing on the roles he played in the past to inform his attitudes and decisions in the present. The contradictions that challenge H.I.'s quest for stability, family and conformity are entrenched in the policies of his president. Jeffords determines that "Reagan himself stood paradoxically for continuity *and* change, continuing images and narratives of earlier decades at the same time that he lobbied for immediate change from a Democratic leadership and a social service agenda."[58] It is this paradox which is seen to be at work in the world of *Raising Arizona* as H.I.'s aspirations, based upon ideals set out by Reagan and the New Right, are rendered unattainable because of the severance of crucial welfare programs and the overhaul of social support systems, also endorsed by Reagan and his supporters. The ideological conception H.I. has of the "perfect" family is utterly absurd in his circumstances and the Coen brothers present its suitability as highly questionable.

The notion that families were encouraged to attain nostalgic, though often unrealisable, ideals purloined from the recesses of popular culture is a theme of many films of the 1980s and is evident in the series of "Vacation" movies depicting the inglorious adventures of the Griswold family. In this cycle of films, Clark Griswold (Chevy Chase) is the hapless patriarch of a middle-class American family with whom he attempts, in vain, to manufacture perfect family events: a cross-country vacation (*National Lampoon's Vacation* [Ramis, 1983]), international travel (*National Lampoon's European Vacation* [Heckerling, 1985]) and a Christmas celebration (*National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* [Chechik,

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[57] Alan Nadel, *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America*, Rutgers, New Brunswick, N.J. & London, 1997, p.3.
[58] Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J., 1993, p.89.

1989].[59] The plot of each film deals with the myriad ways in which the buffoonish Clark manages to sabotage his own best laid plans, ensuring the desired event fails to transpire. Like H.I., Clark finds images of perfection in the popular cultural forms of a bygone era or in nostalgic reminiscences. In *National Lampoon's Vacation*, Clark confides to his son, Rusty (Anthony Michael Hall), that all he wants is to give his young boy the same kind of experience his own father gave him many years before. And in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, Clark is determined to execute the perfect family celebration, seeking to replicate all the expected elements of a "typical" Christmas: a lavish lighting scheme decorating the house, a reading of "The Night Before Christmas," and an authentic Christmas tree complete with excessive ornamentation. Nadel notes that "Clark is trying to create the sort of American family Christmas represented in countless 1950s television shows."[60] And when, after a series of blunders and disasters, Clark has a breakdown which devolves into a psychotic rant, the fictional ideals that inspire his conception of a Christmas celebration are revealed:

> Nobody's walking out on this fun, old-fashioned family Christmas. No, no! We're all in this together. This is a full-blown, four-alarm holiday emergency here! We're gonna press on, and we're gonna have the hap, hap, happiest Christmas since Bing Crosby tap-danced with Danny fucking Kaye!

Clark's vision of a perfect yule-tide celebration is not drawn from tradition but from a film: the Danny Kaye and Bing Crosby vehicle *White Christmas* (Curtiz, 1954). Unlike H.I., Clark will never realise that the image he desires is mere fantasy and that his dream will never materialise into reality.

In *Raising Arizona*, the Coen brothers hint at H.I.'s impending identity crisis almost as soon as he has abducted little Nathan Jr.. Interestingly, it is not a moral crisis; H.I. does not register any kind of anxious dilemma as a result of stealing a child. Rather, the pressure of fatherhood immediately begins to take its

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[59] A fourth film of the cycle, *Vegas Vacation* (Kessler, 1997), continues the series but at nearly a decade after *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* it does not replicate many of the recurrent issues shared throughout the prior three films.
[60] Op. Cit., Alan Nadel, *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams*, p.151.

toll. Shortly after returning to the trailer-home H.I. proposes to Ed that they preserve the moment with a photograph and the two sit on the divan, bracketing Nathan Jr.. While the timer on the camera counts down, Ed confesses her apprehension: "I gotta tell ya, I'm a little scared...we got a baby, H.I.. It's an awful big responsibility...I mean we never done this before and I'm kinda nervous." But it is H.I. who betrays the fear and anxiety that lays ahead as he attempts to affect a suitable smile for the camera, his visage seemingly more attuned to a man under sentence of death. When he curtly advises Ed: "We're set to pop here, honey," he is referring to the camera's automatic timer but he may as well be talking about the accruing tension that will almost destroy their marriage. Later, the Coens use Glen and Dot's dysfunctional family to externalise H.I.'s apprehension. H.I. watches as Glen's monstrous kids destroy his home by writing on the walls, breaking precious objects, vandalising his station-wagon and other assorted acts of anarchy. Then Glen insipidly relates a weak joke which inspires no reaction from H.I.. When Glen asks: "Shit, man, loosen up. Don't you get it?" H.I.'s answer: "No Glen, I sure don't," is clearly intended to be his response to Glen, Glen's family, and the prospect of a future surrounded by this kind of chaos and disorder. H.I. reveals his fears to Glen a short while later, confiding that family life is not exactly what he expected. Glen is sympathetic and proposes to H.I. that they engage in a bout of wife-swapping. The suggestion is met with a swift response from H.I., resulting in a broken nose for Glen.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? takes a different approach to the issue of the family: no longer is it an idyllic object of aspiration, now it is an object for repossession. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* details the reunion of Everett with Penny and his restoration at the head of the family as the proverbial paterfamilias. Unlike H.I., Everett is a prolific father and his family is stable and secure. However, Everett is in prison and not at the head of the table, which he believes is his rightful place. His problem is that he is not bona fide and his paternal tenancy is being contested by Vernon Waldrip. The Coen brothers immediately cue the audience's sympathies; handsome and charming George Clooney gives Everett an infectious congeniality whereas Waldrip is a thin, weedy, pursed-lipped, goofy-looking character inviting no such empathy or warmth. For Everett, his legitimacy as the head of the family is based solely upon his biological relationship with his

children and the conventional wisdom that suggests as father, and (former) husband, his right to that position is guaranteed. Penny declares that, unlike Waldrip, Everett is an unfit father: "Vernon here's got a job. Vernon's got prospects. He's bona fide." Everett's simple response is "I'm the paterfamilias." Everett's blind faith in paternity endorsed by his simple application of the theory that as the father he is the centre-piece of the family, works to critically deconstruct the naturalising of patriarchal power. Everett's reliance on a rhetorical argument—"I'm the only damn daddy you got! I'm the damn paterfamilias!"—mirrors the kind of rhetorical exercises that Ryan and Kellner cite as indicative of several films of the late 1970s and 1980s (*Ordinary People* [Redford, 1980] and *Kramer v Kramer* [Benton, 1979]) that demonised mothers and glorified fathers.[61] In other films like *Three Men and a Baby* and *Parenthood* (Howard, 1989) women are mostly absent or in the background, and when they do appear they often serve to merely reflect and enhance the glories of paternity. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* satirises this ideological thesis by initially focussing on Everett's quest to repossess his family unit, but then allowing Penny to actively challenge his position as patriarch by determining that his paternal credentials are inadequate to her and her daughters.

Ed, in *Raising Arizona*, shares much in common with Penny. Unlike the older women of *Raising Arizona*—Florence Arizona and the female representative on the parole board, who rarely speak—Ed is forthright and resolute, and she shares an outspoken relationship with her husband. H.I. is compelled to apologise to his prison buddies (whom Ed has ejected from the trailer-home) confiding: "When Ed gets mad...you know, she gets an idea." Ed's authority in the relationship is reprised in Penny's dominance over Everett, in which all she needs to do is "count to three" to demonstrate her obstinance. When she demands that she will only remarry Everett with her original wedding ring she explains that her decision is beyond debate: "I have spoken my piece and counted to three." Ellen Cheshire and John Ashbrook sense a common theme that demonstrates the gender politics of these relationships, implying that both Everett and H.I. are brow-beaten spouses. They illustrate just how mixed-up Ed's morality is as she finally ends up

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[61] Op. Cit., Michael Ryan & Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica*, pp.157-60.

blaming H.I. for all the indiscretions they have shared throughout the film.[62] And on *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Cheshire and Ashbrook suggest that Penny and Everett are totally incompatible: "[h]e is (generally) a thoughtful, reasoning man but she is reactionary and obsessive...[Penny] has a much more American attitude towards money."[63] Penny represents a natural progression from Ed, a woman obsessed with conformity. She is concerned with society's expectations of her as a exemplary mother and is driven by the prospect of money and status. Penny and Ed are intriguingly similar conceptions, females who seem primarily concerned with the pressures and ideals of their cultural milieu. In both cases these women are the guiding influence in their husbands' lives, providing them with the impetus to seek out the rewards of the American Dream.

That the Coen brothers are satisfied in imbuing their female protagonists with these disagreeable ambitions is problematic; their linking of femininity with narrow-minded conservative ideals is potentially misogynistic. Yet, there are several moments in their films in which such tendencies are subtly subverted. The Coen brothers regularly parody the conventions of mainstream narratives by undercutting typical moments with humour and satire. One such moment, in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, effectively demonstrates this thesis by parodying the convention of the hero who wins back the fair maiden so typical of mainstream cinema. Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella and D. Charles Whitney illustrate this convention as follows:

> Similarly, in most narratives—at least until recently—it is the male characters who define the action of the story, although it is often the woman who, as an object of desire, makes the story move. The hero sets out to win, to rescue the woman, or to find some objects required to win or save the woman. The woman is rarely allowed to speak. If a strong woman character threatens to disrupt the masculine universe of

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[62] Ellen Cheshire & John Ashbrook, *Joel and Ethan Coen: The Pocket Essential*, Second Edition, Pocket Essentials, Harpenden, 2002, p.23.
[63] Ibid, p.78.

> the story, she will almost inevitably be subdued in the end, by either death or marriage.[64]

This conventional narrative paradigm is evident in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in which Everett travels "many a weary mile" in order to reclaim his paternal rights. And Everett not only has to overcome obstacles on his journey but must also face a recalcitrant ex-wife. Penny's adoption of her maiden name represents a reinforcement of the independence she acquires when she divorces Everett. It becomes a symbol of the chasm that Everett must cross in order to repossess her. However, when the newly reunited couple leave the concert Penny makes a reconciliatory gesture. Delmar inquires: "Is the marriage off then Miss Wharvey?" (referring to her planned betrothal to Waldrip); to which Penny responds: "McGill. No the marriage will take place as planned." Penny corrects Delmar, reclaims her married name and also indicates her intention to remarry Everett. The gesture bears a striking resemblance to the coda of *Die Hard*. In that film, John McClane's wife, Holly Gennero (Bonnie Bedelia), consecrates her salvation with the reclamation of her married name. This comes after her formerly estranged husband has saved a building of hostages, including herself, from a gang of foreign criminals posing as international terrorists. Jeffords writes of this scene: "Throwing any remaining feminist sentiments aside, and offering a resounding victory for the New Right/Reagan definition of family, Holly corrects him, 'Holly McClane'."[65] Here the narrative convention and the social sentiment merge to endorse the position of the woman in the male narrative as a trophy to be won and repossessed at the conclusion. Significantly, both *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Die Hard* follow the pattern outlined by Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney. Yet, the ending to the Coen brothers' film is not so clear-cut as the conclusion suggested in this narrative pattern. At the conclusion of *Die Hard* the reunion of McClane and his wife is unproblematic and certain, they literally walk-off together arm in arm, their marriage saved, the trophy won and the subjugation sealed with a kiss. Yet, at the end of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* everything is far from settled and the marriage that promises to subdue Penny remains out of reach.

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[64] Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella & D. Charles Whitney, *Media Making: Mass Media in a popular culture*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1998, p.229.
[65] Op. Cit., Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, p.61.

The Coen brothers give Penny the final word and, like the culmination to *Raising Arizona*, the conclusion remains open-ended. Penny has refused to remarry without her original wedding ring and Everett's belated attempt to retrieve it proves fruitless. Penny has said her piece and counted to three and the marriage remains unconfirmed, Everett's task incomplete and his trophy un-won. The happy end that is promised by the typical narrative is frustrated and the convention is thwarted in this inexorable postponement.

The ending of *Raising Arizona* follows a similar pattern to that observed in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, with Ed and H.I.'s future happiness far from assured. Yet, their marriage is represented as far more appealing than the other marriages in the film, and Ed is presented as a moderate compromise between the hyper Dot and the subdued Florence Arizona. Other than Ed, these two characters are the only sustained visions of motherhood in *Raising Arizona*. Florence is presented as the dutiful wife to gruff Nathan Arizona; she is not afforded a voice in the film, nor in her relationship. Dot, on the other hand, dominates her husband, regularly berates her children and covets little Nathan Jr., describing him as an angel straight from heaven. Dot superficially represents normal motherhood, instructing Ed on the fineries of raising a child – vaccinations, bank accounts, impending orthodonture and college applications. Yet, her maternal responsibility is extended to outlandish proportions with McDormand delivering her advice with an urgent hysteria totally incompatible with the circumstances (H.I. and Ed only having "received" the baby a few days earlier). Dot is a crazed version of the rational mother. While advising Ed of every contingency in raising a child she exhibits the worst kind of mothering skills, repeatedly scolding her terrible children. Her dysfunctional relationship with her husband and deviant sexual practices suggest that she is not the repository of order and reason that is common in contemporary cultural images of motherhood.

The unorthodox gender positioning in *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* suggests a deeper issue of femininity and masculinity in the family dynamics being represented. Films such as *Three Men and a Baby*, *Parenthood* and *Look Who's Talking* represent dads combining the roles of mother and father, explicitly feminising the patriarchal position. Davies and Smith

argue "the emphasis on paternity, and the proliferation of representations of white males as fathers in films from the late 1980s on, often function as relatively new strategies for reproducing white patriarchal hegemony by annexing personal qualities hitherto typed as 'feminine'."[66] The ideological role of the father is explicitly examined in *Raising Arizona*, specifically in the dilemmas that face H.I. after a child is introduced to his previously "rambunctious" lifestyle. Shortly after H.I. has endangered his wife and child in the course of sticking-up the convenience store, Ed chastises him for his actions. But H.I. responds with a curious explanation that foregrounds the issue of masculinity: "Well Nathan Jr. accepts me for what I am and I think you better had, too. You know, honey, I'm okay you're okay? That-there's what it is...See I come from a long line of frontiersmen and...outdoor types." For H.I. his incompatibility as a father, or typical father rather, is predicated on being a man, and exhibiting the kinds of tendencies associated with masculinity. Where Matthews contends that there might be "something quite subversive about underlining men's status as gendered beings, rather than the universal, apparently ungendered central figures of much of mainstream culture,"[67] it might be more accurate to suggest that there is a subversive agenda when this issue is exposed as a construction of ideological domination.

The obsession with masculinity in many of the films of the late 1980s suggests a translation of broader social articulations around the issue of America and its foreign policy, and the internal responses of the emergence of feminism. The Coen brothers present H.I.'s spurious imputation of heredity in his behaviour as a convenient excuse that challenges the common sense of masculinity. Jeffords notes that this notion of masculinity is propagated in the "hard body" action film heroes redolent during the Reagan years: "And because Rambo is consistently depicted as strong, aggressive, and powerful, these films conclude, he can be nothing other than a 'real man'."[68] Yet, while H.I. suggests aspirations to this masculine ideal as his interpretation of his lineage suggests, he fails to physically replicate this conception of the hard body, even his revolver is unloaded.

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[66] Op. Cit., Jude Davies & Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film*, p.18.
[67] Op. Cit., Nicole Matthews, *Comic Politics*, p.100.
[68] Op. Cit., Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, p.36.

Curiously the only time he does load his gun occurs when he sets out to save Nathan Jr. from the Snopes brothers, declaring that he aims to now act responsibly, at the very same moment he is cocking a shotgun. By making the central male characters of *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* such ridiculous boobs, Joel and Ethan Coen undermine many of the assumptions that are associated with such roles. Everett is presented as the unworthy benefactor of Penny's affections and his children's esteem, while H.I. is depicted as a hopelessly inept father and irresponsible husband. While the women in these films are not sympathetic, the males, too, fail to inspire confidence or veneration.

Ethnicity, Race and Class in America

> *Brothers! Oh brothers! We are forgathered here to preserve our hallowed culture and heritage from intrusion, inclusion and dilution, of colour, of creed, and of our old-time religion. We aim to pull evil up by the root before it chokes out the flower of our culture and heritage.* Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall) *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*.

> *Hegemony thus works by exclusion and marginalization, as much as by affirming specific ideological positions.* Douglas Kellner[69]

At first glance *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* seem to be ethnically detached, set within environments dominated by classless white societies. Yet, as Ella Shohat points out, "[c]inematic space, far from being ethnically neutral, is the subliminal site of competing ethnic and racial discourses." She contends that elements such as speech, looks, make-up, costume, décor, music and dance, and locale are all indicative of a set of cultural codes.[70] In the case of the "Hayseed Trilogy" the Coen brothers utilise a series of codes that stand for Southern culture. Visser's costume and speech in *Blood Simple* identify him as the archetypal Texan cowboy, even where his morality runs counter to this program. H.I.'s extravagant shirts, outrageous facial hair (an aspect also satirised

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[69] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, p.114.
[70] Ella Shohat, "Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema," *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, Ed. Lester D. Friedman, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991, p.218.

in *Joe Dirt* [Gordon, 2001] where the hero confirms his facial hair will only grow in a "white-trash" fashion), loquacious expression and homey attitudes in *Raising Arizona* speak directly of redneck America. And, in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Pappy's bleached suits, cantankerous disposition and authentic Dixie dialect depict the classical Southerner politician. Common throughout these cultural representations is an emphasis on language; the Coen brothers' focus on distinctively regional dialogue places the narratives within keenly defined ethnic, racial and social environments.

While the monologue that commences *Blood Simple* is the primary cue to Visser's ethnic characterisation (he rambles with a drawling Texan twang) his initial appearance in cowboy boots and Stetson hat confirm his identity. The use of costume in *Blood Simple* is integral to establishing character. Julian Marty, a Greek-American, wears clothes that combine his heritage with his adopted nationality: that nationality being Texan, as opposed to American. The first glimpse of Marty initially focusses closely on a pair of red cowboy boots, Visser then places his alabaster Stetson on the desk. The image is rich in Texan iconicity, supported by the honky-tonk music that plays in the bar next-door. The camera then slowly reveals Marty's body from behind, the pinky ring he wears on his right hand drawing attention. An edit then reveals Marty front-on, his thin black hair slicked back and his dark features emphasised by the shadows of the lighting scheme. Marty wears a European-cut shirt that is opened wide at the collars revealing a thick mat of chest hair. The multicultural imagery conflicts with the iconic representation from the preceding shots. Marty's European heritage is also implicitly revealed in his recitation of a proverb of Greek lore. Marty explains to Visser how he, as a bearer of bad news, would be beheaded in Greece. Visser's response is delivered in his typically hissing tone: "Well, first off, Julian, I don't know what the story is in Greece, but in this state we've got very definite laws about that."

Visser and Marty may be ethnically different, but they share the same racial typology. Meurice (Samm-Art Williams) is the only character of a different race to the "white" characters in *Blood Simple*. Ray, Abby, Marty and Visser are identifiably white, and also detectably Texan, though their heritage is a matter of

ambiguity; but Meurice is an outsider simply because of his physical appearance. Robyn Wiegman explains:

> Where ethnicity provides the means for differentiations based on culture, language, and national origins, race renders the reduction of human differences to innate, biological phenomena, phenomena that circulate culturally as the visible ledger for defining and justifying economic and political hierarchies between white and non-white groups.[71]

Meurice is a fascinating character in this Texan community, and a largely atypical representation of a black person in American film. Meurice is depicted as a slick and sophisticated Northerner who sees himself as superior to the Texan clientele to whom he tends bar. At one point, in the original cut of *Blood Simple*,[72] Meurice explains to a bemused bar patron that Friday night is "Yankee-night" and that it is his turn to program the jukebox: "I'm from Detroit. See, that's a big city up north, with big, tall buildings." Meurice rolls his eyes as the Texan lubber fails to recognise the sarcasm in the ridiculous statement. Interestingly, Meurice is dressed all in white, his clothes are the casual wear of a city-type, his windcheater proclaiming in proud letters – "I visited Carlsbad." The shirt's slogan further defines the character of Meurice as more sophisticated and worldly than the folks in the bar. Later, while chatting with an attractive blonde woman, Meurice explains his "ring of fire" theory, a system for harnessing the energy of exploding volcanoes. This representation of a black character in *Blood Simple* operates in several ways to threaten the essentialist notion of the black experience as definitely urban, ghetto-concentrated and victimised. Mary Ellison makes a similar point of Morgan Freeman's portrayal of Detective Somerset in *Se7en* (Fincher, 1995), noting how his wisdom, intellect and control contrast with his white associates.[73] Meurice as a black man in a Southern community is a

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[71] Robyn Wiegman, "Race, Ethnicity, and Film," *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Eds. John Hill & Pamela Church Gibson, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p.161.
[72] *Blood Simple* was re-released in 1998 with a quirky subtitle: "Forever Young." The re-release had a number of scenes shortened, or excised altogether.
[73] Mary Ellison, "Ambiguity and anger: representations of African Americans in contemporary Hollywood film," *American film and politics from Reagan to Bush Jr*, Eds. Philip John Davies & Paul Wells, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2002, pp.167-68.

misnomer, he is not the fish-out-of-water burlesque caricature like Richard Pryor in *Stir Crazy* (Poitier, 1980), nor is he indicative of the insulting "mandingo" representation common in 1970s cinematic representations such as *Mandingo* (Fleischer, 1974) and *Drum* (Carver, 1975). Meurice is perhaps the least stereotypical character in *Blood Simple*, a film that relies heavily on generic convention and archetypal representation.

Where Meurice's character operates against type, Joel and Ethan Coen play freely with the notion of stereotype, often embracing it as an automatic cue for the audience. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain that the term "stereotype" is a facile catch-all invocation that fails to make the distinction between the kinds of stereotypes that do not seek to persecute a particular community, and the more insidious form of stereotypes that are designed specifically to participate in a prejudicial policy against a persecuted community.[74] Where Meurice is depicted against the stereotype of the black character in a Southern community, Marty and Visser are much more easily defined by their stereotypical traits. Shohat and Stam instruct that "[w]e cannot equate the stereotyping performed 'from above' with the stereotyping 'from below,' where the stereotype is used as it were 'in quotes,' recognized as a stereotype and used to new ends."[75] Visser is the "typical" Texan; thus they are his words in the film's opening text explain the mythology of the Lone-Star state. Marty is somewhat of a revision of the Greek character Nick Papadakis from James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Though Marty is less naïve than Cain's cuckolded husband, he is Greek, an owner of a road-side establishment and is betrayed by his wife and ultimately killed by her lover (with a little help from Visser). Marty's Greek heritage is pronounced in a stereotypical manner which instructs and sustains the connections he has to Cain's Nick. Marty's jewelry, his slick black hair, open-necked shirts and swarthy features work to give the viewer immediate cues. The Coen brothers are using the stereotypical image as an automatic signifier, and not as a means of derision and prejudice. Stereotype is working in the same way as generic convention and

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[74] Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, London & New York, 1994, p.183.
[75] Ibid, p.205.

representational codes, it is a system of signs whose rules cue the viewer to generate meanings and distinguish characters.

Like genre and convention, stereotype avails itself to parody because of its familiarity. The Coens employ stereotypes in an open and often ironic manner. This concept of allusion and intertextuality ties in with Stam's Bakhtinian approach to notions of ethnicity. Stam removes the question of realism in the depiction of ethnicity, and instead focusses on a text's "voices" and "discourses." Stam identifies the kinds of questions that an ethnic representation summons: "What are the 'accents' and 'intonations,' to use Bakhtinian language, discernible in a filmic voice? Which of the ambient ethnic voices are 'heard' in a film, and which are elided or distorted?"[76] The composition of the characters of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* suggest that to some degree the Coen brothers fail to give full voice to the black characters who represent a majority of the "background" action in poverty-struck Mississippi. The Parchman Farm from which Everett, Delmar and Pete escape and to which Pete is returned after capture was an almost all-black Mississippi prison labour camp.[77] And it is therefore curious that Joel and Ethan Coen focus their attention on three white escapees. Yet, their representation of black characters—soul-selling guitarist Tommy Johnson (Chris Thomas King) and a wise-old blind seer (Lee Weaver)—are uniformly sympathetic and, in the case of the blind seer, a further interesting inversion of stereotype. Everett, Delmar and Pete encounter the blind seer as they make their escape from the prison camp, he offers them portentous advice for their journey and shapes a series of premonitory forecasts that will eventually assist in their travels. The visionless seer is a sly parody of the Uncle Remus character of Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (Jackson, Foster, 1943), a convivial old black slave-hand who tells fantastic tales to the imaginative child of a plantation owner. Shohat and Stam suggest that the Uncle Remus stereotype is in its purest form a "naïve, and congenial folk philosopher."[78] The blind prophet of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, though, proves to be wise and insightful and he is presented less as a yarn spinner

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[76] Robert Stam, "Bakhtin, Polyphony, and Ethnic/Racial Representation," *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, Ed. Lester D. Friedman, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991, p.255.
[77] Op. Cit., Rob Content, Tim Kreider, Boyd White, "*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," p.42.
[78] Op. Cit., Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p.195

and more as a sage. Stam and Shohat dispute the essentialist ahistoricism of much of stereotype analysis and contend that such theories tends to be static, "not allowing for mutations, metamorphoses, changes of valence, altered function [and ignoring] the historical instability of the stereotype and even of language."[79] The manner by which the Coen brothers have re-articulated a stereotypical representation in their own text reconfirms their ironic use of allusion and intertextuality.

While Joel and Ethan Coen's manipulation of outdated stereotypes in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is commendable, the absence of any "significant" black representation is troubling. Kellner notes that hegemony operates by marginalisation as much as inclusion or affirmation, suggesting "[o]ne should also pay attention to what is left out of ideological texts, for it is often the exclusions and silences that reveal the ideological project of the text."[80] The integration of minority racial and ethnic communities as equal participants in society remains as a real though elusive objective, and the absence, or insufficiency, of minority representation in cinematic texts is an illustration of that problem. Yet, where *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* seems to ignore black characters, race remains central to the film in the repeated misidentifications of the film's three white heroes as blacks. The point of this connection is not merely to suggest that impoverished rural whites also have a history of discrimination and subjugation, but to acknowledge that this solidarity is borne of shared anguish. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, in several ways, examines the integration of black characters, black culture and "blackness" into white America. Shohat and Stam have argued that the musical, of which *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a skewed version, is usually limited to the representation of an imagined white community. The exclusionary nature of the musical therefore mimics the dialectics of the presence/absence dynamics of marginalised communities: "the musical orchestrates a monolithically White communal harmony that represses awareness of America's multicultural formation."[81] *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, however, engages readily with multiculturalism, specifically in the application of particular kinds of

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[79] Ibid, p.199.
[80] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, p.113.
[81] Op. Cit., Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p.223.

music and also in the themes of misrecognition that run through the film. The Coens use authentic music that draws together several competing cultural voices in the songs that complement the narrative. The use of a mournful chain-gang song like "Po' Lazarus" and Tommy's rendition of "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" speak of the despondency and repression of the black experience, whereas the employment of old-timey music like "I am a Man of Constant Sorrow" and "In the Jailhouse Now" refer to the experiences of destitution, loneliness and incarceration that plague the under-classes. These twin musical approaches bring the white and black experience together and into focus.

The racial identity of the Soggy Bottom Boys (Everett, Pete, Delmar and Tommy) is repeatedly confused on their journey from obscurity to provincial celebrity. Initially, the boys encounter a blind radio station operator for whom they record the song "I am a Man of Constant Sorrow." Everett, presumably protecting the anonymity of the recently escaped members of the band, declares to the radio man that they are all "Negroes" except for their accompanist. When the radio man declares he does not record "Negro songs" the boys change their story. The confusion of this incident will cloud the memory of the radio man who will later recall: "Oh I remember 'em, coloured fellas I believe." The Soggy Bottom Boys' song becomes a success, and their mysterious identity serves to fuel the fire of inquiry, one newspaper headline stating: "Soggy Bottom Boys a Sensation – But Who Are They?" This play with identity operates concurrently with issues of race as it relates to notions of social construction, here clarified by Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney:

> Identity is always an unstable and temporary effect of relations that define identities by marking differences. The theory recognizes that there are differences between people but insists that which differences become important and visible..., where the line is drawn..., and the meaning of each category are the products of the communicative codes of a society.[82]

[82] Op. Cit., Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella & D. Charles Whitney, *Media Making*, p.220.

The Soggy Bottom Boys are only revealed to the public incognito, as it were. The boys take to the stage at a community gathering wearing long hillbilly beards, their faces still smudged from the black paint worn in camouflage when springing Pete from a prison farm. It is at this point that Stokes recognises them from the disrupted Ku Klux Klan rally and exposes them as "miscegenated" and "integrated" to the crowd. But the audience, drunk on the music, and elated by the presence of the mysterious Soggy Bottom Boys, reject Stokes' rhetoric; eventually shuttling him off on a rail. Stokes' accusation confirms that racial identity is based upon differences that are capricious, and in this case, not even accurate. And the audience confirms, with their reaction to Stokes, that race is not important to their understanding and acceptance of the band. The Coens' seemingly simple play with the convention of mistaken identity, carries with it a significant social message of racial tolerance and harmony.

Joel and Ethan Coen reinforce messages of a universal brotherhood that transcends race in their derision of Stokes and the other practitioners of racism in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. The ridiculous representation of the Ku Klux Klan—an extremist adjunct of middle-America WASPism—situates the "natural" as outsider/other by way of caricature and deconstruction. The Ku Klux Klan rally is depicted as a farcical ritual that combines the synthetic orchestration of Leni Riefenstahl's images of Nuremberg in *Triumph of the Will* (1935), the choreography of a Busby Berkeley musical and the rhythmic chanting of the Munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz*. The Coens make a mockery of the "venerated observances and rituals" of the rally and completely undermine its pretensions toward ceremonial gravity and earnestness. Violence, ritual and ceremony are often associated with ethnic representation as a point of attraction, repulsion, identification or objectification. Here the connection to *Triumph of the Will* is significant because Riefenstahl's film trades on the spectacular, and the spectacle in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is deconstructed and ridiculed.

Raising Arizona has less to say about race than *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (black characters are depicted as H.I.'s prison inmate companions in the prologue, but remain unseen in the Arizona community) though the film focusses shrewdly on issues of class. And this is unsurprising given it is a film of and about

the 1980s. Kellner notes this decade was "an unprecedented era of class warfare with massive redistribution of wealth from working and middle-class sectors to the rich and an era of high fear of unemployment, downward mobility, and crisis for the working classes."[83] These are the tangible themes of *Raising Arizona* as H.I. fights against his economic circumstances in order to ascend into "decent" society. Each of *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is set in the south of the United States, and the question of race often overwhelms all other social divides within these communities. Yet, the issue of class is a valid topic that is significant to the social constitution of the people of America's South. Traditionally, the United States is assumed to be a classless society, but in reality, the classes in America are simply manifested in ulterior forms. Class in America is not constructed upon relationships between the aristocracy and the proletariat, but rather it is a purely economic phenomenon in which those with more are routinely better off than those with less.

Where *Raising Arizona* fails to engage directly with issues of race, it does suggest the intertwining of class and race in the implied designation of H.I. and Ed as a typical "white-trash" couple – a classification that suggests both a racial type and an economic condition. Discussing the topic of "white-trash," Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray argue the term is both a classist slur and racial epithet which serves to characterise particular whites as "a breed apart, a dysgenic race unto themselves."[84] The opening sequence of *Raising Arizona* cues the audience to H.I. and Ed's social position. H.I.'s dress sense, economic difficulties, predilection for crime, as well as his post-nuptial trailer park home, all work to designate he and Ed as a typical "white-trash" couple. Significantly, that trailer home is destroyed during a comical brawl between H.I. and Gale Snopes. Kellner maintains that the American Dream is traditionally based upon owning one's own home and in the era of accelerating unemployment, a failing economy and diminishing discretionary income the fear of losing one's home prevailed in the 1980s.[85] This fear is made manifest as the trailer proves to be particularly flimsy, its thin walls caving in with the merest contact. H.I. and Ed's tenuous hold on

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[83] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, p.126.
[84] Annalee Newitz & Matt Wray, "Introduction," *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, Eds. Matt Wray & Annalee Newitz, Routledge, New York & London, 1997, p.2.
[85] Op. Cit., Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, p.131.

normal family life in Reaganite America is made clear as their home disintegrates at the slightest abuse.

Allan Bérubé, writing on his childhood experiences in a "white-trash" community, suggests some affinity to the desires borne out in the world of *Raising Arizona*. Bérubé declares that his "parents' dreams of someday buying a house, starting a small business and sending the kids to college were the engines that drove their lives."[86] But Bérubé's conception of the American Dream is bitterly recalled in retrospect as a "lie" because of its fundamental unattainability, a theme developed in *Raising Arizona*. Many conservative films of the late 1970s and 1980s celebrate the triumph of class transcendence to which Ed and H.I. are aspiring, but more liberal films question the myth of the ladder of success. With *Raising Arizona*, the Coen brothers are intent on exposing the fiction at the heart of the American Dream, demonstrating that H.I. and Ed's situation is incompatible with its ideology, unable to attain an ideal that is hopelessly unsuited to their means. H.I., referencing Ed's infertility and his unsuitability to adopt because of his criminal record, explains: "Biology and the prejudices of others conspired to keep us childless." Yet, despite these obstructions, their stubborn pursuit of a family leads to the abduction of an infant child. H.I. and Ed aspire to the middle-class seeking social progress, class ascension, material success, transformation and acquisition. Yet, while many of these are admirable objectives, their misguided methods for realising this goal effectively envisions the mendacity that is at the heart of the American Dream.

The connections between race and class that are hit upon by *Raising Arizona*'s exploration of a characteristic "white-trash" couple are also prevalent in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. The examination of the merging of racial identities of the Soggy Bottom Boys and the way Everett, Pete and Delmar are socialised as blacks by their involvement in chain-gangs and association with institutional poverty construct veritable links between class and race. This latter point is made rather subtly in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* when Pete and Delmar are seen eating roasted gopher – a meal traditionally associated with indigent African

[86] Allan Bérubé, with Florence Bérubé, "Sunset Trailer Park," *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, Eds. Matt Wray & Annalee Newitz, Routledge, New York & London, 1997, p.33.

Americans. Constance Penley recalls in her youth that she would trade captured gophers to her cousin, who would then sell them in the black community. Penley identifies the method by which race and class were conflated in her upbringing, stating that as a Southern white child she was conditioned to understand that "white trash folks are the lowest of the low because socially and economically they have sunk so far that they might as well be black."[87] The connection between the three fugitives in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and their black brethren—in their friendship with Tommy, their placement at the Parchman Farm, the prejudice they suffer as a result of identity confusion—is repeatedly linked to their class position. Bérubé argues that his family's descent into the lower class endangered them, in the eyes of other white people, of foregoing their own claims to the racial privileges that are associated with being recognised as white Americans.[88] By determining that Everett, Pete and Delmar's social status is based upon their limited economic means, the Coens are maintaining that their condition—as "white-trash"—is manufactured by circumstances. The linking of class with race foregrounds the social construction at the centre of racial identity relating it to the concept of ideology and common sense thinking. Racial and social division as represented in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is seen to be less a matter of nature and more an effect of situation.

Joel and Ethan Coen are keenly interested in the processes of ideology. The Coen's films regularly investigate the constructedness of our circumstances, whether it be the structuring of representational texts or the fabrication and maintenance of racial and social circumstances. The prominence of political and social interrogations in *Raising Arizona*, *Blood Simple* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* effectively demonstrates the Coens' desire to engage with the cultural dilemmas that contextualise their films. The political and social inquiry in *Raising Arizona* cannot be completely concealed by a "cartoonish" narrative dealing with a "white-trash" couple's maniacal desire to be a "normal" family. The investigation of America's questionable relationship with an economic system that replicates jungle survivalism cannot be suppressed by an innocuous tale of

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[87] Constance Penley, "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn," *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, Eds. Matt Wray & Annalee Newitz, Routledge, New York & London, 1997, p.90.
[88] Op. Cit., Allan Bérubé, with Florence Bérubé, "Sunset Trailer Park," p.18.

infidelity in a Texan suburb in *Blood Simple*. And the study of the complex racial relations in the United States and the distrust of the very doctrine of democracy cannot be denied by a picaresque musical about a trio of escapees wandering across 1930s Mississippi in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. These three films effectively demonstrate that the Coens are, indeed, American filmmakers that are deeply concerned with, and curious of, the culture within which they exist.

Conclusion

Joel and Ethan Coen's status as independent filmmakers has been established on several occasions throughout this dissertation and its significance to an analysis of their films cannot be disregarded. The Coens' ironic approach to literary material, parodic attitude to genre, subversive critique of American culture, and deconstruction of language and history are inherently tied to their ability to control their own filmmaking procedures. Recently, the Coen brothers produced their first collaborative enterprise: *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003). This film represents the first time that the Coens have worked from material created by other screenwriters (Robert Ramsey and Matthew Stone) and, perhaps more significantly, it is the only time Ethan Coen has shared production duties with a fellow producer, Brian Grazer. The Coens did share writing credits when they worked with Sam Raimi on *The Hudsucker Proxy*, but in that case they were the originators of the material. And, although prominent Hollywood producer Joel Silver provided the financial backing for that film, Ethan Coen remained the only producer and Joel Coen the sole director and their typical working regime was not compromised. Although *The Hudsucker Proxy* had a relatively large budget (in excess of $20 million) it was still an independent film in the sense that the Coen brothers' creative control was absolute. *Intolerable Cruelty*, on the other hand, is a commercial Hollywood film in which the Coens have ceded some elements of their typical authority. The contrast between *Intolerable Cruelty* and the Coen brothers' other films indicates that "independence" can be characterised at least as much by creative control as by matters of economics or aesthetics. *Intolerable Cruelty* in terms of budget and visual design varies little from most of the Coen brothers' other films, yet it does not contain the subversive and ironic elements that make their films exemplary. Ben Walters notes his disappointment with *Intolerable Cruelty* by declaring that the "wilful imagination that marks each of the Coens' previous pictures—the delight in mundane absurdity, the flights of genre-subverting fancy, the painstaking construction of heightened but internally consistent worlds—is subverted in favour of a straighter, more accessible tone."[1] Walters is acknowledging the Coen brothers' conscious repositioning within a

more classical form of representation. This contention suggests the Coen brothers' subversive, ironic and parodic design, evident in each of their films to this point, depends greatly upon their typical position being just outside of Hollywood's mainstream.

Intolerable Cruelty is modern-day Screwball comedy that explores contemporary matrimony in a world concerned more with money and power than love and commitment. Consequently, the film's material provides ample opportunity for the kind of satire exhibited by the Coens, evinced in their critique of marriage in *Raising Arizona*, their interrogation of commercial America in *Fargo* and their focus on the jungle survivalism of the American Dream in *Blood Simple*. In *Intolerable Cruelty*, Miles Massey (George Clooney) views marriage as an arena for battle, regarding divorce proceedings as a means to destruction and domination. Miles considers the institution of marriage the same way Wade in *Fargo* approaches a ransom deal, as a site for the establishment of authority and as a chance to better one's opponent. However, Miles' cynical mask conceals a life of discontent, he confides to his underling Wrigley (Paul Adelstein) that there is something lacking in his seemingly perfect life. And by the film's conclusion Miles will have identified the deficiency as love, and will have overcome his loneliness in the embrace of the similarly cynical (and equally lovelorn) character of Marylin RexRoth (Catherine Zeta-Jones). The film's happy ending in which Marylin and Miles confirm the value of love is hinted at throughout *Intolerable Cruelty* in several ways Sarah Batista O'Flanagan Sorkin (Julia Duffy) personifies Marylin's ultimate objective to acquire copious wealth and everlasting independence through marriage and divorce. But Sarah is represented as a gloriously unhappy and lonesome homebody whose material gain has precluded her chances of ever being loved again. The anxieties associated with losing her amassed fortune have given her a peptic ulcer which requires constant attention. When Marylin cruelly fabricates the death of Sarah in order to swindle Miles—she explains that she does not want to endure the same kind of insufferable existence as her friend and merely wants companionship—her motives are malicious and calculated. But at the film's conclusion it is for these same reasons

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[1] Ben Walters, "Bringing up Alimony: *Intolerable Cruelty*," *Sight and Sound*, 13.11, November, 2003, p.31.

that Marylin does succumb to Miles and the cynicism represented earlier is dismissed without a hint of irony.

There is no irony earlier, too, when Miles addresses a convention of divorce lawyers and ratifies his belief that love is the only thing that matters. Walters writes that the scene invites uncertainty from the audience ("it's hard to know where to look")[2]; the maudlin music playing underneath this paean to passion and ardor suggests the Coens are sincere despite the hokiness of the sentiments. Miles, who should be delivering a lecture on the cynical tactics he applies in order to maximise his clients settlements, instead condemns his practices and speaks glowingly of the power of love: "But today, I am here to tell you: Love should cause us no fear. Love should cause us no shame. Love...is good." Interestingly, the scene bears a resemblance to the famous "greed is good" sermon delivered by Gordon Gecko in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*. Miles, like Gecko, bypasses a standard endorsement of his business practices to instead explain to a sceptical congregation the bare facts of what he believes in: for Miles it is love, for Gecko it is greed. And where Stone's film functions as an indictment of the very values Gecko espouses, the Coens' film supports and endorses the credo that "love is good." As Miles' speech begins to take hold of the audience the music swells and the camera focusses on assenting faces. And when Miles descends from the stage a slow hand clap swells into rapturous applause as the Coen brothers focus, unironically, on Clooney's gratified expression. Like the heroes of Capra's "little-man makes good" films, Miles has managed to convert an incredulous community with a sentimental elegy to fellowship and romantic union.

Miles soon discovers that Marylin has duped him into marriage and that the love he has spoken of so emphatically is fictitious. Yet, ultimately this is merely a dramatic obtrusion which will eventually be overcome when Miles and Marylin return to each other's arms. Love is all they need and when their union is finally sealed with a kiss it delivers the eminently conventional ending that was denied in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Raising Arizona*. This ending demonstrates the dissonance between *Intolerable Cruelty* and the Coens' earlier

films. The coda in *Raising Arizona* satirises the kind of "happily ever after" summations found in conventional films such as *Intolerable Cruelty* and challenges the ideological project that such narrative forms promote. In both *Raising Arizona* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* there is a semblance of normalcy and contentment at the end of each film, the characters seemingly achieving their objectives: for H.I. it is a prognostication of family happiness, for Everett it is reunion with Penny. Most commentators of these earlier films understand the Coens' motives to be parodic. Rob Content, Tim Kreider and Boyd White suggest that the conclusions of both *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *The Hudsucker Proxy* are so "self-consciously absurd" that they could "only be [seen as] ironic concessions to Hollywood conventions."[3] And Geoff Andrew states that the Coen brothers' satirical conclusion to *Raising Arizona* constructs an admirable parody of mainstream movie-style poignancy.[4] The ending to *Raising Arizona* makes one aware of just how unlikely a truly happy ending is, precisely to demonstrate the unreality of its premises. But with *Intolerable Cruelty* there is no ironic conclusion that denies or defers Miles and Marylin's mutual satisfaction: the ending is typical of mainstream cinema and the Coens opt for sentiment rather than satire.

Though *Intolerable Cruelty* is set in contemporary society, it maintains a connection to the Coens' historical text, *The Hudsucker Proxy*; both films depending heavily on the conventions of Screwball comedy. *Intolerable Cruelty* is reminiscent of Preston Sturges' comedies *The Lady Eve* (1941), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942) and *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948) in which glamorous sophisticates find themselves in anomalous circumstances leading to madcap situations mostly related to falling in and out of love. The alliterative names—Miles Massey, Rex RexRoth, Ollie Olerud—rapid-fire conversations, as well as George Clooney's richly allusive performance (incorporating broad gestures and double-takes) clearly places *Intolerable Cruelty* within the traditions of the Screwball genre. Yet, the Coens opt for a straight rendition of the genre and largely fail to employ

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[2] Ibid, p.31.
[3] Rob Content, Tim Kreider, Boyd White, "*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," *Film Quarterly*, 55.1, Fall, 2001, p.47.
[4] Geoff Andrew, *Stranger Than Paradise: Maverick film-makers in recent American cinema*, Prion, London, 1998, pp.173-74.

any of the alterations or revisions that have typically granted their "historical" films a subversive currency. In fact, *Intolerable Cruelty* resembles the "empty pastiche" that many commentators falsely ascribe to all of the Coen brothers' films. *The Hudsucker Proxy* challenges many of the codes of the Screwball comedy to expose many of the ideological implications attached to the genre. Daniel Kothenschulte believes that *The Hudsucker Proxy* is an "example of a detached treatment of the ethical values of the social comedy, which in films such as *Pretty Woman* [Marshall, 1987] are displayed in largely unrefracted form."[5] With *The Hudsucker Proxy* the Coen brothers are less interested in the emotional connotation of a set of conventions acquired from the Screwball genre and more focussed on interrogating the genre's codes and processes. In this sense the Coen brothers are installing the design of the typical Screwball film not to elicit the same impulsive reactions but to foreground how these emotional responses are generated through such frameworks. Kothenschulte notes that with *The Hudsucker Proxy* the Coens are "primarily interested in the mechanics of the social comedy, an apparatus that is as functional as the clockwork mechanism in the Hudsucker building, they rob it of any centre that might give it meaning."[6] *Intolerable Cruelty*, on the other hand, is a faithful remake of the kind of films associated with Sturges and Frank Capra without *The Hudsucker Proxy*'s critical agenda. It is more like the film Kothenschulte identifies as indicative of the modern social comedy, *Pretty Woman*, as love overcomes the doubts borne of a society fixated on commercial endeavours and consumerist principles.

With *Intolerable Cruelty* the Coen brothers are interested in the ways that economic aspiration has affected the possibilities of romance in a contemporary society obsessed with commercial success. And whenever any of the characters tear up the famous Massey prenuptial agreement the action is typically met with the wry comment: "You're exposed!" Here emotional and sexual vulnerability is associated with financial insecurity. This double entendre is typical of the Screwball genre in which language is layered with double meanings. And the dialogue in *Intolerable Cruelty* does exhibit some of the marvellous aspects of

[5] Daniel Kothenschulte, "*The Hudsucker Proxy*," *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Eds. Peter Körte & Georg Seesslen, Translated by Rory Mulholland, Limelight Editions, New York, 2001, p.164.
[6] Ibid, p.161.

language construction which the Coen brothers have explored throughout their films. The rhythms and repetitions that are found in *The Big Lebowski* and *Fargo* are also evident in the Coen brothers' most recent film, particularly in the legal double-speak employed throughout. The pre-trial mediation between Miles and Marylin's lawyer, Freddy Bender (Richard Jenkins), becomes a session of one-upmanship in which the attorneys debate a proposed settlement, the rhythmically repetitive discussion twisting in ever-decreasing circles until Freddy storms out in protest. However, these moments of language games are tempered by instances of silliness and sophomoric humour. When three characters debate over whether they have appeared before a particular judge the traditional and legal definition of the word "sat" is worked over in a relentlessly drawn out manner. And when Miles and Marylin engage in verbal spars debating the purpose of marriage (Marylin likens it to a safari hunt) Miles affirms that his objective is to find "an ass to mount." Such tired and lazy dialogue does little to support the supposition that Joel and Ethan Coen always produce dialogue brimming with significance. This is perhaps indicative of the Coens' application of material created and prepared by other parties. Moreover, it reflects the distinct influences on the film brought about by its more central placement within the Hollywood system.

Casting Clooney and Zeta-Jones as the leads in *Intolerable Cruelty* also operates to position the film within the Hollywood mainstream. Clooney plays against type in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, foregoing the accomplished and suave characters he created as his niche in films like *Out of Sight* (Soderbergh, 1998), *Three Kings* (Russell, 1999) and *Ocean's Eleven* (Soderbergh, 2001). In *Intolerable Cruelty* he makes a return to the sophisticated and composed leading man, while Zeta-Jones is glamorous and classy in a role that recalls her star making performance in *Entrapment* (Amiel, 1999). The Coen brothers employ these two movie-stars in a fashion that references romantic comedies of the 1940s and 1950s. Clooney's performance is heavily indebted to Cary Grant in films ranging from *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Capra, 1944) to his Hitchcock movies *To Catch a Thief* (1955) and *North by Northwest*. Clooney mugs in the same physical manner as Grant, using his whole body to relay information and appearing handsome in expertly tailored suits. Zeta-Jones, like the heroines portrayed by Grace Kelly in Hitchcock's films, makes grand entrances in elaborately styled

gowns while always remaining coolly implacable, frustrating the male protagonist and intriguing the male viewer. And, though *Intolerable Cruelty* deals very explicitly with deception and disguise—a theme the Coens explored in *Fargo* and *Miller's Crossing*—it is less interested in the way performance and identity operate together. In *Intolerable Cruelty* it might be initially true that "Nobody knows anybody – not that well," as various characters find themselves deceived by their lovers and counterparts, but ultimately everyone realises exactly where they stand and it is the eventual transparency of character that warrants the film's happy ending. In this sense, the performances in *Intolerable Cruelty* are formulaic and conventional, operating merely to propel the narrative and provide visual pleasure to the audience.

But *Intolerable Cruelty* is an aberration in the Coen brothers canon. In content, production process and finished form it fails to match the Coens' previous nine feature films. These films, ranging from *Blood Simple* through to *The Man Who Wasn't There* consistently maintain a relationship with Hollywood's mainstream which is not unlike Bergan's faked epilogue in his Coen brothers study. It is a position of qualification and mistrust, an attitude of acknowledgment though not necessarily acceptance. Kothenschulte notes of *The Hudsucker Proxy* that the Coen brothers' employment of the tropes of romantic, social and Screwball comedy is always qualified by a deconstructive rejoinder: "Like bad lovers, the Coens ensure that every moment of rapture is followed by a sudden, disorienting disillusionment, and in doing so almost casually dissect the functionality of the classic Hollywood film."[7] A postmodern approach to the works of the Coens acknowledges the manner by which they reside within traditional cinema's domain without being infected by its conceits. The independence Joel and Ethan Coen have maintained since they scrounged the funds to launch their first film, *Blood Simple*, has always ensured their complete creative control. *Intolerable Cruelty*'s prosaic structure and acquiescent deference to the tenets of Hollywood's mainstream demonstrates just how central that independence is in constructing the typical Coen brothers film. The authority permitted by an independent relationship to Hollywood has afforded Joel and Ethan Coen an opportunity to construct their own style of representation, one

heavily indebted to the postmodern program of "use and abuse." *Intolerable Cruelty* suggests that to maintain a mode of representation that critiques its own forms it is necessary to maintain a level of independence from the system that is being subverted. In an exemplary Coen film the brothers' examination of the codes of language, of cinema, of history and of representation is utilised to engage critically with contemporary culture. *Intolerable Cruelty* installs the traditional codes of the modern Screwball farce and the mainstream film without irony, and the text operates as a standard Hollywood romantic comedy. *Intolerable Cruelty* therefore is only marginally representative of the five areas explored throughout this thesis. It does not contribute to the contention that the films of Joel and Ethan Coen are pregnant with a significance that exists well beyond their superficial designs. Whether it is through the adaptation of hard-boiled literature, examination of identity and performance or satirical critique of society and politics, the Coen brothers' films regularly exhibit a depth that effortlessly transcends any accusation that they are "films about films" or representative of a "cinema of meaninglessness."

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[7] Ibid, p.155.

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