

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

ABIDING THE POSTMODERN WORLD: AN ETHICAL, EXISTENTIAL, AND
CINEMATOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF *THE BIG LEBOWSKI*

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
PROGRAM IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

BY

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PREVIEW

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GRADUATE STUDIES

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Abstract

The Big Lebowski (1998) is arguably the most significant cult film in history, and as such, it has garnered a healthy amount of scholarship. Most scholars have addressed the film's playful use of genre, idiosyncratic dialogue, and farcical nature in an effort to illuminate the particular auteur style of the Coens. Through Jameson's use of parody, pastiche and nostalgia, Lyotard's use of metanarratives, and by Baudrillard's use of hyperreality, this dissertation examines how *The Big Lebowski* is postmodern in form, but functions as a cultural critique. Second, the film is examined through a philosophical lens. The Dude is described as an existential hero by using Heideggerian and Sartrean philosophy. Third, the film is examined through ethical lens where Aristotelian virtue ethics are applied to illustrate the absurd banality of life in the postmodern era. Finally, the film's cinematography is examined in terms of composition and technique to show how the camera visually supports the film's underlying cultural critique.

Introduction

The Big Lebowski (1998) just passed a significant milestone by celebrating its twenty-year anniversary of its release on March 6, 2018, and a myriad of articles in the world of media journalism have taken a reflective look at the film, its initial reception and subsequent rise to cult classic. Initially, the film was generally misunderstood by critics, received disappointing receipts at the box office, but eventually found an audience, and has become arguably the most important film in the Coen body of work, and possibly the postmodern genre.

It is now thirty-four years after the release of their first feature film, *Blood Simple* (1984), filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen hardly need an introduction, yet their rise from an era filled with big budget, mainstream studio films to establish themselves as two of the most innovative and intriguing voices in modern cinema makes their work popular for academic inquiry. Their story is quite remarkable, and easily qualifies as one of the most noteworthy in the annals of film history. The Coens grew up in a middle class, Jewish household in Minnesota. Their parents were college professors, and for fun the two boys began experimenting with Super 8 film. Joel, the eldest by three years, attended New York University and earned an undergraduate degree in filmmaking. Ethan, on the other hand, headed off to Princeton and earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy, writing his senior thesis on Wittgenstein. Over the years, they have created a body of work—some seventeen feature films—that range from the farcical to the philosophical. *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Fargo* (1996), *O' Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *True Grit* (2010), and *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) are some of their best-known films that have

achieved critical and commercial success. Their lesser known films like *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Barton Fink* (1991), *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), and *A Serious Man* (2009)—which was even nominated for Best Picture by the Academy of Motion Picture and Sciences—have struggled to find an audience. Even though their films are mainstream Hollywood feature releases¹, the Coens have managed to be identified as independent filmmakers. Their films are mostly nostalgic, genre mixes, which makes them accessible to mainstream audiences, but they often include philosophical subtext that at times has puzzled their audience, but also resonated with them as well. Their unique style combines deep, complex and thought-provoking ideas with comical situations that make audiences laugh, but also think. In terms of style, this rare quality has landed them atop a short list of auteur directors. These two contrarians are famously reclusive, and elusively resist their auteur identity, avoiding the bright lights of paparazzi fame often shed upon celebrity, and when they reluctantly agree to interview requests, they avoid any explanation of their work or insight into the possible meaning behind their creative decisions. As such, “the brothers,” as long-time collaborator Roger Deakins calls them, prefer to let the audience wonder if a line was simply written to be funny, meant with deeper meaning, or quite possibly both.

¹ Mainstream Hollywood releases refers to films that are produced with or through one of the main Hollywood studios, and as such they generally are intended for a wide release across many theaters, enjoying a significant advertising budget. These films are expected to generate significant box office returns.

Coen films are mostly neo-noir² based, crime dramas that artfully reflect cultural trends, combining incongruous elements of violence and comedy from a wide array of genres, yet they provide more. Some critics have missed how Coen protagonists are authentic characters who struggle against societal forces beyond their control. One author who does see the authenticity of these characters is Erica Rowell in *The Brothers Grimm: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*. Rowell posits that Coen films “are modern folk tales,” where the little man struggles to steal his share of the “American Dream pie,” from a crooked capitalistic system.³ The struggle offers up space for academic inquiry, giving film scholars an opportunity to explore these films for deeper sociopolitical meaning in one reading, and yet in another reading, an entertaining film which delivers many comedic moments.

The Coens are considered part of a neo-noir group of filmmakers that includes Quentin Tarantino, David Fincher, David Lynch, Christopher Nolan, and Paul Thomas Anderson. These directors combine genres in a playful manner, and create memorable characters that exist in a troubled world. Fredric Jameson’s thoughts of parody and pastiche, intertextuality, and fragmentation help define the postmodern and offer a methodology which is helpful in the exploration their work. Jameson argues the decentering of the formerly centered subject has resulted from the commodification

² Neo-Noir is a contemporary film genre derived from classic film noir, and it describes films that address similar noir themes and noir characteristics. They commonly contain elements of alienation, pessimism, and moral ambivalence.

³ Rowell, Erica. *The Brothers Grimm: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007. Print.

attributed to late capitalism.⁴ It is the ideology of a “bourgeois society and a field of stylistic discursive heterogeneity without a norm,” and reflects the lack of “any great collective project.”⁵ Jean Baudrillard is another postmodern theorist whose work has helped define the period suggests, that throughout the loss of truth and the real, we enter a period of the hyperreal where simulation and simulacra have replaced originality.⁶ Yet, it is the Coens whose work uniquely delivers a cultural critique embedded in a postmodern form. They are cinephiles who artfully pull from film history, and incorporate innovative ideas, thus reflexively creating a new subversive mix that both entertains and challenges the audience.

The use of space and geography is one aspect of the Coen style that helps define their work as neo-noir. Their settings have character and significantly add to the film’s atmosphere. For example, many of their films incorporate stark, individualistic, and isolated settings. *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Raising Arizona* (1987) are set in the remote southwest, *Fargo* (1996) and *A Serious Man* (2009) are set in the wide-open plains of the Midwest, and *O’ Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000) is set in the Mississippi delta of the Depression-era South. *The Big Lebowski* is set in Los Angeles, and before it became a major city, it was first a coastal desert community, but in the film the city is depicted in individualistic terms. All these locales have offer a

⁴ Late Capitalism refers to the post WWII period where the rise of large, multi-national corporations begin to appear on the business landscape, shifting the various modes of production across national borders.

⁵ Jameson, Frederick *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulation and Simulacra*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glasser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

backdrop to the film's action, and subsequently factor heavily into the overall mood established.

The brothers have an original cinematic voice, and this can be attributed to their ability to write, produce, direct, and edit their own films. Such creative control is rare in the world of film. Some writer directors like Tarantino, Anderson, and Nolan have risen to a stage in their career where they enjoy a large degree of control over their films, but not many people in the film business can claim this level of creative control. Tarantino produces, writes and directs. Paul Thomas Anderson, and Christopher Nolan, produce, write, direct and operate the camera. Steven Soderbergh produces, writes, directs and edits some of his films (under the pseudonym Mary Ann Bernard). As for the Coens, their ability to deliver the main creative roles on their films is one of the main reasons why they are often included in the independent filmmaker category.

Julian Baggini asserts in his essay, "Serious Men: The Films of the Coen Brothers as Ethics" that "to interpret film or oeuvre as though it were an intentional expression of a systematic way of thinking would also almost be misguided...the idea that authorial intention is important to understanding a work is considered laughably naïve, since we cannot know what such intentions are, and in any case, once created, a work of art has a life and a logic of its own."⁷ Baggini's point is well-taken, since there are a myriad of variables based upon an immense collaborative process, all of which must come together, in order to create a unified product, and one that audiences will appreciate. And though it is true that a work of art, and a film in particular, takes

⁷ Baggini, Julian. "Serious Men: The Films of the Coen Brothers as Ethics." Ed. Caryl, Havi and Greg Tuck. *New Takes in Film Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 208-209.

on a life of its own, yet for the sake of argument it must be acknowledged that writers and directors make specific creative choices in order to thematically unify and support their creative vision. Baggini's position opposes intentionality, yet films that are considered exceptional, unify creative elements to support a main idea. For example, in *TBL* the Coens' use a Bob Dylan song "The Man in Me" to intentionally support the character of the Dude, and they use "Hotel California" written by The Eagles and performed in Spanish by The Gypsy Kings in connection to the character of Jesus Quintana. The song is performed in an upbeat, aggressive tempo with the lyrics in Spanish. This Latino version has been appropriated, and the Coens are intentionally using it to suggest a cultural shift has taken place from when the original version was released (1971) to when the covered version is released (1991). Maybe Baggini is suggesting that artists do not always make conscious creative decisions and thus cannot fully claim intentionality, nor can an artist control how a viewer will receive the film, and this is true, yet writer/director/producer/editor combinations are quite rare in the world of mainstream Hollywood cinema. For instance, the Coens work together to create a script, they work very closely with a storyboard artist, and they work closely with the creative design team, so if all design elements are structurally unified to support their vision, then the end-product will show some degree of authorial intention. Auteur theory suggests, like writing words on a page, the filmmaker captures images in a frame. To further support this assertion, the Coens work consistently with familiar cast and crewmembers. The Coens have never let a major studio control their film. They have always raised enough capital to retain final

cut for their films. They keep their productions small for the most part, and in doing so they can have an immense amount of control.

The Coens are an unusual creative team in the world of cinema. They enjoy both financial and creative autonomy from the controlling reach of studio executives, which places them as independent filmmakers, but they also release their films through the studio. It is also important to note that Coen films tend to operate on a small budget, so the film does not necessarily wilt under the pressure if box office receipts are modest. In a 2013 *NY Times* interview, the Coens discuss whether they are independent filmmakers or establishment studio filmmakers, and how they handle funding for their projects. Joel Coen states, “Nobody wants to look stupid or lose lots of money. On the other hand, they’re [the studios] not afraid of doing other stuff if they can trust you to keep it reasonable. So, yeah, they kind of let us wander off without any adult supervision and do what we want.”⁸ This special status gives the Coens creative freedom to make original films within the mainstream Hollywood studio system, but without editorial interference. Most Hollywood films are considered merely a commodity—the current trend being superhero blockbusters—with the goal of being entertaining and immensely profitable, yet smaller, niche films can be entertaining while also being considered culturally significant.

After their experiences on *Blood Simple* (1984), the Coens learned a valuable lesson about finance and creative control, and subsequently have controlled their production budget by raising funds independently, which allows them to work independent of studio interference—financial control means creative control—thus

⁸ Dargis, Manohla and A.O. Scott. “We are the Establishment.” *The New York Times*. www.nytimes.com. September 4, 2013. Accessed February 4, 2018.

enabling them to work efficiently and effectively. The term Coenesque has entered the film lexicon—describing the unique style associated with the brother’s work—and one can see their authorial hands are involved in the building, the shaping, the molding, and the polishing of each film. Possessing this much control in the world of cinema is quite rare, and it also makes a compelling argument for auteur theory, which is explored by film scholars such as Peter Wollen. In *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Wollen argues, the director is not simply in command of the film, written by another artist, but one who shapes the film through structure and motifs, raising his role beyond a *metteur en-scène*.⁹ Wollen’s ideas on auteur are credibly supported by his production experience and his theoretical work. He can adeptly see the difference between a director who can competently construct a film through the normal elements of *mise-en-scène*, but one who lacks the true artistic vision or creative skills to elevate the film in a personally stylized manner. The Coens have such a talent, and their style is evident throughout their oeuvre.

The Coens have somehow managed to rise from indie film auteurs to critical and popular success, and what is impressive throughout their career, the brothers’ style remains consistent whether the film is critically praised or trounced, or whether the film generates huge profit or meager returns. Though their films mostly tend to generate only modest box office receipts, their budgets are small, so profit is generally easier to achieve. Also, they are rarely concerned with the films’ reception. Some of their films, like *No Country for Old Men* (2007), have been received well by the critics—the film won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2007—and it also

⁹ Wollen, Peter. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Bloomington, Indiana: IU Press, 1972

produced impressive box office results by grossing \$164 million worldwide while being budgeted at a cool \$25 million.¹⁰ Historically, Coen films have energized a small, but loyal following; however, some critics of the Coens have not been so kind.

Many critics have condemned the Coens for creating films that contain ridiculous characters that take part in meaningless plots. Coen films have also been criticized for being purposely stylish without containing any real substance. For instance, even J. Hoberman of the *New York Times* who once worked under Andrew Sarris at *The Village Voice* has denounced most Coen characters as “garden variety shmeggeges”.¹¹ Hoberman is one of the most well-established voices in film criticism and he has been consistently critical of their work. In a review of *Burn After Reading* (2008) Hoberman declares the Coens are “masters of the cheap shot,” and that they have “built a career on flippancy.”¹² Hoberman wasn’t the only veteran critic who misunderstand the film. Even noted film critic Gene Siskel did not understand *The Big Lebowski*, and felt the Coens create characters that no one cares about.

The Coens are often critiqued for creating characters that are caricaturist and shallow, and storylines that are meaningless, farcical and unnecessarily violent while trying to be comedic. For example, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum criticizes the Coens filmmaking style as a “gaudy bag of tricks, whose cleverness and imagination

¹⁰ “The Numbers.” *No Country for Old Men*. www.the-numbers.com. Accessed on March 17 2018.

¹¹ Hoberman, J. “Coen Bros. Torture Another Schlemiel While Imagining They Are Dylan’s True Heirs” <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/153484/coen-brothers-inside-llewyn-davis>. Accessed 10 April 2014.

¹² Hoberman, J. “The Coen Brothers Make Another Mockery with *Burn After Reading*.” *The Village Voice*. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2008/09/10/the-coen-brothers-make-another-mockery-with-burn-after-reading>. Accessed March 17, 2018.

exist mainly for their own sake.”¹³ David Denby from NY Magazine felt “*The Big Lebowski* is an off-kilter thriller with a sad sack-hero,” and “what’s the point at scoring off morons who think they are cool”¹⁴ In a retrospective look twenty years later, Denby followed up his initial scathing review by stating, “*The Big Lebowski* is a tribute to harmlessness, friendship, and team bowling. It offers a persistent ‘no’ to the hard-pressing American ‘yes.’ Like *Raising Arizona*, it’s a ballad held together by tenderness.”¹⁵ After initially missing many of the film’s nuances, Daphne Merkin of *The New Yorker* admits, “In some ways, the dude and his disconnected dudeness has a certain appeal now, maybe because the world has grown more horrendous or reality is less bearable than when the film was made.”¹⁶ Merkin further reveals, “it’s beautiful to watch with all that cinematography. The Busby Berkeley sequences.”¹⁷ When it comes to *The Big Lebowski* these noted critics initially missed many of the very things that make the film great, and given the benefit of time, they have revised their position and showered the film with accolades.

The Big Lebowski (1998) was neither a critical or financial success upon its release. It was a modest film with a \$15 million budget, grossing a meager \$5 million

¹³ Rosenbaum, Jonathan. “L.A. Residential” <http://www.chicagoreader.com>. Accessed 10 April 2014.

¹⁴ Denby, David. “In Brief: *The Big Lebowski*.” www.nymag.com/nymetro/movies/reviews. Accessed September 15, 2017.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rosenberg, Eli. “*The Big Lebowski* is 20.” *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/03/06/the-big-lebowski-is-20-we-reached-out-to-the-critics-who-panned-it-to-see-what-they-think-now/?utm_term=.84ea134b2656. Accessed on March 17, 2018.

¹⁷ Ibid.

on its opening weekend, and only earning \$17 million to date, but somehow the film has increasingly built a cult-like following.¹⁸ According to critic Scott Tobias, “The film’s subsequent success on DVD—and the regular midnight screenings and Lebowski-fests that have popped up in the meantime—is a classic example of an impassioned cult resurrecting a film’s tarnished reputation. Quotes from *The Big Lebowski* have become a form of cultural currency second only to *The Simpsons*; for modern cult-movie fans looking for fellow travelers, they’re the closest thing to a Vulcan hand-sign we have”¹⁹

The fact is this film has emerged as arguably the most successful cult film in cinematic history should be considered a sign of its importance. The film’s general reception is based upon its comedic functions, but much of the film’s enduring power comes from its ability to speak to its audience in deeper, more meaningful way. The film has much more to offer in terms of its postmodern function, its existential philosophy, its cinematography, and the way it illustrates Aristotelian virtue ethics. *The Big Lebowski* began to build a following that started rather modestly.

Fans of the film first established Lebowski Fest in 2002 in Louisville, Kentucky, consisting of a trivia contest, costume contest and bowling. The first festival drew only 150 attendees, was held in a rented Baptist church, and now the festival is in its twelfth year, and on November 22, 2013 the followers of the film who call themselves The Achievers, added their 100,000th fan. To date the festival has been

¹⁸ Box Office Mojo. “The Big Lebowski” Boxofficemojo.com. Accessed 18 April 2014.

¹⁹ Tobias, Scott. “The Big Lebowski”. The A.V. Club. Avclub.com. Accessed 19 April 2014.

staged over fifty times in thirty cities (Lebowski Fest). No other single film can claim such a cult following. One film that comes close is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and it does have a solid fan base, but according to The Rocky Horror Picture Show Fan Club, there are only 50,000 members. The followers of *Rocky Horror* might be drawn to the dramatic and interactive experience where fans enjoy ritualistic participation rather than one that inspires yearly festivals. In the science fiction genre there is the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* phenomenon, but these events include the entire catalog of films, not just a single film. Both franchises have devoted fans, but it's important to note that they are conventions of the entire franchise, which includes multiple films and television programs. Another distinction worth noting is the conventions tend to be structured toward merchandising with the intent of generating profit rather than the exuberant nature of Lebowski Fest where fans attend film screenings, musical performances and a bowling party. For Lebowski Fest 2014 held in Los Angeles, Jeff Bridges and The Abiders are the featured musical act. So why has a film that was labeled a critical and financial failure become so important to so many?

One theory about the latent success of this film suggests a cultural shift took place from Pre-911 America to Post-911 America. According to Martin and Renegar, due to the social and economic stability in the late 1990s, audiences were not receptive to social critiques of dominant power structures, but as a single worldview dictated by political leadership dominated mainstream media, audiences became more receptive to alternative viewpoints.²⁰ This certainly may be true, but perhaps fans of the film might

²⁰ Martin, Paul, and Valerie R. Renegar. "The Man For His Time" *The Big Lebowski* as Carnavalesque Social Critique." *Communication Studies* 58.3 (2007): 299-313. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 22 Jan. 2014.

also recognize a new methodology or philosophy that combats the overly homogenized and often banal world of postmodernity. Fans of the film seem to understand the frustration associated with postmodernity, and with that understanding they seem to connect with the main character's rejection of societal norms, his innate ability to find meaning in his life, and his authentic demeanor. The film illustrates existentialist thought that focuses upon living an authentic existence, rejecting the compromised ethics of a corrupt society, and learning to find happiness in simplicity. This alternative philosophy is characterized by the saying, "The Dude abides." This philosophical position stands in stark contrast to the dominant political and social views exhibited during The Gulf War in 1991, where societal reaction to was minimal at best, and opposition to it only garnered a few "No Blood For Oil!" rallies.²¹ The Dude's counter cultural *ethos* is dressed in 1960s garb, and the film is a pastiche of old forms, which complicates any single reading of the film, and as a result the film has become a popular topic for scholarship.

In as much, film scholars have written about the Coens and a fair amount about *The Big Lebowski* itself. Many texts use multiple Coen films to discuss style, theme, character, and some scholars conduct a more comprehensive analysis of *The Big Lebowski*, yet most authors that do take time with the film. They mostly focus upon the connections to the 1946 Howard Hawks film based upon Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, and *The Big Lebowski*'s multiple mix of genres. It is true that the film's form is postmodern—a potpourri genre mix—but it also functions as postmodern as

²¹ Tobias, Scott. "The Big Lebowski". The A.V. Club. Avclub.com. Accessed 19 April 2014.

well. For example, when addressing the Dude, most authors believe the Dude to be lazy, which is true, but it is far too convenient of an assessment, yet upon greater examination a rich philosophical subtext is often the source for much of the sociopolitical commentary.

However, I believe the Dude is grounded in his antecedents—Hawks's Marlowe, Smight's Harper, and Altman's Marlowe—but he is arguably an existential hero who rejects the dominant cultural values of his time, and seeks a meaningful existence despite the overwhelming forces of postmodernity that surround him. The Coens present the Dude and his existential philosophy as a vehicle to find meaning in the absurd and banal world of postmodernity. This could also contribute to the film's cult appeal. This film would speak directly to disenfranchised members of society who sense a growing alienation with postmodernity, and by sharing their collective appreciation for a film that champions a philosophical position, it allows them to find a sense of community, belonging, and meaning. And, the film would also speak to an audience who would enjoy the zaniness of a playful farce. Another possible reason the film has enjoyed such latent and enduring success is the Coens use of multiple genres, multiple narratives and an unorthodox, non-classical Hollywood method of storytelling. These postmodern techniques—using old forms to construct new meaning—allow multiple opportunities for viewers to connect with the subject matter.

Film philosopher Mark T. Conard has compiled a number of articles by various authors on the Coens in his 2012 text *The Philosophy of The Coen Brothers*. Some of articles have addressed the philosophical traits in Coen films, and some authors have written about the philosophy of *The Big Lebowski*, but no one has yet to define the

Dude as an existential hero. The Coens have created an existential hero for postmodern times. Heidegger and Sartre's work helps shed some light on the Dude's existential tendencies, allowing a new way to read *TBL* and the Dude. Richard Gaughran is one scholar who has contributed an insightful article in Conard's text, and Gaughran connects the philosophy presented in *The Big Lebowski* to postmodernity by suggesting the "individual's attempt to construct a viable identity within the hostile environment emerges as a major theme...as does confusion concerning the identity of others."²² The tenable connection between postmodernity and existentialism opens ample room to discuss the human condition in an age of such technological change. I see the nexus of the postmodern, existential philosophy and a modern age filled with technology as a new way to read this film. The postmodern structure of the film, the film's form, has been extensively documented, and some film scholars have examined the film for its political subtext, yet by exploring the film through an existential, ethical and cinematographic framework, I believe the film raises important questions about the nature of the postmodern condition.

One of the areas of inquiry regarding this film that lacks academic exploration is the film's cinematography. I am interested in exploring how the film's cinematography supports the questions about, or adds to the conversation, on the film's use of existential philosophy and its application of ethical theory. How do the Coens and their cinematographer Roger Deakins effectively use cinematographic methods (camera techniques, *mise-en-scène*, lighting, and frame composition) to tell the story in visual images, which not only supports the storyline, but to also create new

²² Gaughran, Richard. "What Kind of Man are You?" *The Philosophy of the Coens*. Ed. Mark T. Conard. Kentucky: University Press, 2012.

meaning as well? Deakins has built an impressive body of work over his storied career, but what is even more astounding is that he has collaborated with the Coens on eleven films. His work on this film, and the cinematographer's work in general, lacks substantial scholarship, yet it is such an essential component in the filmmaking process. The cinematography of the film presents an opportunity to explore the visual language of the cinema, and the often-complicated relationship between reception and intentionality. It also begins a discussion between two factions that rarely speak to one another—theory and production. Cinematographers are generally not theorists, and theorists are generally not cinematographers. The two worlds would benefit if they talked to one another.

Many of the elements in the film are repurposed from prior films like *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Harper* (1966) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973), yet the Coens are film scholars who, as filmmakers, are adroit at using intertextuality²³ in a transformative manner. According to Allen H. Redmond, “The Coens produce films that both resuscitate considerations of classical genres and reinvigorate analysis of contemporary issues through genre.”²⁴ The old becomes the new, and the familiar becomes the novel. As such, the film can be read on multiple levels and each reading offers a rich variety of meaning.

The Big Lebowski (1998) is neo-noir crime drama that is based upon the mistaken identity of two men named Lebowski—one Jeffrey Lebowski, (the Big

²³ Intertextuality is a literary device also commonly referred to as an allusion, but it is a primary postmodern technique that uses textual referents in a work as a way of activating a reader's prior knowledge, and/or adding layers of meaning in the formation of a new idea.

²⁴ Redmond, Allen H. *Constructing the Coens*. New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2015.