

Films of the Coen Brothers  
Prof. RANDY KOVITZ

December 6, 2016  
Paper #1

by Henry Dixon

*Ex-Variety reviewer Todd McCarthy said this about The Big Lebowski: “the film doesn’t seem to be anything other than its own cleverness.” Do you agree with that statement? Is the film about anything?*



## The Dude Abides

Attention to detail is familiar to the Coen brothers — they are notorious for preparing every detail of a film before shooting anything. The Coen's filmmaking embodies the archetypical of classic (versus romantic) thought process, based on ideas, concepts, and abstractions that can be written, sketched, and detailed. Despite this, not all Coen films have achieved popular success; the Coens have often accused of cleverness, but Todd McCarthy's criticism of *The Big Lebowski* suggests the film is not "anything other than its own cleverness." Indeed, perhaps the film is more plot-antagonistic and wandering than other films the brothers have made, but the poignant part



of McCarthy's criticism suggests the film has a lack of purpose other than 'cleverness.' Now to fully parse this view, we must have an idea about what we mean when we discuss *The Big Lebowski's* cleverness. At its essence, McCarthy's critique seems to take issue with a lack of anything for the audience to take away at the end of the film. This is to say perhaps the film lacks purpose other than simply existing as a thoughtful film with idiosyncratic qualities (akin to if a film had a personality with traits like 'clever').

The experience of watching *The Big Lebowski* is strange, in large part to the Coen's irreverence for plot. Many of the strange elements of the film (e.g. the dream sequences, incidental character interactions) are established and quickly abandoned, leaving no lasting

impact on the arc of the story. Despite this apparent lack of purpose, the film feels like it has a lot going on — a lazy bowler who gets mixed up in a kidnapping plot is an exciting premise, and the supporting characters are eccentric and entertaining. The main cause for this weirdness is that things happen and then they stop. It's useful to compare *The Big Lebowski* to the Coen's *Burn After Reading*, which has a similarly wandering plot but never achieved the popular success or cultural significance of *The Big Lebowski*. Both films rely on a frenetic and improbable plot pieced together from a beautiful bricolage — fragments of assorted moments in the film. The difference between the two movies is that the often diverse and sporadic plot points in *Burn After Reading* seem to build upon themselves; things relate back to earlier events and things become more intertwined until it builds to nothing. By contrast, *The Big Lebowski*, does not try to have the same kind of build-up, and the audience is simply left with nothing when a lot of the situations just stop before they even seem to get going.

McCarthy's qualm with the film seems to concern the perception that movies have a lesson, a moral, a story arc — something that the character undergoes to effect some kind of change — a progression from who the character was to who the character becomes, a reflection of growth and progress through the film. The stop-and-start nature of *The Big Lebowski*'s plot is



the source of the surreal comedy; the sporadic pacing creates anticipation in the audience to see what all of these disparate pieces add up to, but the movie never provides that kind of closure.

Many film critics, writers, and philosophers have examined the philosophy of Dude-ism in a serious light, with countless books produced on the subject. Moreover, many of The Dude's most famous catchphrases are present in cultural vernacular (most notably, "that's just like your opinion, man"), so it would be difficult to argue that the movie lacks cultural significance. Roger Ebert addressed McCarthy's criticism head on when he said, "*The Big Lebowski* is about an attitude—not a story," and that judging this film as you would for others is perhaps missing the point of it. *The Big Lebowski* is not about the plot, it is about The Dude himself. The end of the film mirrors the start; the narrator returns in person and meets The Dude at the bowling alley, and their conversation ends with the narrator saying, "Take it easy dude. I know that you will." The Dude takes a minute and before providing a dispassionate response "Well you know, The Dude abides." This scene, which harkens back to the narrator's opening monologue about who The Dude is, sends a clear message: The Dude is still The Dude. At this point, there are so many unresolved questions and loose ends that the Coens do not even try to address, but this makes the most sense in the world; it does not matter how all of these situations resolve themselves because it simply does not matter to The Dude.



NARRATOR  
How have things been going?

THE DUDE  
Strikes and gutters, ups and downs.

NARRATOR  
Sure. I gotcha.

THE DUDE  
Yeah. Well, take care, man. Gotta get back.

NARRATOR  
Sure. Take it easy, Dude.

THE DUDE  
Oh, yeah.

NARRATOR  
I know that you will.

THE DUDE  
Yeah, well, *The Dude* abides.

## Works Cited

*The Big Lebowski*. Prod. John Cameron, Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Ethan Coen, Mary Zophres, Rick Heinrichs, Jean Black, and Daniel Curet. By Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, Skip Lievsay, Tricia Cooke, Carter Burwell, T-Bone Burnett, Roger A. Deakins, Janek Sirrs, Jerry Hewitt, Bill Landrum, Jacqui Landrum, Todd Kasow, Sonny Kompanek, Happy Walters, and Bob Dylan. Dir. Joel Coen. Perf. Jeff Bridges, John Goodman, Julianne Moore, Steve Buscemi, Peter Stormare, David Huddleston, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Sam Elliott, John Turturro, Ben Gazzara, and David Thewlis. PolyGram Filmed Entertainment Presents, 1998.

King, Lynnea Chapman. *The Coen Brothers Encyclopedia*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Print.