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THE COEN BROTHERS

RONALD BERGAN

Second Edition

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BROTHERS

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THE
COEN
BROTHERS

Second Edition

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION
BY THE AUTHOR

RONALD BERGAN



Arcade Publishing • New York

For Rik Boulton, Richard Statman, and
Vito Rocco, friend, colleague, and idol, respectively

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the
worst Are full of passionate intensity.

W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Introduction to the Second Edition

- I O, Brother!
- II Kings of the Indies
- III The Brothers Geek
- IV First Blood
- V Hi Stakes
- VI Double Crossing
- VII Hollywood Nuts
- VIII CapraCoen
- IX Yah! Yah!
- X Cool Dudes
- XI Odd Odyssey
- XII James M. Coen
- XIII Intolerable Hollywood Bowel Syndrome
- XIV Blood Complex
- XV A Comedy of Errors
- XVI A Good Jew
- XVII Pardners
- XVIII A Folk Tale
- XIX Hail, Coens!

Filmography

Bibliography

Index

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

“Reasonable doubt. I’m sayin’, sometimes, the more you look, the less you really know. It’s a fact. A proved fact. In a way, it’s the only fact there is.”

Freddy Riedenschneider in *The Man Who Wasn’t There*

THE REASON I WROTE THE first edition of this biography, published in 2000, was that the Coen brothers were among the most exciting, innovative, intriguing, and amusing American film directors around. And they were the most independent! What I particularly admired, and what interests me in most art, was the allusiveness and intertextuality of their films. They were especially aware that their films came after more than seventy years of cinema history, and they paid homage to the writers and directors that had influenced them. But their work was no mere pastiche or superficial acknowledgement of their predecessors. They had, in Ezra Pound’s terms, “made new.”

When they first burst onto the scene with *Blood Simple* in 1984, they immediately established their credentials as the true descendants of the masters of the American film noir of the 1940s, and showed how profoundly they were imbued with the spirit of the hard-boiled school of writers such as James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and Dashiell Hammett. Above all, they had immediately grasped the language of cinema. They were not content to use the tools of conventional narrative but sought to explore the supremacy of the image. In film after film, they found the appropriate visual style for the subject. Each of their films had a different look and feel, and yet each carried the brothers’ individual signature. This was heartening in a period when Hollywood movies were becoming more and more anonymous and increasingly aiming at teen audiences. Yet the Coen brothers’ films could be appreciated by sophisticated adults who got the references, as well as by those who enjoyed them on a less

cerebral level.

However, I cannot disguise the fact that I've been disappointed by some of the Coens' films since the last edition in 2000, and what I saw as a detrimental move into the mainstream. But this was only measured by the highest standards that they had set themselves. Nevertheless, I was confident, given Joel and Ethan's singular talents and track record, that another high would be just round the corner.

I was not wrong. They soon came up with *No Country For Old Men*, for which they carried off three Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay, plus Best Supporting Actor (Javier Bardem). This enabled the Coens to join the few elite directors honored in three main categories for one film. There was also almost unanimous critical acclamation, with some reviewers, like Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone*, considering the movie to be "a new career peak."

No Country For Old Men was the first direct adaptation of a novel, after which the Coens returned to original screenplays: *Burn After Reading*, which I consider a blip, and *A Serious Man*, their most personal and least commercial film (with *The Hudsucker Proxy*). Then it was back to an adaptation/remake with *True Grit*, nominated for ten Academy Awards, their least personal but most commercial film.

Although, as Joel admitted, "Neither of us rides, and I don't think we'd thought enough about the horses. They're at the front of every scene and that was tricky at times," that didn't disqualify two middle-class Midwest Jews from making a superior western.

"No horses were harmed" during the making of *True Grit*, just as "no Jews were harmed" during the making of *A Serious Man*, a subject that was closest to their own childhood experiences in 1967, filtered through their black humor. *Inside Llewyn Davis*, set a few years earlier in 1961, at the time of the folk revival, gave the brothers the chance to explore their favorite theme of the loser, adding the struggling folk singer to the list that includes Hi, Barton Fink, Norville Barns, The Dude, Ed Crane, and Larry Gopnik. Of the character of Llewyn Davis, Ethan declared that "It's more interesting for us to make a movie about a loser. Who wants to make a movie about Elvis?"

One could say that the Coen brothers know as much about being losers as they know about riding horses. Because, whether an adaptation, a remake, or an original screenplay, commercial or personal, a Coen brothers' film is always an event. Retaining their position as foremost among filmmakers who emerged in

the 1980s, the Coens continue to surprise, astonish, irritate, amuse, and inspire.

Ronald Bergan
Prague, 2015

I

O, BROTHER!

“The way we work is incredibly fluid. I think we’re both just about equally responsible for everything in the movie.”

1 *The Mark of Coen*

FILM DIRECTOR JOEL COEN SLAYS YOUNGER BROTHER ETHAN!

DURING ONE OF THEIR WRITING sessions, Joel Coen (46) suddenly pulled out a gun on Ethan (43), his brother and co-creator of all their movies, and threatened to kill him. Ethan begged him not to do it. “Look into your heart,” the younger man pleaded, echoing the words that John Turturro speaks when he is about to be killed in *Miller’s Crossing*. But Joel blasted the .44 Magnum into Ethan’s chest two or three times in the manner of some of the many violent scenes in their films. He then took Ethan’s body into the country around Minneapolis, Minnesota, their hometown, and was feeding it into a mechanical wood-chipper when the police caught up with him. Joel then turned the gun on himself. The motive for the killing is still unclear. Some say that Joel could not tolerate the duality of their existence. Scrawled on a piece of paper on his desk was a quote from Edgar Allan Poe’s *William Wilson*, a story in which a mean-spirited gambling Austrian officer murders his *doppelgänger*, confesses, and kills himself.

You have conquered and I yield. Yet, henceforth art thou also dead—dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.

When the quotation above was submitted to the police graphologist, it was found

to have been written by Roderick Jaynes, the mysterious editor on most of their films, and the writer of the introductions to the published scripts of *Barton Fink* and *Miller's Crossing*.

Naturally, like most people, I was shocked by the totally unexpected fratricide. But, to be honest, as the brothers' biographer, I was secretly delighted. What a coup! Joel couldn't have timed it better. The tragic event happened just as I was completing my biography and wondering how to end it. There is never much problem in the cases where the subjects are dead, but with the living it is far more difficult because the story has not ended. This gruesome killing gave my biography, or "bigraphy," just the sensationalist element it needed, a *sine qua non* for biographies these days. Up to that point, I had failed to dig up anything even vaguely scandalous about the brothers, though I hoped to suggest that they were abnormally close, a relationship on which new light was cast by the Coencide.

Yet, nobody would ever have imagined that such a thing could ever have happened. There was a clue in something Joel once said when asked how the brothers determined which of them would produce and which direct. "I'm about three years older and thirty pounds heavier, and I have about three inches on Ethan in terms of reach. But then he fights real dirty. I can beat him up so I get to direct." Ethan concurred: "It's those critical three inches in reach that make the difference."

I was reading the screaming banner headlines, when a gust of wind caught the newspaper and carried it away from me. I tried to chase it along the road, but it kept evading my grasp. And then I woke up . . . I was unsure whether I was relieved or disappointed.

There's a guy in No. 7 that murdered his brother, and says he didn't really do it, his subconscious did it. I asked him what that meant, and he says you got two selves, one that you know about and the other that you don't know about, because it's subconscious. It shook me up. Did I really do it and not know it?

The Postman Always Rings Twice (James M. Cain)

2 *Being the Coen Brothers*

My thoughts went back to the day, over a year before, when I was first commissioned to do a biography of the Coen brothers and approached them to ask if they would cooperate. It was a situation that reminded me of a cartoon I once saw of a man opening the door of his apartment to a stranger. "Excuse me,"

says the visitor. “You don’t know me but I’m your biographer.” Joel asked me, “Why would you want to write a biography of us? Listen, you’ve written books on Jean Renoir and Sergei Eisenstein. We can’t compare to them in any way. We’re boring.” I assured him that I, and my potential readers, were more interested in their public lives than their private ones. After all, I wasn’t writing a book on some bimbo movie star, male or female. But they were skeptical. “Actually, to tell the truth, we don’t want a book written about us.”

“Come on,” I thought, “we’re not talking J. D. Salinger here!” However, there was one condition on which they would agree to cooperate, which I will come to later in this chapter.

The Coen brothers, however reluctantly, have submitted themselves to endless interviews and photo sessions, though they are seldom seen smiling in the photos. “We’re not usually in a smiling mood when we get our pictures taken,” Joel explained. “It’s not one of our favorite things. The best interview we ever did was with a guy from *Details* magazine. We did it and then he went away and must have decided we were too boring, so he just made up the entire piece himself.”

“I have to say,” interjected Ethan, “it was a big improvement. But if we keep being interviewed, we’ll never get any work done. You can print whatever you want. You don’t have to confirm anything.”

Ideally, what biographers want is to enter the minds of their subjects, not literally, as in the Spike Jonze film *Being John Malkovich*, but in a figurative sense. “I want you to enter my mind,” says cartoonist George Sanders to his “ghost” Bob Hope in *That Certain Feeling*. “Can I bring a toothbrush?” Hope asks. I had my toothbrush ready for the journey. I was willing to act like an ace reporter, responding to the demands of the city editor, like the one in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, which I quote with one name substitution.

“I wanna know what makes the Coens tick! Where are they from? Where are they going? I wanna know everything about these guys! Have they got girls? Have they got parents? . . . What’re their hopes and dreams, their desires and aspirations? . . . What do they eat for breakfast? Do they put jam on their toast or don’t put jam on their toast, and if not, why not, and since when?”

Although I had met the Coen brothers and seen them a few times previously, I often wondered whether they were for real. Were they, as some headlines have suggested, “Brothers from Another Planet?” Or are we to believe George Clooney, who told an interviewer on the set of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* that

“They are not brothers at all, and Ethan is really a woman. Don’t let the whiskers fool you!”

When I first spoke to Joel, he was just about to embark on the screenplay of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* with Ethan. He told me he would speak to Ethan about the biography and that I could contact them through Alan J. Schoolcraft. Having already been forewarned of the prankster nature of the brothers, I skeptically questioned the existence of Mr. Schoolcraft, but Joel insisted there was such a person. The name struck me as invented. Knowing of Alan Jay Lerner, the lyricist of *My Fair Lady*, I put two and two together: Lerner, Learner, Learning, School Craft. QED.

I admit that I subsequently spoke regularly to Schoolcraft on the phone, although his voice sounded suspiciously like Joel’s. He seemed to act as the Coen brothers’ factotum. A sort of Figaro, which is an anagram of *Fargo* without the I. Then I read a diary by one Alex Belth who worked as an assistant on *The Big Lebowski*. He writes: “I was introduced to Alan J. Schoolcraft, a recruit sent over from Working Title . . . I took one look at the Schoolcraft and thought there just wouldn’t be enough for two. He was a hulking slab of a lad with a fuzzy blond head and devilishly raised eyebrows over his shiny Irish eyes. The guy was pushing thirty and had been out in La-La land for a few years.” This piece of purple prose convinced me that Schoolcraft was a figment of the Coens’ imagination and that Belth was playing along.

I was further frustrated when I tried to contact their editor Roderick Jaynes, who lives in Haywards Heath, not far from London where I lived, but I kept being told that he was either abroad or unavailable. I even stupidly began to question his existence, though I knew he had been nominated for an Oscar for his work on *Fargo*. As with Schoolcraft, I analyzed Roderick Jaynes’s name. From where did the name derive? I remembered that Roderick Usher was incestuously attracted to his sister in Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Jaynes echoes Janus, the two-faced Roman god. And that is how the Coens were mostly seen—as a two-headed, filmmaking mutant.

3 *The Ministry of Silly Names*

Both Joel and Ethan are Biblical names. Joel is Hebrew for “Yah is God,” meaning “Jehovah is the only true god.” In the Bible, Joel was a minor prophet, though he had a book named after him. According to nameologists, Joels are considered ambitious, intelligent, caring, and creative. Ethan means firm and

strong. In the Bible, Ethan the Ezrahit is an obscure figure, only mentioned as being surpassed in wisdom by Solomon. The only other Ethan as famous (yes, there is the actor Ethan Hawke) is a fictional one, Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. There are not too many celebrated Joels either, although two appear in these pages—Joel Silver, the Hollywood producer of *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and Joel McCrea, the star of Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels*, from which the Coens took the title *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Joel and Ethan might be considered silly names by some, but they are not nearly as silly as the ones they have invented for their characters. Like one of their emulates, Preston Sturges, they take a Dickensian delight in the comical cognomen. Gertrude Kock-enlocker (Betty Hutton) is the heroine of *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), who gives birth to sextuplets (one better than the mother in *Raising Arizona*), but can't remember the father's name. She only remembers that his name was something like Ratsky-Watsky.

In Sturges's *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), Rudy Vallee plays millionaire Hackensacker III, not too distant a name from millionaire Hudsucker. (From a different world comes J. J. Hunsecker, the vicious newspaper columnist played by Burt Lancaster in Alexander Mackendrick's *Sweet Smell of Success*.) The ruthless businessman Sidney J. Mussburger (Paul Newman) starts toying with changing the name of Hudsucker Industries to Mussucker Industries, Hudburger Industries, Sidsucker Industries.

The slogan of wealthy furniture dealer Nathan Arizona, the father of the quints in *Raising Arizona*, is "If you can find lower prices anywhere my name ain't Nathan Arizona," when actually his name is the even sillier Nathan Huffhines. "Would you buy furniture at a store called Unpainted Huffhines?" he says. In the same movie, there are the Snoates brothers, Gale and Evelle, and the terrifying Lone Biker of the Apocalypse with the incongruous name of Leonard Smalls. The leading characters are H. I., or Hi (as in drugs) and Ed (as in Edwina).

The Big Lebowski, a funny name in itself, features a video porn producer called Jackie Treehorn and a Chicano bowling fanatic called Jesus Quintano; the Soggy Bottom Boys, Wash Hogwallop (obviously a hick), and Vernon T. Waldrip (an uppity drip) appear in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?.. Fargo* has Gaear Grimsrud and Carl Showalter. The "funny looking" Steve Buscemi, who plays Showalter, also plays Mink, a little rodent, in *Miller's Crossing*. However, the most emblematic of their characters' names, in the tradition of Restoration comedy, is Barton Fink (John Turturro), "fink" meaning a sneak or unpleasant person.

4 *First Sighting*

Friday, May 24, 1991—the Duke of York’s Cinema in Brighton, Sussex, England. We have just watched *Miller’s Crossing* as part of the Brighton Festival. Joel and Ethan are being interviewed on stage after a screening. Although I knew already from having met a number of film directors, and interviewed some of them, that they are no longer whip-wielding, eye-patch and jodhpur-wearing megalomaniacs, I still have a romantic notion of these “helmsmen” of the cinema. Now they are just like you and me, and sometimes much younger. Little did I know that evening, almost a decade ago, that I would attempt to play their Boswell, although Dr. Johnson was over twenty years older than his biographer. The reverse would have seemed quite risible. Of course, a biographer can be older than a deceased subject.

After coming out of my reverie of how young the brothers looked, I became aware of a nasty aroma from Ethan’s sneakers. It was the price I paid for being too much of a fan and sitting in the front row. Some of the audience challenged them on the filmmaker’s “responsibility” with regard to representing violence. Joel and Ethan brushed off any sense of responsibility, which didn’t go down too well with some of the more prissy questioners, but the Coens didn’t seem at all bothered.

5 *Double Whoopee*

“We received your fax regarding a biography, but due to our exceedingly busy schedule we will be unable to participate in the book for some time. However, in going over your résumé we noticed a prior bio on Laurel and Hardy. If you wished to reissue that particular book and substituted ‘Joel and Ethan’ for ‘Laurel and Hardy’ you would have our blessing.”

I decided to try it. Below is an extract from the original first chapter of this biography.

Although it took a few more films to develop the fixed personalities that Joel and Ethan Coen would be loved and acclaimed for, it was clear that *Blood Simple* was the beginning of a perfect comic partnership—Joel displaying his pomposity and outraged dignity, and Ethan innocently unaware of the havoc his idiocy causes. In their T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers, they were vagrants from bourgeois pretensions. However, despite their deference to authority, their unfailing courtesy, and their reverence for property, they inevitably left a trail of destruction in their wake. Yet if they had been merely idiots they would never have attracted the love and laughter of generation after generation. Much of their appeal lay in a childlike innocence—children suddenly finding themselves having to behave as adults in a harsh adult world. When Ethan cried, he cried not out of anger or hurt, but because he was confused. Even as married men,

they behaved like naughty boys trying to escape from their nannies.

Unfortunately, it was too difficult to continue in this vein, because I started getting into a fine mess when certain real discrepancies between the lives of The Thin One And The Fat One and those of The Thin One and The Thin One kept creeping in. Yet the Coens have often been referred to as a double act, and they do identify with the comic duo to a certain extent, though which is which is hard to tell. Oliver Hardy might not have been the explicit model for the many fat men (mostly John Goodman) in the Coens' movies, but his influence on them is evident. However, Ollie was the master of the slow burn—when Stan landed him in a fine mess, he would just glare at the camera and twiddle his tie—while the Coens find “howling fat men” funny.

In *Raising Arizona*, the two cons, Gale (John Goodman, the Hardy one) and Evelle (William Forsythe, the Laurel one), escape from jail and come out in the mud, a scene reminiscent of one in *Pardon Us* (1931), Laurel and Hardy's first feature. Stan and Ollie are sent to prison for bootlegging. When they make their escape, they find themselves in cotton fields, where they black up and join the cotton pickers undetected. The three escaped convicts in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* pretend to be black when they record a “Negro song” as the Soggy Bottom Boys for a blind record producer, and later black up to effect an escape from a chain gang. Of the two cons in *Raising Arizona*, the Coens remarked: “We first imagined Gale and Evelle to be sort of the Laurel and Hardy of the Southern penal society. Gale being the bigger older one and Evelle more the Stan Laurel type. They looked like grownup babies.”

As in *Their First Mistake* (1932), in which Laurel and Hardy have to look after an adopted baby, Gale and Evelle have Nathan Arizona, Jr., the infant they have abducted, on their hands. When Evelle holds up a store to get diapers and balloons for the baby, he asks the shopkeeper if the balloons are a funny shape. “Not unless you find round funny,” says the shopkeeper. The Coens obviously found “round funny” like the hula hoop—you know, for kids—in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and big, round men like business tycoon Waring Hudsucker (Charles Durning), the detective (M. Emmet Walsh) in *Blood Simple*, gangster Johnny Casper (Jon Polito) in *Miller's Crossing*, and John Goodman.

In *Liberty* (1929), Stan and Ollie are back in prison but quickly make a break for it and somehow find themselves on the top of a partly built skyscraper, not the best place for Ollie to discover that a crab has sidled into his pants. Panic reigns as much as when Paul Newman falls out of a skyscraper window in *The*

Hudsucker Proxy with only the Laurel-like innocent, Tim Robbins, to hold him up by his feet.

In *The Big Lebowski*, John Goodman attacks a Corvette with a crowbar, smashing the windshield and the driver's window, thinking it's the car of someone on whom he wishes to inflict revenge. Unfortunately, it's the wrong car, and the Mexican owner takes the crowbar away from him and starts to smash what he believes is Goodman's car. This derives almost directly from *Big Business* (1929), in which a splenetic James Finlayson and Laurel and Hardy wreck each other's Tin Lizzies with abandon.

Stan and Ollie are known in France by the singular sobriquet of "Laurelardee." As the brothers speak with one voice, it seemed an unnecessary chore to divide their enunciations into "said Joel," "added Ethan," "Joel interrupted," "Ethan interjected," "explained Joel," "ejaculated Ethan" throughout the book. I, therefore, considered calling the Coens, in order to vary the prose, Jethan, Ethoel, Joethan, Jethco, or even Ethel. How much better to quote them as one! e.g. "When we're writing the script, we're already starting to interpret the script directorially," remarked Jethco. However, more often than not I have synthesized their individual utterances into one quote, so that when one reads "said the Coens," it does not mean that they literally spoke in unison.

ED: You mean you busted out of jail?

GALE: Waaal . . .

EVELLE: We released ourselves on our own recognizance . . .

GALE: What Evelle means to say is, we felt the institution no longer had anything to offer.

6 *Coenciescences*

According to Ephraim Katz, “the brothers work in perfect harmony as a synchronized unit, planning and writing their films together and taking turns at directing scenes.” The brothers referred to here are not the Coens but the Italians Paolo and Vittorio Taviani. Codirected films and sibling filmmakers are not as “singular” or uncommon as has been made out. After all, in the beginning were the Lumière Brothers, August and Louis, whose surname has a poetic congruity. Let There Be Light! and there was Cinema! Twin brothers John and Roy Boulting interchanged as producer and director, and Albert and David Maysles made their Direct Cinema documentaries together. At another extreme are twin brothers Mike and George Kutch, camp, low-budget, underground New York directors. Like the Coens, they were first let loose with 8mm cameras in their childhood, but unlike the Coens, the Kutch brothers never graduated to 35mm. “I’m afraid of working on a big picture,” explained George. “I really wouldn’t want anyone to sink their money into a project of mine and then lose the money.” More recently, there have been Peter and Bobby Farrelly (*There’s Something About Mary*), Larry (now Lana) and Andy Wachowski (*Matrix*), and the Belgian prize-winning brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne (*La Promesse, Rosetta*).

*

Nominally, Joel directs and Ethan produces, but they are jointly involved in every aspect of production and share the credit as screenwriters. So why does Joel take credit for directing while Ethan takes credit for producing? “We really codirect the movies,” Joel explained. “We take separate credits but actually do pretty much everything together. There really isn’t a good reason. We got in the habit with *Blood Simple*, just to stake out these two areas, to say, ‘Look, he produces. Don’t give us a producer.’ We could just as easily take the credits —‘Produced, written, and directed by’ the two of us. We’ve considered changing it, but we’d just get asked why we changed it at this point, so we might as well let it be. The credits on the movie don’t reflect the extent of the collaboration. I do a lot of things on the production side, and Ethan does a lot of directing stuff. The

line isn't clearly drawn."

Ethan: "We tend to see the movie on the same terms. There are no fundamental disagreements of what we are dealing with since we created it together."

Joel: "We share the same fundamental point of view towards the material. We may disagree about detailed stuff, but it's just a case of one person convincing the other that their point of view is truer to the final objective. It gets talked out and decided through discussion. Also, by that point we are also collaborating with a lot of other people."

Roger Deakins, the director of photography on almost all their films since *Barton Fink*, was initially concerned about the logistics of working essentially with two directors. "I soon realized, though, that I could ask either of them if I had a question. It didn't matter who I turned to. It was whoever was free and nearest or most convenient. They were so totally in sync."

William Preston Robertson, a friend of the Coens, described their way of speaking as "a word jazz of monosyllables and demi-sentences, halting advances into non sequitur and abrupt retreats into coma." When Robertson interviewed them separately, "the isolated Coen being queried would utter half a sentence, then look around curiously (Joel) or in panic (Ethan) when no one interrupted him to complete his thought."

Barry Sonnenfeld, the cinematographer on their first three pictures, commented that a typical discussion on the set after a take would consist of nothing more than Ethan saying, "Joel," and Joel responding, "Yeah, Ethan, I know. I'll tell them." Another trademark is to punctuate their sentences with "heh-heh" or "yeah-yeah," nervous verbal tics that seem to indicate amazement that anything they say should be taken seriously. John Turturro calls them the "yeah-yeahs."

"At times it was like being directed in stereo," said Jon Polito, who played Johnny Caspar in *Miller's Crossing*. "It's the yin and yang of one being," remarked close friend and erstwhile collaborator Sam Raimi. "They're like identical twins. Alike, but very different," according to Sonnenfeld.

But they are not identical twins, or even unidentical twins. For many years, they looked like a pair of perennial post-graduates—Coen clones can still be seen on every campus in America. Today, Joel, with his unkempt, long hair, resembles a nutty professor, while Ethan, his hair and beard more neatly trimmed, could be a lecturer in business affairs. They both wore granny glasses, though Joel's were

sometimes dark tinted, while Ethan's were wire-rimmed, and frequently T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers. One or the other or both have beards and mustaches from time to time. Joel's beard is often an attempt at a Van Dyke, and he likes to tie his straight black hair back in a ponytail, whereas Ethan seems to be able to do nothing with his gingery curly mass. Joel is taller and darker. Ethan is ginger and slight of build. One commentator separated them by saying that "Joel has the sort of good looks and elegantly casual clothes you'd expect from a semi-retired West Coast musician. Ethan, with his frizzy hair and more animated expression, seems closer to the kind of movie geek that you might expect."

According to William Preston Robertson: "Joel is lanky, dark-haired and ponytailed. In his more pensive moments, he will sit slouched in a chair with an expression that resembles an Afghan catching the faint scent of game in the wind. Ethan is somewhat shorter, but has a larger fuzzier head, and, in his more pensive moments, exhibits a propensity for tireless, outside-the-delivery-room-style pacing."

The brothers, then still in their twenties, first emerged blinking into the spotlight after *Blood Simple*, yet to find a distributor, had excited audiences at film festivals around the USA. For one reporter, "they made a comical appearance" at the New York Film Festival. "Petite, self-effacing and soft-spoken, they gave an air of pleasant tranquility . . . looking like a couple of nuclear-freezeniks from a Quaker college."

Gabriel Byrne, who played the lead in *Miller's Crossing*, commented on working with the Coens. "I had no idea what the brothers looked like and here they were, this double act who could be in movies themselves. They looked like somebody Diane Arbus could have shot, the one with long black hair who looks a bit like Peter Sellers in *The Wrong Box* [Joel] and the other curly-headed guy [Ethan] who chews biros all the time. And they paced up and down the floor, as they tend to do, nodding furiously one to the other."

Joel once tried to explain away their duet for two voices in a mundane manner. "A lot of journalists write about how we finish each other's sentences. What they don't realize is that, frequently, it's in an interview session where you've often been asked the question before." "Two heads are better than none," Ethan put in.

However, there are some divergences in their characters. Although they both smoke Camel Lights, Ethan likes good coffee from Starbucks, while Joel will drink "any-store-will-do" coffee that is handed to him and, when they write, Ethan does most of the typing. Joel is more talkative and sociable. Ethan takes

books to parties. (When Barry Sonnenfeld told director Penny Marshall, “They’re so easy to work with. It’s like working with one person,” she replied, “Sure, one of them’s mute.”) They live at opposite ends of Manhattan and, of course, they are married to different women, Joel to the actress Frances McDormand, and Ethan to the film editor Tricia Cooke.

Their tastes in films differ in one aspect. “I really like dog movies,” claimed Joel. “I’m not sure Ethan is into those.” “*Old Yeller* and that kind of thing,” replied Ethan dismissively. “It doesn’t irritate me, it’s just not an enthusiasm I share.” But Joel remarked that “Ethan is unbelievably sentimental and sloppy. He’s always trying to sneak it into our movies.” “Joel refuses to go to sentimental movies with me because my weeping embarrasses him. But don’t tell anyone in the press.”

It obviously amuses the brothers to express some disunity, but it is the sort of badinage they resort to in order to deflect any deep probing. However, if we were to take Joel’s remark at face value, then the slightly sentimental endings of *Raising Arizona* and *Fargo*, rare examples of sentimentality in their work, could be blamed on Ethan.

Sam Raimi remarked: “Ethan has the literary mind and has more of a say on scriptorial matters, leaving Joel more time to worry about visual issues.” Frances McDormand commented: “It’s not like you can say exactly that one scene or one line is Joel’s idea and another is Ethan’s. It’s a smooth, rolling process. Ethan is literary. He’s published short stories outside of their work together. Because of Joel’s earlier work as an editor, he’s much more visual.”

Nevertheless, the more one tries to separate the sibling Coens, like operating on Siamese twins, the more they knit together. Like Alexander Dumas’s *The Corsican Brothers*, The Minnesotan Brothers seem to have a “physical telepathy.” The fact that they come from the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul adds a further relish to the binary aspects of their lives.

There is a passage in a short story called “Greenleaf,” by one of the brothers’ favorite authors, Flannery O’Connor, that sums it up. “‘Which is boss, Mr. O.T. or Mrs. E.T.? She had always suspected they fought between themselves secretly. ‘They never quarls,’ the boy said. ‘They like one man in two skins.’ ‘Hmp. I expect you just never heard them quarrel.’ ‘Nor nobody else heard them neither.’”

Agreed to have a battle;

For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
Had spoiled his nice new rattle.

Just then flew down a monstrous crow,
As black as a tar-barrel;
Which frightened both the heroes so,
They quite forgot their quarrel.

Through the Looking Glass (Lewis Carroll)

II

KINGS OF THE INDIES

“You sort of do it by feel and not with reasons.”

7 *Independents’ Day*

IN 1996, AROUND THE TIME of the release of *Fargo*, an interviewer suggested that the Coens “were at the beginning of the independent filmmaker movement, doing it your way and all that.” “Yes, we were at the beginning of that bullshit,” replied Ethan facetiously. “We are grandfathers of the independent.” It was also intimated that they had become “the elder statesmen of indie cinema.” Joel’s reaction was, “When it comes to elder statesmen, I think Robert Altman still holds that position. Personally, I don’t want to be an elder statesman of anything. I don’t even want to be a statesman.”

But Independents’ Day was declared as long ago as 1919, when four of the biggest names in motion pictures, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charles Chaplin, and D. W. Griffith, formed United Artists and published their aims. “A new combination of motion picture stars and producers was formed yesterday, and we, the undersigned, in furtherance of the artistic welfare of the moving picture industry, believing we can better serve the great and growing industry of picture productions, have decided to unite our work into one association. . . . We believe this is necessary to protect the exhibitor and the industry itself, thus enabling the exhibitor to book only pictures that he wishes to play and not force upon him other program films which he does not desire, believing that as servants of the people we can thus serve the people. We also think that this step is positively and absolutely necessary to protect the great motion picture public from threatening combinations and trusts that would force upon them mediocre productions and machine-made entertainment.”

It was claimed at the time that “the lunatics have taken over the asylum.” But as Jack Lipnick, head of Capitol Studios in *Barton Fink* says, “The lunatics are

not going to run *this* particular asylum. So let's put a stop to that rumor right now." Unfortunately, the lunatics (and that includes the Coens) have never really run the asylum (i.e. Hollywood) but have often managed to influence those oversane, reactionary people who run the place to change the regime slightly, and allow their charges a little more freedom from time to time.

The first idealistic attempt at true independence failed. By the end of the 1920s, Griffith was ruined, Pickford and Fairbanks were heading for retirement, Chaplin's divorce cases and politics were beginning to tarnish his reputation, and United Artists, "the company built by the stars," passed out of their hands and into those of producer-businessmen. United Moguls might have been a more appropriate name.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the major studios consolidated their grip on the movie industry, despite the increased artistic freedom accorded to producer-directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and William Wyler and writer-directors like John Huston and Joseph L. Mankiewicz. In the 1950s, a growing number of independent producers gradually broke the stranglehold of the majors. In fact, by 1958, 65 percent of Hollywood movies were being made by independents, discounting the avant-garde and underground movements that had always been there. Units such as Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, the Mirisch Corporation, and Otto Preminger Productions were able to tackle more daring subjects, delving into those areas from which Hollywood had previously shied.

At the other end of the financial scale, Roger Corman, as "King of the Z movies," and John Cassavetes, whose *Shadows* (1959) was made for a mere \$40,000, provided hope and inspiration for a new generation of directors. Martin Scorsese, who was seventeen at the time of the release of *Shadows*, declared: "It had a sense of truth and honesty between its characters that was shocking. And since it was made with a 16mm camera, there were no more excuses for directors who were afraid of high costs and cumbersome equipment." (Joel was then five years old and Ethan was two.) At the same time, the French New Wave directors were turning their backs on conventional filming methods. They took to shooting in the streets with handheld cameras and a very small team, using jump cuts, improvisation, deconstructed narratives, and quotes from literature and other films. In particular, Jean-Luc Godard with *Breathless* (1960), dedicated to Monogram Pictures (the all-B movie studio), attempted to recapture (and comment on) the directness and economy of the American gangster movie. Then, with *Une Femme est Une Femme* (*A Woman Is a Woman*, 1961), Godard paid homage to the MGM musical, and, in *Alphaville* (1965), he used the

trappings of American pulp fiction and film noir to tell a futuristic story. The methods and subject matter of Godard, Francois Truffaut, and Claude Chabrol were taken up and adapted by young directors in other countries. The French New Wave was the most seismic event in the history of the cinema since the coming of sound.

In the 1960s, Hollywood found itself with an audience now increasingly drawn from the 16–24 age bracket. This younger generation expressed a growing aversion to traditional values and political and social processes, an attitude that culminated in the anti-Vietnam War movement in 1968. Furthermore, with the demise of the old Production Code, the limits of language, topics, and behavior were considerably widened, almost enough to satisfy the tastes of the young. They were pandered to mainly by the low-budget youth-oriented movies of Roger Corman such as *Wild Angels* and *The Trip*, both starring Peter Fonda, who produced and featured in *Easy Rider* (1969), the film whose combination of drugs, rock music, violence, and motorcycles caught the imagination of youth.

This movement was ignored by fifteen-year-old Joel and twelve-year-old Ethan, beginning their first experiments with Super 8 and influenced by more mainstream movies. While smaller-scale independently produced pictures were attracting the young, the major studios continued to target family audiences with the sort of movies that had attracted Doris Day fans such as little Joel and Ethan. As the producer Samuel Goldwyn, Jr. said, “Movie audiences have become like political groups. They are much more splintered than they used to be.”

In the 1970s, the majority of those people who regularly went to the cinema were in their teens and early twenties. In order to cater to their tastes, the studios turned more and more to a quartet of talented young film-school graduates who would dominate the cinema of the decade, and whose films would be among the biggest grossers in the history of motion pictures. Francis Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg were known as the “movie brats.” They were exposed to classic American films at just the historical moment when these films were becoming intellectually respectable, convincing them that the Hollywood tradition was an honorable one. But this group also realized that the tradition was ready to be reformed and revitalized from within. The New Hollywood, according to critics David Bordwell and Janet Staiger, “has absorbed narrational strategies of the art cinema while controlling them within a coherent genre framework.”

Joel and Ethan were still students when *The Godfather*, *Star Wars*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Jaws* came out, and when Woody Allen’s sophisticated and hilariously angst-

ridden cycle of New York movies took off with *Annie Hall*, introducing the most persuasive and pervasive strand of Jewish neurosis yet into screen comedy. When the Coens made their debut with *Blood Simple* in 1984, their elders David Lynch (*Eraserhead*), John Waters (*Pink Flamingos*), John Carpenter (*Dark Star*), and David Cronenberg (*Scanners*) had already entered the kingdom of indiedom. But in 1984, the year John Cassavetes released his final film, *Big Trouble*, Lynch was making a \$40-million movie, *Dune*; Waters had begun dipping into the mainstream with *Polyester*; Carpenter was swimming in it after *Escape from New York*; and Cronenberg had just made his first Hollywood movie, *Dead Zone*.

The unrepentant maverick Robert Altman, out of step with the more bland Hollywood of the eighties, had moved to New York, formed his own company, and was concentrating almost exclusively on transforming modern American plays into films. The field was now open for a new generation of “independent” directors, as distinct from “underground” filmmakers such as Andy Warhol, with a different perspective. It was Sam Raimi, Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee, and the Coens who led the way, lucky to have emerged at the time when indies were ready to bloom. But it was the Coen brothers’ genre-bending style, alternating between spoofery and seriousness, that had the greatest influence on most of the American independent movies that followed.

In one way, however, the lessons of the Fluxus artists, which the Coens satirized in *The Big Lebowski*, could be related to the independent film movement. As Yoko Ono said: “Fluxus is a very important movement in that sense. They let people know that they don’t I think have an excuse. They can’t say, ‘Well, I can’t buy any materials, and I don’t have enough money, therefore I can’t make art,’ or, ‘I didn’t go to school, so therefore I can’t make art.’ Anybody can do it if they put their minds to it. Each of us has a song of our own, and you can express that, either visually or in music . . . and in writing, too.”

The indies were supposed to be geographically situated at the anti-podes of the hypercapitalist mentality of studio filmmaking. Though the borders have often since become blurred, the indies represent the hip side of cinema. The self-effacing, geekish Coens accepted the hip mantle with amusement, pleasure, and some irony. To paraphrase a couple of their lines from *Barton Fink*, “We all have that Coen feeling. But since you’re the Coens, you should have it in spades.”

Asked how they felt about the new phase when directors get treated like rock stars, Ethan replied, “Well, that’s good. Joel’s pretty happy about that. People have always mistaken Joel for Joey Ramone. I’ve always been treated like a rock star. Nobody mistakes me for the other Ramone.” In Ethan’s short story, “Have

You Ever Been to Electric Ladyland?”, the obnoxious record producer says, “It is hipness that will kill this great industry. I am as hip as the next person. But I am from fucking Cleveland . . .” Substitute Minneapolis and you get the picture.

JACK LIPNICK: I respect your artistry and your methods, and if you can’t fill us in yet, we should be kissing your feet, for your fine efforts . . . (*He gets down on his knees in front of Barton.*) You know in the old country we were taught, as very young children, that there’s no shame in supplicatin’ yourself when you respect someone . . . On behalf of Capitol Pictures, the administration and all the stockholders, please accept this as a symbol of our apology and respect.

Barton Fink

8 *Our Way*

Sinatra-istically, the Coens have always done it their way, despite having big studios bankrolling them. More aptly, they have stuck to their guns both figuratively and literally. (There is a shooting in almost all their films, excepting the aberrant *The Hudsucker Proxy*.) In fact, they turned down a Warner Bros. offer of millions to direct *Batman* because the project didn’t originate from them, a *grand geste* that stood out from the pervasive venality of Hollywood. There were also plans to turn *Fargo* into a TV series, and Kathy Bates was already working on a pilot episode when the Coens decided to drop the project. Nevertheless, the Coens were happy to act as executive producers on the TV spinoff of *Fargo* in 2014.

According to Carter Burwell, the composer on all their films, “The Coens are different from any other filmmaking enterprise I’ve ever worked on, because we’re entertaining ourselves a lot of the time. I’ve never heard Joel and Ethan discuss an audience at this point—the audience will get this, or get that, or we’ll sell tickets. It’s certainly never been brought up in my presence. In other films, the process does seem more geared towards the audience—they test them, to see what they do and don’t understand. The concept of an audience is very different from how Joel and Ethan make a film. They have their own quality; they’re not bent out of shape to fit whatever the market demands. Those films are made inexpensively, so they’re able to make more of them. When you make a movie for six million dollars, you can hardly lose money, and it keeps their careers going for as long as they do.”

This was said at the time of their second film, *Raising Arizona*. Those were the days! *The Hudsucker Proxy* would cost twenty-five million dollars, and the Coens

started the new century with *To The White Sea*, budgeted at sixty million dollars. After *The Hudsucker Proxy* was given the cold shoulder by the critics, the brothers commented defensively: “It’s like the lower budget makes them [the critics] feel safer. Maybe you don’t seem like such underdogs when you’re doing the big budgeted stuff. Maybe that’s it. That’s probably a large part of it. Critics are usually kinder to cheaper movies than to those they perceive to be big Hollywood releases. In some of the bad reviews of *Hudsucker*, it was reported that the movie cost forty million dollars. In fact, it cost twenty-five million. It’s true that a lot of money seems like a stick they want to beat you with. They cut you a lot more slack if you spend less money, which makes no sense.”

It never entered their minds that *The Hudsucker Proxy* was their least commercially successful movie, not because of bad reviews, but because it was their most referential film and thus excluded much of the audience. It was also mooted that American audiences found the title off-putting, as “proxy” was not a word in most of their vocabularies. But all the Coen titles are enigmatic. How many people understand what *Blood Simple* or *Raising Arizona* mean? In France, for example, they were given the more elucidatory titles, *Sang pour Sang* (*Blood for Blood*) and *Arizona Junior*, while *The Hudsucker Proxy* was called *La Grand Saut* (*The Big Jump*). *Miller’s Crossing* is a rather tangential title (only two scenes, albeit crucial, take place there) and only one short scene transpires in the town of Fargo. *The Big Lebowski* is really about the Small Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), and Barton Fink is the protagonist’s real name, not a nickname. As for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, only independent filmmakers like the Coens could get away with such a title. Big studios would have, at least, asked for it to be called *O Brother*. The titles are symptomatic of the Coens’ independent spirit.

However, huge budgets, such as the one for *To The White Sea*, begin to separate the Coens from the younger wannabe directors and move them, whether they like it or not, into the Establishment, despite cinematographer Roger Deakins’s conviction that, “You’ll never see them selling out and going to Hollywood and shooting someone else’s script.”

Pauline Kael put the question on the release of *Blood Simple* as long ago as 1984: “What’s the glory of making films outside the industry if they’re Hollywood films at heart, or, worse than that—Hollywood by-product?” At the same time, Joel commented, “Ethan has a nightmare of one day finding me on the set of something like *The Incredible Hulk* wearing a gold chain and saying ‘I’ve got to eat, don’t I?’”

NORVILLE: You know, for kids! It has economy, simplicity, low production cost and the potential for mass appeal, and all that spells out great profitability . . .

The Hudsucker Proxy

9 Auteur Biography

The Coens claim to take responsibility for everything in their movies as true auteurs do. How does one tell an auteur from a hack? One indication is when a new film is referred to by the name of the director(s) rather than the title, e.g., the new Altman, Almódovar, Von Trier, Oliviera, Kaurismaki, Coen brothers. Whereas few people would ever refer to the new Howard, the new Reiner, or the new Cameron. In keeping with their genuine reticence, the brothers discreetly append their names to the end of the picture, the only directors ever to do so exclusively (they broke the rule with *The Big Lebowski*). Of course, no artists with distinctive, instantly recognizable voices, in whatever art form, need to put their names on their creations. Does one have to squint down to the bottom of a painting by Picasso to read his name, or be told that a symphony one has just listened to is by Mahler?

One critic saw *Blood Simple* as a “grab-bag of movie styles and references, an eclectic mixture of Hitchcock and Bertolucci, of splatter flicks and Fritz Lang and Orson Welles.” Another wrote, “It looks like a movie made by guys who spent most of their lives watching movies, indiscriminately, both in theaters and on TV and for whom, mostly by osmosis, the vocabulary and grammar of film has become a kind of instinctive second language.”

The fashionable label (1980s–1990s style) of “postmodernism” is often conveniently attached to the Coen brothers. If the world is meaningless, then why should art be meaningful? One should relish the nonsensical. According to Jean Baudrillard, in postmodern society there are no originals, only copies, or “simulacra.”

But what some critics have failed to see is that the Coens, from their very first film, were interested in working inside the rules of a genre, and then breaking them from within. They distill the essence of the genre so that each film contains every element that we expect from a film noir, gangster movie, detective thriller, or cons-on-the-run picture, the boundaries being pushed as far as they can go, deconstructing conventional narratives. Their films evoke the atmosphere of classic genre movies, sometimes quoting from specific ones obliquely, without nudging the audience’s awareness of them. They have found a visual language

(and a verbal one) that translates the past into the present. The ironic inverted commas that inevitably cling like crabs around most postmodernist movies are restricting (especially to audiences not as steeped in American movie history), while the Coens find them liberating.

Many of their movies are fundamentally films noir, disguised as horror movie (*Blood Simple*), farce (*Raising Arizona*), gangster movie (*Miller's Crossing*), psychological drama (*Barton Fink*, *A Serious Man*), police thriller (*Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*), comedy (*The Big Lebowski*, *Intolerable Cruelty*), social drama (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), spy drama (*Burn After Reading*), and western (*True Grit*). Yet, however different they are on the surface, each of the films contains elements of the other, horror edging into comic-strip farce, violence into slapstick and vice versa. One thing is clear: the Coens have little interest in what passes for “realism” in Hollywood mainstream movies. As W. P. Mayhew, the William Faulkner figure in *Barton Fink* says, “The truth is a tart that does not bear scrutiny.” Like Hitchcock, the Coens enjoy progressing from the prosaic to the baroque. They could also concur with Hitchcock, who observed: “Most films are ‘slices of life,’ mine are slices of cake.” *Pieces* of cake, they aren’t!

*

Most of the movies are influenced, in one way or another, as much by other films as by the holy trinity of American crime writers: Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain. *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* were variations on Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*. (The 1944 Billy Wilder film of the latter was co-written by Chandler.) The models for *Miller's Crossing* were Hammett’s *Red Harvest* and *The Glass Key*, and much of Chandler’s written prose was metamorphosed into cinematographic prose in *Barton Fink* and *The Big Lebowski*. Ethan had no qualms about spoofing Raymond Chandler, one of the most pastiched of American authors, in his short story “Hector Berlioz, Private Investigator.” Written completely in dialogue as a radio play, it still manages to convey Chandler through the younger Coen’s quirky, deadpan humor. “Berlioz: I'd seen it all, or thought I had. Then one day—September 14, 1947—she walked in. Since then, I *have* seen it all.”

Crime is the core of the screenplays, because “we feel that criminals are the least able people to cope in society.” The Coens are fascinated by losers, who

appear as the “heroes” of all their films. Kidnapping, which allows for comic or dramatic tension, occurs in five of the pictures, and they are littered with brutal murders. But they are intrinsically fables of good vs. evil. The Coens seem to have heeded Sam Raimi’s recipe for films: “The innocent must suffer, the guilty must be punished, you must drink blood to be a man.”

There are unmitigated symbols of evil who challenge the good at the climax as in any traditional kiddie matinee adventure. The sleazeball detective against the “innocent” wife (*Blood Simple*); the showdown between the Lone Biker of the Apocalypse and Hi, the naive hero (*Raising Arizona*); Eddie Dane, the vicious gangster’s henchman, and the ambivalent gambler hero Tom Reagan (*Miller’s Crossing*); the good/bad salesman Charlie Meadows/serial killer Karl Mundt wrestling with himself (*Barton Fink*); Aloysius, the malevolent sign-painter, struggles with Moses, the black clock-keeper, as the guileless Norville plunges forty-four floors (“forty-five counting the mezzanine”) toward the ground (*The Hudsucker Proxy*); the sinisterly taciturn Gaear Grimsrud confronts the cop, Marge Gunderson, hurling a log at her as she holds him at gunpoint (*Fargo*); the bowling pals Dude, Walter, and Donny stand up to the three German nihilists in black leather who are demanding money from them (*The Big Lebowski*); and Cooley, the persistent sheriff with the mirrored sunglasses, pursuing the escaped convict hero, Everett, who is saved by the flooding of the valley (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). But the most irredeemably evil character of all was the hitman Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem) in *No Country For Old Men*. The German critic Georg Seessien proffered:

Evil exists in Coen films in three very different forms. Firstly, in the very real form of power, power that is generally in the hands of fat, older men [Nathan Arizona Sr., Leo O’Bannion, Jack Lipnick, *The Big Lebowski*], power which is deeply rooted within society and whose continuation is guaranteed by capitalist exploitation and family order. Secondly, in the travails of young protagonists [Hi, Tom Reagan, Barton Fink, Norville Barnes, Jerry Lundegaard, the Dude, Ulysses Everett McGill] whose desire for something or other brings them into confrontation with the fat, older man. And thirdly, evil exists in the form of a very unreal, murderous projection, in wandering killers and monsters [Gale and Evelle, Johnny Caspar and Eddie Dane, Carl Showalter and Gaear, Treehorn’s Thugs and the German nihilists], which come into being at the point where the power of the old man meets the desires of the young hero.

The Coens paint pictures of a disenchanted America. Their heroes are

imprisoned in the ideology of consumerism, little men (Capraesque at one remove) often being pitted against big business and entrepreneurs. (They make a jokey reference to this in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, in which a candidate for governor uses a midget for his campaign slogan “Homer Stokes, Friend of the Little Man.” “Pappy O’Daniel, slave a the Innarests; Homer Stokes, servant a the little man!”) Mammon dominates *Raising Arizona*, *Miller’s Crossing*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and *Fargo*, in the latter of which, near the end, Marge delivers a rather unconvincing homily to the crook she has just captured. “There’s more to life than a little money, you know. Don’t you know that? . . . And here ya are, and it’s a beautiful day.”

The Coens approach each film as a new stylistic challenge according to the nature of the setting, the period, and the plot, yet there are always certain stylistic devices that crop up in a Coen movie such as wide-angle lenses, complicated tracking shots, creative sound, color, and art direction. Each film can be represented by one potent image: a hat, a typewriter, a skyscraper, snow, a bowling alley, leg irons.

Joel: “I don’t think there’s a thread, at least a conscious thread, anyway, between the different stories we’re telling. Sometimes when people point out to us things that are common to the different movies, it’s almost like, ‘Oh, yeah, I guess that’s the case’ as opposed to ‘Right, that’s how it was designed.’”

Ethan: “It’s what you call style in retrospect only. At the point of actually making the movie, it’s just about making individual choices. You make specific choices that you think are appropriate or compelling or interesting for that particular scene. Then, at the end of the day, you put it all together and somebody looks at it, and, if there’s some consistency to it, they say, ‘Well, that’s their style.’”

JACK LIPNICK: We’re only interested in one thing: Can you tell a story, Bart? Can you make us laugh, can you make us cry, can you make us wanna break out in joyous song? Is that more than one thing? Okay, the point is, I run this dump and I don’t know the technical mumbo jumbo. Why do I run it? I’ve got horse sense, goddammit. Showmanship.

Barton Fink

10 Credit Sequence

Like Woody Allen’s movies, the unity of the Coens’ pictures is created by the use of a repertory company in the tradition of non-American films such as those of

Ingmar Bergman, Yasujiro Ozu, or Federico Fellini.

Producer: Ethan Coen. **Director:** Joel Coen. **Screenplay:** Ethan Coen, Joel Coen (or Joel Coen, Ethan Coen). **Cinematographer:** Barry Sonnenfeld (*Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*), Roger Deakins (*Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *Intolerable Cruelty*, *The Ladykillers*, *No Country For Old Men*, *A Serious Man*, *True Grit*). **Production Designer:** Jane Musky (*Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*). Dennis Gassner (*Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). **Music:** Carter Burwell. **Editor:** Roderick Jaynes. **Costume Design:** Richard Hornung (*Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*), Mary Zophres (*Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). **Storyboards:** J. Todd Anderson. **Actors:** Frances McDormand, John Goodman, John Turturro, Jon Polito, Steve Buscemi, Holly Hunter, George Clooney.

11 *Critics' Choice*

Suddenly, there is the sound of two Coens laughing in their characteristic hiccupping manner. It is in response to attempts to submit their films to any kind of aesthetic, textual, or thematic analysis. They consider that to take intellectual stock of their work, to delve beneath the surface, is a vain exercise. In this they are in the tradition of macho directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Raoul Walsh, who believed they were merely good old-fashioned story tellers, and gobbled up over-intellectual interviewers for breakfast. The Coens are less cannibalistic. When questioned about the content of their films rather than the technicalities behind the making of them, they become reticent, evasive, facetious, or make like philistines.

I suppose when you're landed with a question you don't really know how to deal with you clam up. People interviewing us often look at the movies in different ways from ours, and when they present them on their own terms and ask the meaning of this or that, it's sometimes hard to know what to make of the questions. People read things into our work we didn't know existed. In certain films we've done, where there is an ambiguity designed into the movie, it's frequently the case that the reviewer won't let it rest as being simply ambiguity. And the audience then feel that they're missing something, not understanding something, and have to analyze something into a concrete answer when in fact the movie itself is designed so that you should just be able to watch it and enjoy it. Those journalists have a hard job. They could say, "This is a kind of funny movie and I laughed at it," and leave it at that, but they have to write a certain number of words, so they indulge in all sorts of things that will justify that number.

There is, therefore, some sincerity behind the jokey sarcasm of their comments on critics. “Young writers just starting out and eager to make good should know that the world teems with critics—ugly, bitter people, fat and acned for the most part, often afflicted with gout, dropsy, and diseases of the inner ear. Always they know better; always they recognize exactly what is missing; always, always they can point the way to the finer choice. That is why, on occasion, we search them out. Though the critic can tell you how to improve, he will never tell you what is equally important, when to stop improving. The critic is a lonely man, and a crafty one.”

Their attitude to criticism makes the role of the critic and/or biographer redundant, or reduces them to ciphers. But, as François Truffaut wrote: “No artist ever accepts the critic’s role on a profound level. In his early period he avoids thinking about it, probably because criticism is more useful to and also more tolerant of beginners. With time, artist and critic settle into their respective roles; maybe they grow to know each other, and soon they consider each other, if not exactly adversaries, in some simplistic image—cat and dog. Once an artist is recognized as such, he stubbornly refuses to admit that criticism has a role to play. . . . The artist in a sense, creates himself . . . and then places himself on display. It is a fabulous privilege, but only provided he accepts the opposite side of the coin: the risk involved in being studied, analyzed, notated, judged, criticized, disagreed with.”

The Coens have never been able to come to terms with this. Right from the start, the critical reaction to their work has puzzled them. “We thought when we were making *Blood Simple*, it was just a murder story. So imagine our surprise when we started reading reviews and discovered it was the bust of Homer. Or something in that league.”

Critics (more often than audiences) hunger for explanations of intentions, sometimes getting their knickers in a twist trying to seek them. When it was suggested by an interviewer that the scene where a woman is reading Russian literature while the creatives in *Hudsucker Proxy* are trying to come up with a name for the “extruded plastic dingus,” might be a critique of capitalist society, Joel laughed off the idea. “We weren’t really thinking of a critique of capitalism. That didn’t mean much to us.” It is, in fact, a pretty obvious joke about the passing of time, as she is reading *War and Peace* (always shorthand in American comedies for a long and difficult book) and is on *Anna Karenina* by the time they decide to call it the hula hoop.

Asked to explain the end of *Barton Fink*, where Barton is on a beach, with a

box (which might contain a woman's head), seeing the girl in the picture in his hotel room materialize, Joel agonized. "Boy that's a tough one. That's a really funny question!" Ethan helped out. "There's a guy on a beach with a head in a box. What do you say beyond that? We got some very interesting interpretations of *Barton Fink*. What was that by that French critic? 'God checks into a hotel'? He had it all worked out. In a way it was much more clever [sic] than anything we could have come up with."

Naturally, it had to be a French critic, always the object of the moviegoing Joe Public's scorn. There is a tradition of anti-intellectualism in American (and British) films. Hollywood has long been synonymous with mindless, crass, and meretricious mass entertainment. When Hollywood does treat important subjects, it manages, on the whole, to drain them of any depth, presenting the most simplistic and basic reactions to the so-called serious pursuits of existence: politics, philosophy, religion, and the arts. Movies have been a kind of antidote to solemnity and "high art," which is why any sociological, philosophical, or psychological approach to them is generally greeted with deep suspicion.

Film psychiatrists are often pompous gurus or of the crazy Viennese variety as consciously stereotyped by Dr. Hugo Bronfenbrenner in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. "Patient displayed litzlessness, apathy, gloomy indifference and vas blue und mopey. Ven asked vut four Rorschach stains reprezented, Patient replied, 'Nussink much,' 'I don't know,' 'chust a blotch,' und 'sure beats me.' Patient shows no ambition, no get-up-und-go, no vim. He is riding ze grand loopen-ze-loop . . ."

An intellectual writer like Barton Fink, according to John Turturro who portrayed him, was "living too much in his head. The film is all about heads and, at the end, his head is cut off metaphorically." When the derisible Barton is turned on by the servicemen while dancing with a girl at the USO hall, he reacts by pointing to his head and tapping his skull. "This is *my* uniform! This is how I serve the common man! This is where . . ." Finally, the common man (John Goodman) turns, shrieking, "Look upon me! I'll show you the life of the mind!" In contrast, Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara), the Hugh Hefner-type Sixties swinger in *The Big Lebowski*, taps his forehead with one finger, and says, "People forget that the brain is the biggest erogenous zone." "On you, maybe," replies the Dude.

Wisdom comes not from intellectuals, but from Moses, the black clock-keeper (*The Hudsucker Proxy*), the cowboy (*The Big Lebowski*), and the black blind seer (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*)—the kind of folksy characters who have all the

answers, to whom classic Hollywood movies have always given credence, and who are acknowledged by the Coens, with postmodern irony. However, the rabbis in *A Serious Man* are seen as false prophets.

Vladimir: Moron!
Estragon: Vermin!
Vladimir: Abortion!
Estragon: Morpion!
Vladimir: Sewer Rat!
Estragon: Curate!
Vladimir: Cretin!
Estragon (with finality): Critic!
Vladimir: Oh!
[He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.]

Waiting for Godot (Samuel Beckett)

12 *Cheech and Chong Coen*

In *The Making of The Big Lebowski* William Preston Robertson, trying to elucidate the cowboy voice-over and the tumbleweeds at the beginning of the film, expostulated: “It is an arch statement on America’s Great Western Expansion, with Los Angeles being the farthest geographic point in that expansion . . . and the chauvinism of Western Expansion, and, indeed, the absurdity of the pioneering masculine mystique itself. But more than that, it is about the past, and the irony of a land professing a doctrine of newness and expansion that is in reality a vestige of its cowboy past.”

Ethan’s reaction to this was: “Yeah, I mean, probably. It’s not that there’s some connection between the West and LA. It’s that it’s kind of wrong in a way. I mean, even the things that don’t go together should seem to clash in an interesting way—like, you know, a Cheech and Chong movie, but with bowling. You sort of do it by feel and not with reasons.”

Frances McDormand once chipped in during an interview with an earnest reporter: “You see that’s the problem talking to these guys. You can’t get them on the grand themes.” Asked if they were postmodernist, Ethan replied: “I’m not real sure. The honest answer is I’m not real clear on what postmodernism is.” Actually, the brothers may act like Dumb and Dumber, but they are really Smart and Smarter, or intellectual Beavis and Buttheads.

When asked what the image represents that accompanies the main title of *Miller's Crossing* and the parallel dream sequence in which a black hat is being blown through a forest, Ethan replied, "It doesn't represent anything. It's just a hat being blown in the wind." Joel added: "That hat in the dream is not a symbol, it doesn't mean anything in particular. It's an image that pleased us. You mustn't look for any deep meaning."

Gabriel Byrne, whose character of Tom Reagan dreams of the hat, asked Joel on the set one day, "What's the significance of the hat? I need to know." Joel said, "Ethan, come here, Gabe wants to know what the significance of the hat is." Ethan said, "Hmm. Yeah, it was significant," and then walked away leaving Byrne none the wiser.

In fact, this deflection from the search for significance is built into the screenplay. When Tom Reagan wakes up he tells his girlfriend Verna (Marcia Gay Harden), in bed with him, about the dream. "Yeh, and you chased the hat and it turned into something else." "No, it stayed a hat. And I didn't chase it." He further comments, "There's nothing more foolish than a man chasing his hat." Perhaps there's nothing more foolish than a critic chasing a symbol that evades him. To quote Ludwig Wittgenstein: "In order to recognize a symbol by its sign, we must observe how it is used with a sense . . ." or, to quote the Coens' patron saint, Raymond Chandler: "Scarcely anything in literature is worth a damn except what is written between the lines."

On *The Hudsucker Proxy*, an interviewer proposed that the characters represent Capitalism versus Labor. "Maybe the characters do embody those grand themes you mentioned, but that question is independent of whether or not we're interested in them—and we're not."

This is in contrast to the movie director John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) in Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), who sees a fight in a western on the roof of a train as "Capital and Labor destroying each other." Sullivan wants to make *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* "I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions. The problems that confront the average man . . ."

The Coens echoed this by making the pretentious playwright Barton Fink say: "We have an opportunity to forge something real out of everyday experience, create a theater for the masses that's based on a few simple truths . . . The hopes and dreams of the common man." Naturally, the Coens were sympathetic to the satiric intent of Sturges's film, and agree with the final sentiments expressed. "I don't want to make *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. That's all they've got in this cockeyed caravan."

James Agee's comments on Preston Sturges's films might serve equally for the Coens' work. "They seem to be wonderfully, uncontrollably, almost proudly corrupt, vengeful, fearful of intactness and self-commitment . . . their mastering object, seems to be to sail as steep into the wind as possible without for an instant incurring the disaster of becoming seriously, wholly acceptable as art."

III

THE BROTHERS GEEK

It was an odd choice, Minneapolis. To be sure, it was virgin turf; its Swedes, Poles, and German Lutherans had never organized on the model of eastern towns. But there seemed little to organize. The city had not much serious crime. It was dotted with scenic lakes. The people were polite. Many owned boats. In the summer they engaged in water sports; in the winter they skied. The stolid northern stock seemed immune to the great miseries and grand passions upon which crime traditionally feeds.

—“Cosa Minapolidan” (*Gates of Eden* by Ethan Coen) 13 *Minnesota Nice*

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, WAS AN ODD choice for Jewish families to make. Anyway, the Diaspora scattered many of them across the United States, some landing in the oddest places. The Coens found themselves in St. Louis Park, a middle-class suburb of Minneapolis, a rather staid and boring midwestern city. Maybe its very dullness pushed young Joel and Ethan toward a more imaginative life and an escape into a more exciting world, most of it gained from books and the movies. “It was to compensate for the fact that our lives were terribly mundane,” the brothers explained. “It was the suburbs, you know. I cannot think of a single, seminal childhood event,” Ethan remarked. “Bob Dylan got out of there at an early age and you can see why,” said Joel. “When I had the chance, I wanted to get as far away as possible as fast as possible.”

Yet, Minneapolis, for all its lack of excitement and particular visual resonance, is used as background to some of Ethan’s short stories, full of insights into a Jewish childhood filtered through fiction, and makes an appearance in *Fargo*, the film that some say put Minnesota on the map. (Other filmmakers followed, particularly Sam Raimi with *A Simple Plan*, who took on the Coens on their own ground, both literally and figuratively.) Ethan refers to his native city in a story called “I Killed Phil Shapiro,” in which the young narrator commits patricide in

his imagination/in actuality. “He moved us to Minneapolis. I lived in that strange frozen city where people’s breath hovers about them where fingertips tingle and go dead, where spit snaps and freezes before it hits the ground.” Minneapolis is among the coldest cities in the USA.

“What they really remind me of is two guys who grew up in bunk beds,” says a long-time friend. Joel and Ethan did share a room and were closer to each other than to their older sister Deborah Ruth (now a psychiatrist).

“I saw almost nothing of my sister from the outset of her puberty until she left for college six years later,” writes Ethan in the short story “The Old Country.” “She spent those years in the bathroom washing her hair. Very occasionally she emerged for food or to use the telephone, her head wrapped in a towel.” This came partly from life and partly from those Sandra Dee movies of the 1960s on which the boys doted.

The brothers skied a little and were bored at school. Bright but unexceptional, they went to the local public school attended mostly by Jews, but there were also Protestant kids of Scandinavian origin with names like Gustafson and Lundgaard. The Minnesota phone book is full of Olsons, Johnsons, Svensons, and Ericsons, descended from nineteenth-century immigrants who farmed the land when it wasn’t covered with three feet of snow. The Coens were brought up on Sven and Ole jokes, rather than Paddy or Polack jokes as in other parts of the country. Perhaps the Coens missed a beat by not naming a couple of characters Olsen and Johnson in *Fargo* as a homage to the madcap stars of *Hellzapoppin*’, although there is an Officer Olson in it.

It has been mentioned that there is something Japanese about the way the natives of Minnesota refuse to express emotion. In *Fargo*, in order to stress the point or subvert it, a Japanese Minnesotan named Steve Park (Mike Yanagita) breaks into tears in a bar, lies about his wife dying of leukemia, and tries to make a play for his heavily pregnant former school friend Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand). She plays it like an Oriental woman, looking around embarrassed, eyes lowered over her Diet Coke, while he is talkative and tactless.

The scene was filmed in a replica of the Radisson café in downtown Minneapolis that the Coens knew well. Another scene, where Jerry Lundgaard discusses the ransom with his father-in-law and Stan Grossman, a business associate, was shot in Embers Family Restaurant in St. Louis Park where, in his teens, Ethan once worked as a dishwasher.

It is rumored that Minnesotans are less likely to take part in television talk and game shows than citizens of other states. “Minnesota Nice” is given to the slow

manner of speech of many of the state's inhabitants of Scandinavian origin. It is said that they have to be cheerful and cooperative because they are holed up together through long winters. "The Coens exhibit that region's economy of speech and resistance to overt displays of emotion. They share a common Minnesotan reserve," explained a friend. In fact, in the Coens, natural Jewish volubility seems restrained by the "Minnesotan reserve," or conversely, the "Minnesotan reserve" is liberated by their Jewish volubility.

HOOKER ONE: They said they were going to the Twin Cities.

MARGE: Oh, yah?

HOOKER TWO: Yah.

HOOKER ONE: Yah, is that useful to yah?

MARGE: Oh, you bet, yah.

14 *The Old Country*

Joel (born November 29, 1954) and Ethan (September 21, 1957) and their sister Deborah Ruth, a few years the brothers' senior, grew up in an intellectual family in St. Louis Park. Their parents, Edward, an economics professor at the University of Minnesota, and Rena, a professor of art history at St. Cloud State University, both retired, were nominally orthodox (*frum*) Jews. "We were brought up relatively traditionally," Ethan explained. "Our mother made sure of that, but it wasn't very important to our father. They were moderately strict, however."

Quite a lot of Jewish families had congregated in St. Louis Park and its environs. It grew into a substantial Jewish community, and boasts the oldest and largest co-ed Jewish day school, though the Coen parents opted not to send their boys to it. In the 1990s, the synagogues and other local Jewish groups helped Russian-Jewish families settle there.

Joel and Ethan's paternal great-grandfather was a Polish Jew who immigrated to London. He changed his long Polish name to Coen thinking he would be taken for Irish and be better treated than as a Polish Jew. Their grandfather worked for a diamond importer in London, blew the whistle on some irregularity in the business, and as a reward was given a diamond, which he used to put himself through law school. He ended up as a barrister in London, wig and all.

Their paternal grandmother immigrated from Tsaritsin in Russia to New York as an adolescent after the Revolution. (She died in Hove, on the south coast of England, in 1991.) Toward the end of her long life, she began to lose her memory, her speech lost its sense, and then she stopped speaking altogether. But, a year before she died, she began to speak again . . . in Russian. Strangely, she had used her native tongue only rarely over eighty years. For some reason, she encouraged her grandchildren to memorize the phrase "Yayik do Kieva Dovedet," meaning "By your tongue you will get to Kiev," not a terribly useful phrase for three children living in Minneapolis. But its sense is "If you don't know just ask," a good maxim for biographers, and even film directors.

Their paternal grandparents were staying in New York when their father Ed was born. "Though technically he's American, he was brought up in London and

went to the London School of Economics. Being English, he has a distinctive sense of humor, but different from ours.”

The boys’ parents were religious, but not to excess. In contrast, their maternal grandfather and grandmother were orthodox Jews. Their grandmother, who came from Riga in Latvia, would not drive on the Sabbath. “When they paid us a visit on the Sabbath, my mother used subterfuge to make them believe we obeyed all the laws and that we didn’t do anything forbidden. That’s where we learnt about acting.”

But the Judaism that the Coens were brought up in didn’t really stick, though they still keep the religious holidays. Perhaps, like the British stage director and sometime comedian Jonathan Miller, they were Jew-ish, they “didn’t go the whole hog.” Nevertheless, they realized that to stop being Jewish is not as simple as “turning in your library card,” to quote the converted Jew Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) in *The Big Lebowski*. As Ethan wrote in his university thesis: “A distinguishing mark of religious attitudes is that one is forbidden to abandon them . . . the converted (to and from a faith) are a small minority (not counting as a ‘conversion’ someone’s outgrowing his kiddie-faith). That they are exceptional shows that there is some rule at work.”

The boys attended Hebrew school as preparation for their bar mitzvahs. Ethan evokes the sort of school it was (with poetic license) in his semi-autobiographical story “The Old Country.” It is set in 1967, is written in the first person, and is about a ten-year-old boy, the age Ethan was at the time.

“There was one, and only one, all-school assembly during my years in Talmud Torah [Torah Study]. It was at the outbreak of the 1967 Six-Day War . . . and for want of an auditorium, it was held in the snack bar. We were called together so that the faculty could tell us about Israel’s performance and prospects in the fighting just started. The main speaker was Ken Jacobson, an earnest teacher unlike most of the rabbis inasmuch as he was less than seventy years old, and who stockily strode the halls of the Talmud Torah in a cardigan sweater and knit yarmulke. (The old rabbis favored skullcaps of a slick black synthetic gathered into a hard button center.)”

In the same story, Ethan describes, with obvious envy and admiration, an anarchic student, whose rebellion goes too far one day and who is taken out of school for a week, only to return a docile shell of his previous self. “For the next several months Michael was a model student, if somewhat robotic, until his family moved to California, where (it was common knowledge) all meshuggenehs end up.”

What mysteries have been preserved, what lost, and what transformed in our migrations from Canaan to Eastern Europe to New York City and finally this far-flung garden suburb?

“I Shot Phil Shapiro” (*Gates Of Eden*)

15 *Jew Reckoning*

Until they made *A Serious Man*, there are few overtly Jewish characters in the Coen brothers’ films, most of which are populated by goys and rednecks. Those Jews, including Walter Sobchak, the adopted Jew, are pretty unsympathetic. In *Miller’s Crossing*, Bernie Bernbaum (John Turturro) or “the Schmatte,” as he is referred to, is a cowardly, double-dealing, crooked weasel of a man. *Schmatte* is Yiddish for cheap goods. Police chief O’Doole says of him, “It ain’t right all this fuss over one sheeny. Let Caspar have Bernie—Jesus, what’s one Hebrew more or less?” However, the Italian-American Turturro gives the character more than his due. “Bernie is a guy who’s trying to be a survivor. He’s constantly on the move. Which is kind of Jewish history.” But Joel put it into perspective. “People objected to the fact that the character was Jewish and about the way Gabriel Byrne takes him out in the woods to shoot him. It’s such a stretch to take this old Chicago school gangster behavior and turn it into a train ride to Auschwitz.”

Nevertheless, it is not forcing the issue to suggest that the Holocaust hovers over *Barton Fink*, which is deliberately set in 1941, on the eve of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Even the Coens reluctantly admitted that “the whole movie was supposed to feel like impending doom or catastrophe. And we definitely wanted it to end with an apocalyptic feeling.” Most horrifying of all, whether intended or not, is the knowledge that the affable insurance salesman Charlie Meadows (John Goodman), “the average working stiff. The common man,” whom Barton wants to write about, turns out to be “Madman” Karl Mundt, “who likes to ventilate people with a shotgun and then cut their heads off.” At the moment when he shoots a cop, he shouts, “Heil Hitler!”

It is also no coincidence that the two cops sent to question Barton about the murder in the crummy Hotel Earle turn out to have Italian and German surnames, Mastrianni and Deutsch. “Fink. That’s a Jewish name, isn’t it?” says Mastrianni. “Yeah.” “Yeah, I didn’t think this dump was restricted.”

Barton is Jewish, as is the vulgarian head of the studio, Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner), an amalgam of Louis B. Mayer, whom he physically resembles, and the hated Harry Cohn. “I’m bigger and meaner and louder than any other kike in

this town,” says Lipnick, who originally comes from Minsk, where Mayer was born.

“What’s interesting, is that you have these guys who were Jews from the old country, and they used to build synagogues for their parents on the back lots and make them as much like the synagogues in the old shtetls as possible,” Joel mused. “On the other hand, they wouldn’t admit anything about their own Jewishness and went around calling people kikes.”

“We were thinking about these characters as Jews, but we weren’t thinking about Jewishness,” Ethan added. “It just made sense to us that Barton would be Jewish, given where a lot of these people came from.”

It has taken a long time for Jews in the cinema to be treated as well or as badly as any other minority group. Jews as Jews were more or less invisible in Hollywood. Stars such as Tony Curtis (Bernard Schwartz), Kirk Douglas (Issur Danielovitch), Lauren Bacall (Betty Perske), and Jerry Lewis (Joseph Levitch) hid their origins behind Aryan names. In the rare cases when Jewish characters appeared in the movies, it was usually as victims of anti-Semitism as in *Gentleman’s Agreement* and *Crossfire* (both 1947). Because most of the Hollywood moguls were Jewish, Jews, when they appeared, were always handled with kid gloves while blacks, Asian American, Native Americans, and Mexicans were humiliated for years.

It was Woody Allen who first made the breakthrough with *Annie Hall* (1977), much as Spike Lee—initially greeted as “a young, black Woody Allen”—did with blacks in *Do the Right Thing* (1989). “He [Allen] has vacillated in his attitude toward Jews and Gentiles,” wrote Peter Biskind. “One moment sentimentalizing Jews as life-saving agents of passion and vigor, capable of revitalizing desiccated WASPs as he does in *Interiors*, the next denigrating them for their vulgarity, as he does in *Stardust Memories*, or romanticizing WASPs as vessels of truth and beauty put on earth to redeem eternally ambivalent Jews, as he does in *Manhattan*.” Allen himself repudiated this. “I use my Jewish background when it’s expedient for me in my work, but it’s not really an obsession of mine, and I never had that obsession with Gentile women.”

The Coens are more relaxed than either Allen or Lee on the racial issue, and have never cared for the sensitivities of minority groups, treating Jews as they do other characters. After all, Martin Scorsese and Francis Coppola never had any qualms about presenting Italian-Americans in the worst light.

In a way, it has only been permissible for Jews to be anti-Semitic, or rather, to

create unpleasant Jewish characters. Put Jackie Mason's jokes into a non-Jewish comic's mouth and they would sound offensive. One of the most obnoxious creations in Ethan Coen's stories, which contain many Jews, is the Jewish record entrepreneur in "Have You Ever Been to Electric Ladyland?" In a dazzling monologue, steeped in "fucks" and "cunts," he gives the police an endless list of enemies who could have poisoned his dog. "His first wife was Jewish, looked like a goddam horse, I used to call her Mrs. Ed—last year I sent the daughter an enema bag. 'On the occasion of your bar mitzvah, so you'll know the way to a man's heart.'"

If Jews in the Coens' movies get a rough ride, they are no more done down than other religious, ethnic, or social groups. In fact, as much as the Coens enjoy bending genres in their image, they are happy to play with stereotypes. In *Fargo*, Shep Proudfoot, a Red Indian mechanic on parole for dealing in narcotics and other criminal activities, is a sullen, unsympathetic, and violent man. (The Coens knew that the Dakota Indians gave their name to Minnesota, meaning "sky-tinted water.") When Shep beats up the petty criminal Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi), Carl yells, "Stay away from me, man! Hey! Smoke a fuckin' peace pipe, man!"

Miller's Crossing is peppered with characters who express racist remarks; Hi's obnoxious boss in *Raising Arizona* has a fund of Polack jokes, which he can't even get right, and Visser, the sleazy private eye in *Blood Simple*, when presenting the bar owner with evidence of his wife's unfaithfulness, says, "It ain't such bad news. I mean you thought he was a colored . . . You're always assumin' the worst."

However, blacks seem to be treated in a slightly gentler manner than most other groups. Meurice, the black barman in *Blood Simple*, is the only character who has a certain amount of control over his life. Other noteworthy blacks like Tommy Johnson, who believes he sold his soul to the devil to be "taught to play the guitar real good," the blind seer in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the clock-keeper in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and Mrs. Munson, the churchgoing widow at the center of *The Ladykillers*, are repositories of wisdom.

In *The Big Lebowski*, Turturro's Chicano bowler Jesus Quintana is broadly caricatured. Accompanied by O'Brien, "a short fat Irishman with tufted red hair," he warns Walter and the Dude, "I see you rolled your way into the semis. *Dios mio*, man. Seamus and me we're gonna fuck you up . . . Nobody fucks with the Jesus." When the Dude refers to the guy who peed on his rug as a Chinaman, Walter points out that "Chinaman is not the preferred nomenclature. Asian-

American, please.”

In their introduction to the script of *The Big Lebowski*, the Coens announced that they had won the 1998 Bar Kochba award, “honoring achievement in the arts that defy racial and religious stereotyping and promote appreciation for the multiplicity of man.” The award was given by Rabbi Emmanuel Lev-Tov, author of the memoir *You With the Schnozz*.

WALTER: It's shabbas, the Sabbath, which I'm allowed to break only if it's a matter of life and death— DUDE: Walter, come off it. You're not even fucking Jewish, you're— WALTER: What the fuck are you talking about? DUDE: You're fucking Polish Catholic— WALTER: What the fuck are you talking about? I converted when I married Cynthia! Come on, Dude!

DUDE: Yeah, and you were— WALTER: You know this!

DUDE: And you were divorced five fucking years ago.

WALTER: Yeah? What do you think happens when you get divorced? You turn in your library card? Get a new driver's license? Stop being Jewish?

16 *Private Eye and Public Ear*

What specific qualities the brothers inherited from their parents are hard to pin down. One could assume that their knowledge of the economics of film came from Ed Coen. Rena thinks that Joel's "wonderful eye" might have come from her. Ethan, of course, has a "wonderful ear," as anyone reading his collection of short stories, *Gates of Eden*, will testify. Dialogue dominates these stories, some of them written entirely in direct speech, and dialogue is one of the main strengths of their films. Certain phrases like "scare me up a gargle" meaning "get me a drink," from *Miller's Crossing*, were thought up by Ethan.

"He'll end up with a phrase flying around in his head and it will reappear throughout the movie," according to Sam Raimi. In fact, both brothers are masters of the word, especially colloquial language. It is fair to say that they didn't pick it up by frequenting the Minneapolis underworld. A Coen linguistic tic, and a humorously effective one, is to put bombastic language into the mouths of their characters, often in stark contrast to the circumstances or the personalities involved. For example, the terminology used by Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi), the kidnapper in *Fargo*: "I'm not gonna debate you, Jerry." "You're tasking us to perform this mission." "Circumstances, Jerry. Beyond the, uh . . . acts of God, force majeure . . ." To a state trooper: "That's my license and registration. I wanna be in compliance." To a car park attendant: "I guess you think, you know, you're an authority figure . . . You know there are limits to your life, man. Ruler of your little fuckin' gate here."

In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Everett (George Clooney), a con on the lam with his two dim-witted companions, Pete and Delmar, is insulted by Pete as they walk along a dusty road. "Pete, the personal rancor reflected in that remark I don't intend to dignify with a comment, but I would like to address your general attitude of hopeless negativism. Consider the lilies at the goddamn field, or—hell!—take a look at Delmar here as your paradigm a hope."

The Coens explained: "We often get going on a script by thinking about the rhythms and the way that people speak. Finding a voice for a character kind of helps you make them real and figure out what to do with them. It's a way of making them specific instead of just saying 'this is the good guy or whatever.'"

Much of it is a heightened form of colloquial speech derived from pulp fiction, as well as the Coens' innate ability and sense of humor, but also from being steeped in the crime literature of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, and more modern writers like Elmore Leonard.

Ethan remarked: "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."

"An interesting bit," he said negligently. "I picked it up just the other day. Asta Dial's *Spirit of Dawn*." "I thought it was Klopstein's *Two Warts on a Behind*," I said . . . "You have a somewhat peculiar sense of humor," he said. "Not peculiar," I said. "Just uninhibited."

Farewell My Lovely (Raymond Chandler)

17 *Movie Brats*

While still in their teens, both brothers were enrolled at the quaintly named Simon's Rock College of Bard, situated in the small community of Great Barrington in Massachusetts, west of Boston and two and a half hours north of New York City. Located among 275 acres of woods, hills, and ponds, it was a world away from their suburban home in Minneapolis. Comparatively, the rebellion of the sixties hardly penetrated its walls and squeaky-clean students.

The college was founded in 1964, with the idea of admitting students from sixteen years old, too young to go to college. Joel Coen entered Simon's Rock in 1971 and stayed for two years. Ethan arrived in 1974 and spent one year there. As the school claims in its brochure: "Simon's Rock is the only college of the liberal arts and sciences in the United States specifically designed to provide bright, highly-motivated students with the opportunity to begin college after the tenth or eleventh grade . . . It is designed for students who seek a serious alternative to the last year or two of high school because they and their parents find that their ambitions and interests are no longer being met—for students who are searching for something more." It seems as though Simon's Rock met the requirements of the sharply intelligent Coen brothers.

Adams Douglas, a contemporary of the brothers, said they were not involved in the small filmmaking program they had there. "I recall them as unremarkable. I have no strong memories of the topics of intellectual discussions in the Dining Hall (a favorite Simon's Rock pastime), nor do I recall them being in any serious trouble for anything (another way one might become memorable). I do know

they seem to have aged little. Unlike many of us, they look essentially the same as they did in the '70s, including their hairstyles. In fact, they sound like a couple of real dorks."

Before going to graduate school and then on to university, the Coens were drawn to popular culture, especially the movies. "All that cold weather drives you inside to watch movies," they explained. Pete Peterson, an English and Media Studies teacher, remembers the Coens as budding *cinéastes* who attended his Eight and a Half Cinema Club at the high school during the early seventies. "The kids had very sophisticated tastes in film, so we catered to that by showing 'underground' films. It was at the club that the Coens first saw François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*. I remember, they thanked me for it."

But their tastes were generally on a lower level. Ethan has cited *All Hands on Deck* as being the first movie he ever remembers liking. Certainly he can be forgiven for enjoying this unhilarious 1961 CinemaScope Navy musical, starring the anemic Pat Boone and the cretinous Buddy Hackett, that only a four-year-old could like. Joel's primal choice demonstrated rather better taste, though he was six years old when he saw *The Magnificent Seven*, "the first film that made an impression on me."

Unlike Steven Spielberg, whose ambition was to make the sort of movies he enjoyed as a child, and who became a raider of the lost RKO, there is very little discernible influence of the films the Coens saw as children on their own pictures. Among the films the brothers saw (and liked) were lame Walt Disney kiddie movies with animals in the title starring boring, clean-cut Dean Jones: *That Darn Cat*, *The Ugly Dachshund*, *Monkeys Go Home!*, *The Horse in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and *The Love Bug*. The fact that Joel was just into his teens and Ethan was a preteen almost mitigates these tastes.

Francis Ford Coppola determined to become a film director after seeing Sergei Eisenstein's *October*. Martin Scorsese was turned on by the movies by another famous screen tandem, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, and delved into Ingmar Bergman's universe. The Coens enthused about glossy Doris Day vehicles: *Pillow Talk*, *That Touch Of Mink*, *The Thrill of It All*, and *Move Over, Darling*. Actually there is something of Doris Day's spunky wholesomeness in Marge Gunderson, the pregnant policewoman in a parka in *Fargo*. Little Joel and Ethan also giggled through the very worst of Bob Hope movies like *Bachelor in Paradise*, *A Global Affair*, *I'll Take Sweden*, and *Boy, Did I Get a Wrong Number!*, and looked with favor into the pits of Jerry Lewis' career, *The Family Jewels*,

Three On a Couch, and *Boeing-Boeing*. They were particularly taken by the latter and remembered the opening credits in which, to calm top-billing egos, the names of Jerry Lewis and Tony Curtis revolved on an axis. Many years later, as a joke, Ethan suggested that he and Joel do the same with the credits of their own pictures. “If I could keep only one film on video for all time it would have to be *Boeing-Boeing*, a terrible 1965 sex comedy,” Joel later claimed.

Tony Curtis was a favorite in *Sex and the Single Girl*, *Not With My Wife, You Don’t!*, and *Drop Dead, Darling*, as was lanky Jim Hutton in comedies such as *The Horizontal Lieutenant*, *The Honeymoon Machine*, and *Walk Don’t Run*. According to Ethan, “It’s a very weird, wooden aesthetic that nobody’s interested in any more.”

Sometimes nostalgia overrides quality so that the films we see as children have a special place in our hearts, and even seeing them again as an adult, and being able to assess them for the crap they really are, they still retain a glow completely incomprehensible to those of another generation.

On television, Andy Devine, the raspy-voiced buffoon character actor, who rather resembled John Goodman, had a show on television called *Andy’s Gang* in which Devine introduced *Ramar*, a serial set in India, starring Jon Hall stripped to the waist. The Coens’ predilection for exotic trash extended to those late *Tarzan* movies of the 1960s with Jock Mahoney in *Tarzan Goes to India*, and Mike Henry in *Tarzan and the Valley of Gold* and *Tarzan and the Jungle Boy*. The boys had seen the earlier and better *Tarzans* on television with Johnny Weissmuller, their favorite being *Tarzan’s New York Adventure*, probably because of the strange Coenesque incongruity of the Ape Man in a suit, comparable to placing an old-time cowboy in modern downtown Los Angeles in *The Big Lebowski*.

Steve Reeves was another muscle man that the unmuscled Coens reveled in. Reeves was the star of badly dubbed peplum pictures made in Italy, such as *The Giant of Marathon* and *The Trojan Horse*. They developed a shared sense for kitsch as they sat through hours of wooden epics on *Mel Jass’s Matinee Movie*. They were also entranced by an eccentric late-night movie show on Minneapolis TV. “All the films would be Italian productions, but very different. It might be a Fellini film one night, then *Sons of Hercules*. A highbrow Italian movie followed by Steve Reeves.” (It’s typical that Joel mentions the Reeves title, which doesn’t actually exist, but not the “highbrow” Fellini.) This blurring of categories has rubbed off on their work. They often undercut their most dramatic films with dark humor, and switch between styles and genres. “We always liked subject

matter that wasn't just flat-out comedy. But it's hard for us to write without amusing ourselves at a certain level, which means making ourselves laugh. We never did anything we didn't try to leaven with humor."

It was only later that the Coens discovered that there were Hollywood films from an earlier era that had a true quality, like those of Billy Wilder, Frank Capra, and Preston Sturges, on whom they drew more directly. And yet, among their best-loved pictures was *The Fortune* (1975), which is "our favorite Mike Nichols movie, with all its heavy style and humor." The film revolves around a Laurel and Hardyish pair of bumbling, small-time con men (Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson), who pretend to kidnap an heiress to get her father's money. Sound familiar? John Goodman and William Forsythe in *Raising Arizona*; and Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare in *Fargo* are also bumbling, small-time con men who attempt kidnappings. Another of their favorite films was Sam Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), although they claimed, cheekily, never to have seen it. It contains a menacing biker (see *Raising Arizona*), indiscriminate violence (see *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing*), and a head in a box (see *Barton Fink*).

18 *First Fumbling*

Minneapolis may not be the most exciting city in the USA, but its 'burbs were even less so, and St. Louis Park, despite its population of forty-four thousand residents, sixty neighborhood parks, its library on Library Lane, with a large section of Russian-language books, the Jewish Community Center on South Cedar Lake Road, the one movie theater at Shelard Park, and the exclusive Minneapolis Golf Club not far from the Coen family's house on Flag Avenue, there was not much for active and intelligent teenagers to do.

Three such teenagers were Joel and Ethan Coen, and Ron Neter. One day, as the three of them were lounging on the sofa of the basement den where the brothers and their friends hung out, Joel thought of a way of relieving the boredom. Why don't they make movies? Super 8 movies! This was the late 1960s, only a few years after Super 8 had replaced the standard 8mm film. Both optical and magnetic sound tracks could be used, and the larger picture area produced images of greater definition and higher color quality than the standard 8mm film. Until it was replaced by the much easier and cheaper videotape, Super 8 was very popular with home-movie enthusiasts, enabling more and more people to make movies. But they were beyond the means of your average teenage boy.

Ron Neter, now a commercial producer in Los Angeles, suggested the boys mow neighborhood lawns in order to earn enough money to buy a movie camera and film stock. Eventually they were able to purchase a lightweight Vivitar camera and some film, and started making their own films in Super 8, “incredibly cheesy even by Super 8 standards,” remarked Ethan. The tyro filmmakers didn’t realize that in New York, underground film directors searching for a more personal, anti-commercial form of expression were turning to Super 8. The home movie was suddenly cool, and there were manifestos on the revolutionary purity of 8mm over 16mm.

On the day the boys bought their camera, they returned to the basement den to discuss what to film. So they looked in the *TV Guide* and waited for a movie that interested them, pointed the camera at the television set, and filmed *Tarzan and the She-Devil*, starring Lex Barker as Tarzan and Raymond Burr as the heavy. It was a pre-postmodernist act. They had made a film of a film, something they have done, less literally, ever since. It was an equivalent of the short story by Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote.”

“He did not want to compose another *Don Quixote*—which is easy—but *Don Quixote* itself. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.”

Borges goes on to write that Pierre Menard’s *Don Quixote* was “more subtle” than the original although identical. The Coen brothers’ first film, *Ethan and Joel Coen, auteurs of Tarzan and the She-Devil*, was more subtle than the original although identical, and far more subtle than Gus Van Sant’s near shot-by-shot version of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* many years later. Actually, it was probably the first and last time they didn’t have full control over their material.

The Coens then decided to start filming from life. Out they went to their nearest park where Joel, the nascent movie director, filmed his sneakered feet as he descended a slide. This plotless, debut location film could have been called *Feet First* if Harold Lloyd hadn’t got there earlier. Then Joel lay on his back beneath a tree, pointed the camera upwards, and filmed children jumping from the tree down around him.

It was now time to move into the realms of narrative film with actors. Luckily, they found their first star in one of the neighborhood kids, Mark Zimmering, nicknamed, for some cryptic reason, Zeimers. He was a lively boy with a shock of

dark, unruly hair *à la* John Turturro, orthodontic braces, and a wide grin. “I was the one with most charisma, I guess,” recalled Mark Zimmering, now a distinguished endocrinologist.

“We remade a lot of bad Hollywood movies that we’d seen on TV. Movies that never should have been made in the first place,” Joel commented. According to the brothers, two of their most successful films were *Lumberjacks of the North*, “because we owned a couple of plaid shirts,” and the remake of *The Naked Prey*. The latter was a naïve, message-laden adventure film directed by, produced by, and starring the unsmiling Cornel Wilde. Filmed in Africa, it told of how the hero, a white hunter, is stripped and made defenseless by savages and pursued like a wild animal. The Coens’ version was called *Zeimers in Zambia*, in which Zeimers, fully clothed and wearing a fuzzy winter cap with earflaps, is pursued by Ethan, in Buddy Holly glasses and reddish mop of hair, as a savage native waving a spear.

“At that time, we didn’t really understand the most basic concepts of filmmaking,” remembered Joel. “We didn’t know that you could physically edit film—so we’d run around with the camera, editing it all in the camera. We’d actually have parallel editing for chase scenes. We’d shoot in one place, then run over to the other and shoot that, then run back and shoot at the first spot again. We had very weird special effects in that film. We actually had a parachute drop—a shot of an airplane going overhead, then a miniature, then cut to a close-up of a guy against a white sheet hitting the ground.” Ethan explained: “It was hell waiting for the airplane to fly by. We were nowhere near a flight path.”

Ed . . . A Dog, naughtily named, like Holly Hunter’s ex-cop in *Raising Arizona*, after their father Ed Coen, was a remake of the kids’ weepie boy-loves-dog classic *Lassie Come Home*. (The most vicious gangster in *Miller’s Crossing* is Eddie Dane.) Zeimers loves Ed and asks his parents if he can keep him. He is met with rejection from both the father (Ron Neter) and mother, played by Ethan in his sister Debbie’s tutu. Zeimers lifts the small and slight Ethan up and hurls him across the room with ease. As a result, the father agrees to let Zeimers keep Ed. The film ends with Zeimers turning toward the camera and grinning from ear to ear. This classic might have been the reason Ethan expressed antipathy toward dog movies in later years, because of the abuse he suffered during its making.

Another piece of juvenilia was *The Banana Film*. Originally intended to be viewed while listening to Frank Zappa’s *Hot Rats* album, it was about a man (well, actually Zeimers), now without his braces, who has a passion for, and an uncanny ability to smell out, bananas. Ethan, in Debbie’s tutu again, is slung out

of the front door of his house into the snow, a shovel following close behind. Ethan staggers to his feet, begins shoveling the walk, and soon has a heart attack and dies. Zeimers approaches Ethan's corpse and smells something. He discovers a banana in Ethan's pocket. Zeimers goes off eating it, then suddenly stops, clutches his stomach, looks despairingly into the camera, and vomits. "They [the brothers] really had an affinity with vomit in their films," said Ron Neter. Perhaps, it would be apt to describe the vomiting in their films by the vivid Australian expression of a "Technicolor yawn," though it is not applicable to the films as a whole.

19 Barf Time

In *Blood Simple*, when the bar owner, Marty (Dan Hedaya), sees the photos of his "dead" wife and lover, he says "I think I'm gonna be sick," and heads for the bathroom. Previously, Marty has a finger broken and is kicked in the groin by his wife, Abby (Frances McDormand), during a rape attempt. He sinks to his knees, drops forward on one hand, and vomits. In the dream sequence, when Abby confronts the dead Marty, he disgorges bucketfuls of blood.

In *Miller's Crossing*, Tom Reagan (Gabriel Byrne) retches after a post poker-game hangover, and then with fear when he is led into the forest thinking he's going to be shot. The alcoholic Southern novelist W. P. Mayhew (John Mahoney) has a good chunder in the toilet after meeting Barton Fink, and the mysterious Charlie Meadows alias Karl Mundt alias John Goodman pukes after discovering the murdered woman (Judy Davis) in Barton's bed.

Norville (Tim Robbins) spews up (off-screen) after carrying the "swooning" scheming ace reporter Amy Archer (Jennifer Jason Leigh) up the fire stairs of the Hudsucker Industries building to the top floor. Norville: "Excuse me—I—executive washroom . . ." Amy: "Are you all right? . . . Is it your lunch? The chicken a la king?"

In *Fargo*, Marge suddenly doubles over, putting her head between her knees down near the snow. Lou: "Ya see something down there, Chief?" Marge: "Uh—I just, I think I'm gonna barf." Lou: "Geez, you okay, Margie?" Marge: "I'm fine, it's just morning sickness."

He went in, and I let everything come up. It was like hell, the lunch, or the potatoes, or the wine. I wanted that woman so bad I couldn't even keep anything in my stomach.

The Postman Always Rings Twice (James M. Cain) Ned Beaumont went down the stairs, loose-jointed,

pallid, and bareheaded. He went through the downstairs dining room to the street and out to the curb, where he vomited.

The Glass Key (Dashiell Hammett)

20 *My Son the Philosopher*

From regurgitation to education. Joel went to study film at the Tisch School of Arts at New York University in 1974. Contrarily, when Ethan went to Princeton University three years later, he studied philosophy. All Joel has to say about his time at NYU was that the school gave him a camera and left him alone. “I was a cipher there. I sat at the back of the room with an insane grin on my face.” He went because “it had a late application deadline—I missed all the others.” After four desultory years there—“I made some movies, then some more”—he graduated and “chased a woman” to the University of Texas graduate film school in Austin. He married the woman, who wishes to remain unnamed, but quit after a semester and the couple returned to New York to an apartment on Riverside Drive. He did, however, remember the barren roads and roadhouses he had seen around Austin when it came to writing *Blood Simple*.

At Princeton, Ethan’s senior thesis was a thirty-nine page document entitled *Two Views of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy*, which he submitted “in partial fulfillment” of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts on May 7, 1979. Dr. Raymond Geuss, now at Cambridge University, England, supervised Ethan’s independent work. “I do very vaguely remember teaching Ethan Coen as an undergraduate in the late 1970s, but you will appreciate that was a very long time ago,” said Dr. Geuss. “If I try to think back I recall him as a slightly built undergraduate who was very quiet, seemed self-possessed, and smoked a lot. I can’t honestly say that Coen made any strong or distinct impression on me.”

“I didn’t study philosophy with the idea of making a career out of it. It’s just an indication that I had no idea what career I wanted to pursue. My parents, being Jewish intellectuals, thought that because I studied philosophy I was doing something useful.”

One could venture to guess as to how, or whether, Ethan’s philosophy studies had an influence on his profession of filmmaking. Dr. Geuss, the author of many philosophical works, and a collection of poems, most of them translations or imitations from the Greek and Latin under the title *Parrots, Poets, Philosophers and Good Advice*, offers a caveat. “If you are looking for connections between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and Coen’s films you will want to be very careful.

Wittgenstein's work is a kind of Rorschach pattern; everyone finds something different in it and people tend to project into it what they think is true on other grounds." One thing we do know is that Wittgenstein loved the movies.

Paradoxically, in an essay on Wittgenstein, Ethan mainly quotes the American philosopher John Wisdom, an "epigone" of the Austrian-born philosopher. He then proceeds to use Wittgenstein to criticize the Wittgensteinian because this "promises to be more informative than using him to criticize some steely-eyes positivist or existentialist rowdy."

Even in a thesis of such seriousness, Ethan's absurdist sense of humor emerges. After quoting from Stanley Cavell's *The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*, in which he compares Wittgenstein and Freud, Ethan writes, "Holy cow! What an Aha! Stanley must have felt! . . . Actually for Stanley it was only a brief lapse, but I'm still groping after the point of John's [Wisdom's] meandering, apparently purposeless philosophic-artistic-scientific-religious synthetic essays. Puzzles don't get solved, as they do in Wittgenstein. All we get is a few lousy Aha's!" Toward the end of his paper, Ethan writes, "I see that we're running out of time so I'll skip the rest of the dull stuff. I don't think it made things more coherent anyway . . ." and ends, "Wittgenstein might say here: If you want something more, you'll have to cook it up yourself."

Ethan was also an admirer of the Wittgensteinian film critic Sir Anthony Forte-Bowell, who wrote a scholarly essay on the linguistic philosophical aspects in the work of the Three Stooges. "I will pause to note . . . the whimsy implicit in the name given Curly either in wry acknowledgement or in absurd refusal to acknowledge what is striking about his physical appearance, *videlicet* his want of hair, *et ergo a fortiori* his want of curly hair. Analysis reveals no comparable whimsy at work in the assignment of names to Larry and Moe, and an historian might here note that Lawrence and Morris were the given names of the actors by whom they were respectively depicted." This extract from the magazine *Cinema/Not Cinema* (April 1998) was used in the introduction to the published screenplay of *The Big Lebowski*.

Before he plunged into Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and while Joel was in New York, Ethan conceived of a film called *Froggy Went a Courtin'*. He saw it as a montage of run-over toads with a recording of Odetta singing the title song in the background, but he could not find any squashed toads. (Over twenty years later, Ethan was finally able to satisfy this curious whim: a toad was to make a significant appearance in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* when John Goodman squeezes one to death in his ample hands.) But

Ethan would have to put all these notions behind him when he too left Minnesota for college in 1977, with fame and notoriety another seven years away.

Is it a matter of the believer's operating with a more sophisticated conceptual apparatus, which he might bring us (nonbelievers—hello out there) to share by means of some fancy dialectic? No—this isn't how people become religious. Is the believer smarter than we are? No. I'm not saying that he's stupid. I'm saying that I can't imagine what sorts of distinctions he could draw to make his statement make sense for me. And the Catholic's insistence that it is literally the blood and body of Christ that he eats—he wants to emphasize that he gives those words no special sense, that he didn't "have recourse" to them for want of better—underscores the point that here we haven't to do with some quasi-scientific insight.

Two Views of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy (Ethan Coen)

IV

FIRST BLOOD

“We wanted to trick people into thinking we’d made a real movie.”

21 *Dough—Raimi*

IN THE SPRING OF 1980, Sam Raimi drove a station wagon from Detroit to New York, with canisters of the raw footage of *The Evil Dead*, his debut feature, in the back seat. “I’d never driven into New York before and I knew there’d be all sorts of hoodlums and bad characters about. When I pulled up to the building where the cutting room was, this guy came up to the car with long scraggly hair down to his chest, looking undernourished. I thought he was trying to rip us off. That was my first meeting with Joel.” Joel had been hired to be the assistant editor to Edna Ruth Paul on *The Evil Dead*.

The Coens and Sam Raimi had much in common. Raimi is a couple of years younger than Ethan, but got his start before the Coens. Like the brothers, Raimi spent his childhood making 8mm movies, experimenting with comedy, horror, and adventure.

Sam was the fourth of five children and grew up in Franklin, Michigan. His father ran a furniture and appliance store. (In *Raising Arizona*, the father runs a furniture store and has five children.) Sam’s mother owned a store called Lulu’s Lingerie. Sam’s eldest brother Sander drowned at age fifteen, an incident he said colored everything he did for the rest of his life.

Raimi formed a student filmmakers’ society with his brother Ivan while at Michigan State University, and was also close to a younger brother, Theodore, who appeared as a demon in *Evil Dead 2*. After Sam and Ivan left college, they formed their own independent production company, making a thirty-minute version of *The Evil Dead* to screen at parties for well-heeled intellectuals, inveigling investment from dentists, lawyers, and other professional men in Detroit. It was financed independently on a subscription basis and made for

\$380,000, with Raimi acting for much of the time as his own grip and gaffer.

The full feature, shot on 16mm, was completed in 1980 but only released three years later. *The Evil Dead*, “the ultimate experience in grueling horror,” concerned five clean-cut all-American kids in a mountain cabin in Tennessee, who find an old book of the dead that helps them summon up dormant demons from a nearby forest. All except one, Bruce Campbell, become possessed and turn into hideous and murderous creatures who start chopping each other up. The ludicrously lurid film, merely a fright machine, has all the clichés of the slasher movie, eerie sound effects and plenty of blood splashing everywhere. Characters are set up to be slaughtered. But it has some spectacular point of view (POV) ground-level tracking shots, overhead shots, and amazing make-up effects (by Tom Sullivan). The unsteady, racing shots were done with the use of a “shakicam” nicknamed Sam-Ram-a-cam. It was a camera that could be carried along at ground level.

Horror was chosen as a genre by many neophyte film directors because of its appeal to the drive-in market, which would offer the best chance of recouping the investors’ money. “I didn’t really like horror films,” Raimi explained. “They frightened me. But as I studied them I saw there was an art to them. Back then it was a much more infantile goal. Get a response, get a visceral, audible response. Will they jump and how high? I appreciate the artistry of the horror film, but the movies I see are not those. They are stories of real people, or a mix of real people and adventure, like *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which I love.” Raimi’s passion for the John Huston picture was reflected in his 1998 movie *A Simple Plan*, the publicity line being “Sometimes Good People Do Evil Things,” which could have served for quite a few of the Coen movies. It was about a pair of geeky brothers who come across a crashed airplane that contains millions of dollars. They plot to keep the money—but greed causes distrust between them. It all takes place in a snow-covered Minnesota, and was also plainly influenced by *Fargo*.

However, the influence was stronger the other way. Those hours spent in the editing room helping to cut *The Evil Dead*, which contains a premature burial, knives being stabbed into flesh, some characters refusing to die and rising from the grave, must have affected Joel when he came to make *Blood Simple*.

Raimi co-wrote *The Hudsucker Proxy* (in which he appeared in silhouette), written some time before *Blood Simple*. In *Miller’s Crossing*, Raimi had a cameo playing the baby-faced, machine-gun toting plainclothes cop, who shoots a man coming out of the Sons of Erin Social Club, and snickers with satisfaction.

While trying to get *Blood Simple* distributed, Ethan, Joel, and Sam wrote the chaotic slapstick comedy *Crimewave* (1985), directed by Raimi, in which the Coens appeared in a cameo as press photographers. In the same year, Joel and Sam had cameos as drive-in security men in the John Landis spoof *Spies Like Us*. They were among a group of more established directors, such as Michael Apted, Costa-Gavras, Martin Brest, and Terry Gilliam, who had walk-ons. Both Raimi and Coen had made only one feature, but being considered in this group was an indication that they were thought of as comers.

Many aspects of the Coens' style derive from Raimi: the ground-level, high-velocity tracking shots, the odd angles, the relentless Hitchcock-on-speed POV shots. In *Blood Simple*, the camera running up on the front lawn is attributable to Raimi's shakicam method. There is a point in *Evil Dead 2* (1987) when a character looking at someone who has been beaten senseless, says, "Crazy buck's gone blood simple." (Much knowing laughter from a section of the audience.) In the same movie, there are spectacular long takes similar to the ones in *Raising Arizona*, of the same year.

But Raimi's early films are as uninhibited and vulgar as the Coens' are preplanned and precise. The Coens, self-conscious, literary, and thoughtful as they are, often pretend to be like Raimi—intuitive craftsmen, interested in nothing but entertaining their audience. And as *A Simple Plan* proved, inside Raimi are the Coen brothers trying to get out.

After Joel had worked on *The Evil Dead*, cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld, who had been a classmate of Joel's at NYU, hired him as a production assistant on an industrial film he was shooting. "Without a doubt the worst PA I ever worked with," Sonnenfeld recalled. "He got three parking tickets, came late, set fire to the smoke machine. He was better in the cutting room."

In 1981, Joel also worked as assistant editor on *Fear No Evil*, directed by twenty-three-year-old Frank Laloggia, another horror-gore film about a possessed high-school student. Joel then spent a week, before being fired, on *Nightmare*, directed by sex-movie man Romano Scafolini, which contained a catalogue of gruesome murders. Make-up effects expert Tom Savini got top billing in the original ads, although Savini claimed never to have worked on the film. When he threatened to sue, Savini's name was covered up with tape on all the posters.

This was the kind of film background from which Joel and Ethan emerged to

make their gory debut feature.

POSSESSED CHERYL: Why have you disturbed our sleep? Awakened us from our ancient slumber? You will die! Nightmare is before you. One by one we will take you.

SCOTT: What happened to her?

LINDA: Did you see her eyes? Oh Ash, I'm scared. What's wrong with her? *Possessed Cheryl stabs Linda in the ankle with a pencil.*

SCOTT: Cheryl! Stop it!

POSSESSED CHERYL: Join us!

SCOTT: I think we ought to get out of here.

ASH: Yeah.

SCOTT: We still have a few more hours before morning.

SHELLY: I don't think I can wait that long.

SCOTT: You have to. We all have to! And then in the morning, we'll get in the car, and we'll take the bridge.

And— SHELLY: Why does she keep making those horrible noises?

22 *Life is a Pitch*

While Joel was doing his assistant editing on *Evil* movies, Ethan worked for a temporary employment firm as a statistical typist, typing rows and columns of numbers, at Macy's department store, the New York State Power Authority, a law firm, and other companies. Ethan particularly remembers spending his days at Macy's typing up numbers for the tags on men's bathrobes and pajamas. So when it came to writing their screenplays, it was Ethan who did most of the typing. Ethan also earned some cash by doing some writing for the TV cop show *Cagney and Lacey*.

Barry Sonnenfeld, who hung out with the Coen brothers in Central Park around 1980, recalled: "They would play this game where they would have to write a ten-minute movie in ten minutes." Sam Raimi and the Coens began to write *The Hudsucker Proxy* in the Riverside Drive apartment that Ethan now shared with Joel and his wife. "Writing with them was like watching a badminton game," said Raimi. "Joel would mention a line of dialogue, and Ethan would finish the sentence. Then Joel would say the punch line, and Ethan would type it up. When things weren't clicking, they would pace, following each other in designated tracks. I could subtly torture them, by altering the speed of my pace."

But, in early 1981, Joel and Ethan finally felt they had a shootable script, which they had written without Raimi over some months. Then both brothers moved back to Minneapolis for a while to stay with their parents for about the year it took to raise the \$1.5 million budget for their debut feature.

How did two young unknowns come to make their first feature? How does anybody get to make a first feature? These are questions that most young would-be directors always ask. For one thing it helps to have chutzpah and self-confidence, both of which the Coens had. Or, rather, they were able to give the impression of confidence.

What did they have going for them? The only experience they had had in making films consisted of their amateurish Super 8 efforts. The sum total of Joel's experience was his work as an assistant editor on a couple of cheap gore pictures, but that was not enough to convince producers to put up money for a

feature, no matter how gory the subject or low the budget. So they decided to finance their first movie themselves. It has been suggested that this decision was made because they had seen other directors lose creative control of even low-budget movies. In fact, there was a less idealistic reason. “It came about by accident. We raised money ourselves because we had to. No studio would give us money to make our first feature—we had no production experience.”

Inspired by the twenty-one-year-old Sam Raimi’s success in getting *The Evil Dead* made three years earlier after shooting a thirty-minute version, the Coen brothers decided, much less ambitiously, to show what they could do by shooting a three-minute trailer as if the movie was completed and was about to appear. It would show prospective investors that they could make something that looked like a real film, and it was something to invest in that had a recognizable form, unlike a treatment or script, in which none of the investors had any expertise.

All very well, but if you have no money or even a camera, even a three-minute trailer could only be made in their dreams. In order to rent a 35mm camera and lights for five days, at the cost of only a one-day rental charge, they waited until President’s Weekend—Washington and Lincoln’s birthdays. They then shot it from Thursday to Tuesday in Robbinsville early in 1982.

The thirty-year-old photographer Barry Sonnenfeld had never looked through a 35mm camera before, and he taught his cousin Kenny, a neuropharmacologist, how to pull focus. Oh my God, they recruited Kenny! When they watched the footage the next day, Sonnenfeld thought it looked great. But Joel only said, “Okay, bye.” “I was crushed,” recalled Sonnenfeld. “Later, I found out he was really excited, too. But because they don’t need compliments, they don’t realize other people do. That’s another thing that gets people mad at them. They never notice.”

The “trailer” consisted of a gun being loaded, a man being buried alive, and gunshots being fired through a wall and light streaming through the bullet holes, all of which ended up in the finished picture. Joel then took this clip to Minneapolis, where he went straight to Hadassah, the Jewish philanthropic organization. They supplied him with a list of the hundred richest Jews in town, and he raised \$750,000 from them in nine months. They also scraped up pledges of \$550,000 from sixty-eight investors in bits as small as five thousand dollars.

Quite a lot of money was raised in their hometown, although some of it came from New Jersey and Texas (where they were going to shoot the picture) in the form of a limited partnership. “We would pitch it to them from a financial point of view, explaining to them what the risks were, and what the potential rewards

were. We had the most luck with entrepreneurs, people who had started out thirty years before with two hundred dollars and were millionaires now. We went to people who were gamblers. We said, you can lose all your money. On the other hand, you can make money. We would sit there and argue with them for a long time, until they either threw us out or gave us a check. There were over sixty investors in it. All the investors were small. They each put up \$10,000 to \$20,000. We were able to tell them, you're taking a risk, but we're also risking a couple of years, and we won't make any money until you go into profit." (The final budget was \$855,000 plus \$187,000 in deferred costs.) As for salaries, the Coens offered everyone in the largely inexperienced cast and crew "a chance to work on a higher level in exchange for less money."

The Coens certainly had to look across a lot of wide desks to make their pitch, an image that frequently appears in their films—power in the form of "a blustery titan," at the other end of a desk. For example, the table in the conference room in *The Hudsucker Proxy* was so long it had to be delivered in five different pieces and assembled in the studio. Young protagonists wanting something from older, wealthier men: Nathan Arizona, Johnny Caspar (*Miller's Crossing*), Jack Lipnick (*Barton Fink*), Sidney J. Mussburger (*The Hudsucker Proxy*), Wade Gustafson (*Fargo*), and Jeffrey Lebowski.

Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell), the overbearing business tycoon father-in-law, was based on a number of moneymen that our young wannabe directors were courting. "When we were raising money for *Blood Simple*, we did a certain amount of it in the Midwest. I [Joel] remember having meetings with these hardened businessmen who would hang out in the local coffee shop and then put their parkas and galoshes on and slog out into the Siberian landscape, get in their cars, and fishtail off through the snow."

Ed and Rena Coen contributed to the funding of the film. "They were not exactly overjoyed with our decision to become filmmakers, but they came round to the idea. Our parents were always supportive and encouraging. Even though filmmaking fell outside their realm, they were very open-minded."

In Ethan's story called "The Boys," a father contemplates his two sons' futures. "His anger swelled at a world he was certain would make losers of both of them, the one a suck-ass [Joel?], the other a mute [Ethan?]. Why should disappointment be propagated through another generation, a cruel snap travelling down an endless rope?" Ed was able to see his sons' success.

NORVILLE: Well, sir, I've got something for you from the mailroom, but first if I could just take a minute or so from your very busy time . . . a little something I've been working on for the last two or three years . . . You know, for kids! Which is perfect for Hudsucker—not that I claim to be any great genius; like they say, inspiration is 99 percent perspiration, and in my case it's at least twice that, but I gotta tell ya, Mr. Mussburger, sir, this sweet baby—*The Hudsucker Proxy*

23 *Raising Cain*

Before embarking on the shoot, in order to get the tone they were after, one would think that the Coens would have watched *Double Indemnity* or one or more of the four film versions of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, both adaptations of novels by James M. Cain, the prime literary influence on *Blood Simple*. But that would have been too obvious, and might have led them into pastiche, conscious or otherwise. What they did watch was Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (shot in color by Vittorio Storaro) and Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (shot in black-and-white by Robert Krasker), both pictures far removed from the world of *Blood Simple*.

Coincidentally, cinematographer Richard H. Kline and director Lawrence Kasdan watched the same two films while preparing *Body Heat*. Made a few years before *Blood Simple*, *Body Heat* has some similarities in plot—a married woman and her lover want to bump off her husband. Thus, an evocation of prewar Italy and postwar Vienna would influence the style, but not the subject, of *Blood Simple*. “What they wanted was a real non-diffuse image, the kind of image Storaro achieved in *The Conformist*,” remarked Sonnenfeld.

Somewhat closer in time and content was Wim Wenders' *The American Friend* (1977), which they watched a number of times. One of the reasons was that the brothers were big fans of Robby Müller, Wenders's and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's favorite cinematographer. The flashily photographed *The American Friend* was based on a Patricia Highsmith thriller about a dying man forced to take a job as a hitman in order to have money to leave to his widow. But it is much more poker-faced than the Coens would ever allow, and the distracting myth-making works against the plot through which the director's real-life heroes Sam Fuller, Nicholas Ray, and Dennis Hopper wend their way.

Blood Simple was the prime spark that helped ignite the independent film movement from the mid-1980s, but its form and content were made possible by a number of steamy and violent films that had just preceded it: Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*, David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, David

Cronenberg's *Scanners*, and Brian De Palma's *Scarface* and *Body Double*. Closest of all, however, were Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), which was able to be truer to the book in its sexuality than previous screen versions, and Kasdan's *Body Heat*.

Taylor Hackford attempted a remake of *Out of the Past*, Jacques Tourneur's archetypal 1940s film noir, as *Against All Odds* (1984). In France, François Truffaut made *Vivement Dimanche*, based on an American pulp novel (*The Long Saturday Night* by Charles Williams), shooting it in monochrome in an effort to capture the style of 1940s Hollywood *noir*. There was also *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982), a one-joke parody in which Steve Martin interacts with *noir* stars of the past. What made the Coens' film more interesting was their quirky postmodernist take on the genre that was neither pastiche, nor parody, nor remake but had the soul of the genuine article.

The murder of the husband by the detective was influenced by the five-minute sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* (1966), when Paul Newman, with the help of a farmer's wife, batters an East German security guard to death and then disposes of the body. "The idea is that it's very difficult, and takes a very long time to kill someone. It's not necessarily just bang, and the character keels over dead. Hitchcock took ten minutes [sic] to kill that guy in *Torn Curtain*. We decided to stretch it out to twenty."

In *Blood Simple*, however, the husband is shot once and is presumed dead by the audience and by the detective and the barman Ray, who finds him. Ray, thinking his lover Abby has shot her husband, tries to get rid of the "corpse." In a long, wordless sequence, reminiscent of the nine minutes Norman Bates takes to clean up the shower and take Marion Crane's body into the car in *Psycho*, Ray carries the "dead" Marty to his car and takes him out on the road, then stops to bury him in a field. After he has stopped the car, he finds that Marty has crawled out and is attempting to escape. He has to bury him alive in a shallow grave, shoveling the sand over him as he groans, beating the top of the grave with a spade. The ghost of Edgar Allan Poe, the author of "The Premature Burial" and "The Tell-Tale Heart," as much as that of Hitchcock, hovers over this scene.

The somewhat cryptic title of the Coens' debut movie came from Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*. The unnamed detective hero in the fictional town of Personville, nicknamed "Poisonville," believes that after a person kills somebody, "he goes soft in the head—blood-simple. You can't help it. Your brains turn to mush," and "If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood-simple like the natives ..

. I know it. That's what I've been telling you. I'm going blood-simple."

The film shows the influence of hard-boiled detective fiction writers such as Hammett and Raymond Chandler, whom the Coens read avidly, as well as Southern writers like William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, the title of whose novel *Wise Blood* could be the opposite of *Blood Simple*. The term "warthog from hell," applied to the Lone Biker by "Ed" (Holly Hunter) in *Raising Arizona*, was from an O'Connor short story called "Revelation," in which a well-meaning, pig-farming Southern woman is suddenly physically attacked by a fat young girl, who tells her, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old warthog!"

But it was James M. Cain who prompted the screenplay in the first place. The brothers' admiration for Cain knew no bounds. "We've always thought that up at Low Library at Columbia University, where the names are chiseled up there above the columns of stone—Aristotle, Herodotus, Virgil—that the fourth one should be Cain," they declared hyperbolically. "We started reading Cain's novels five years ago [1979]. We especially liked *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity*, *Mildred Pierce*, and *Career in C Major*. We liked the hard-boiled style, and we wanted to write a James M. Cain story and put it into a modern context."

Although the basic geometry of the film is a James M. Cain triangle, and the character of the Greek bar-owner Marty was lifted from Nick Papadakis in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, "but a little less cheerful and fun-loving," the plot has the husband wanting to murder the illicit lovers, rather than the other way around. "We wanted to avoid the clichéd story of two lovers plotting to kill the husband or wife. We also wanted a double-cross because we liked the idea of somebody having a killer who faked it and then killed the guy who hired him. We hadn't seen that one before." *Blood Simple* is also more violent and less sexy than Cain, as well as moving into horror movie territory.

There is also a husband who wants "pictures of his wife in the act" in Ethan's story *Destiny*. "Shut the fuck up. I got a personal situation. I got a wife here fuckin' someone else. His dick. Her pussy. Woom-pah, woom-pah, woom-pah. Do I gotta draw yas an illustration?"

We didn't say anything. She knew what to do. She climbed back and I climbed front. I looked at the wrench under the dash light. It had a few drops of blood on it. I uncorked a bottle of wine, and poured it on there till the blood was gone. I poured so the wine went over him. Then I wiped the wrench on a dry part of his clothes, and passed it back to her. She put it under the seat.

The Postman Always Rings Twice (James M. Cain)

24 Be Prepared

The Coens started with the premise of a murder story/thriller set in Texas and worked from there. In the autumn of 1982, eight months after the trailer was shot and shown, the brothers had their money and arrived in Austin, Texas, to make *Blood Simple* on an eight-week shooting schedule. There was a tendency for the Coens, coming from the icy Midwest, to choose warm climes for their shoots: Texas, Arizona, Louisiana (*Miller's Crossing*), Los Angeles (*Barton Fink*, *The Big Lebowski*), and Mississippi (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*)—the frozen exception being *Fargo*, which was consciously at the opposite extreme.

“But what I know about is Texas,” says the voice-over of the detective at the opening of *Blood Simple*. However, the Coens didn’t know Texas, or Arizona, or Louisiana, or Mississippi. Texas was chosen for *Blood Simple* because “the weather’s good. It seemed like the right setting for a passion murder story. And people have strong feelings about Texas, which we thought we could play off of. And again your classic film noir has a real urban feel, and we wanted something different.”

The less familiar rural Texas landscape is used very effectively and, paradoxically, although the film is set in the wide open spaces, a claustrophobic atmosphere is created. Like *Raising Arizona* and *Fargo*, it concentrates on a small community, with only a few houses and a bar. There does not seem to be a world outside.

For the Neon Boot bar, where a great deal of the action takes place, the Coens benefited from being granted free use of a mainly disused bar. “The only thing was, they opened it up at weekends for swinging singles nights, so we had to keep moving our stuff out.” On the first day of shooting, which happened to be in the bar, Joel was so green that the assistant director had to tell him to yell “Action!” instead of “OK” when he was ready to shoot.

One of the challenges of shooting a \$1.5 million movie was to make it look ten times that amount. For the Coens the only effective way to bring the low-budget film in on budget was to preplan everything, so every scene was meticulously storyboarded, a process that was to be an essential element in their filmmaking henceforth. “We storyboard our films like Hitchcock. There’s very little improvisation, because we’re chicken basically. Preproduction is cheap compared to standing around the set with a crew, scratching your head, and

saying things like, “What would it look like if we put the camera over here?””

The other reason, besides economics, that *Blood Simple* was storyboarded was the intricate nature of the plot. Certain visual elements repeat themselves in ironic visual ways. Devices such as match cuts, sound overlaps, and dissolves are all cheap and easy to do if they are thought about ahead of time.

To help them draw the storyboards, they got three local people from Austin. “It was weird. One guy would do storyboards. Another guy would do floor plans. And a woman was there who seemed a sort of secretarial help. We’d sit there with three people. It was odd. It was very quiet. They were perfectly nice. But you’d sit there and describe the shot and they would stare at you, pencils poised. They treated us like royals. And the storyboards were square and stiff.”

Ethan, Joel, and Barry Sonnenfeld storyboarded the whole film together. At the beginning of every day, the three of them and the first assistant director, Deborah Reinisch, would have breakfast at a Denny’s in Austin—the Grand Slam special—and go through the day’s shots and talk about the lighting. (A Denny’s is where the anarchists confer in *The Big Lebowski*.) It was in Austin that they saw a sinister hotel across the street from where they were staying which became known to them as The Hotel Across the Street. They discovered that its stationery was blazoned with the logo: “The Hotel for a Day or a Lifetime,” a slogan they used for the Hotel Earle, the rundown Los Angeles hotel in *Barton Fink*.

On the set, according to Joel, “We’d put it all together and look through the viewfinder. Barry might have an idea, or Ethan would come up with something different, and we’d try it. We had the freedom to do that, because we had done so much advance work.” Sonnenfeld added: “Also we’d try to torture each other. For example, I didn’t allow smoking, which meant that only one of them would be on the set at any given time, because the other one was off having a cigarette.”

25 *Black and White in Color*

“When people call *Blood Simple* a film noir they’re correct to the extent that we like the same kind of stories that the people who made those movies liked,” Ethan commented. “We tried to emulate the source that those movies came from rather than the movies themselves.” Joel added: “It utilizes movie conventions to tell the story. In that sense it’s about other movies—but no more so than any other film that uses the medium in a way that’s aware that there’s a history of movies behind it. For us it was amusing to frame the whole movie with this

redneck detective's views on life. We thought it was funny, but it also relates directly to the story. It was not our intention to make an art film but an entertaining B-movie."

The greatest films noir, those of the 1940s, were shot in black-and-white. When black-and-white films were almost entirely phased out in the 1960s, much of the atmosphere of the genre was lost. There were some directors, frustrated at being forced to use color, who tried to suggest monochrome by the way color and shadows were used. The Coens, like other directors of the time, had no choice.

"There was a big practical consideration. Since we were doing the movie independently, and without a distributor, we were a little leery of making a black-and-white movie," commented Joel. "But we never really considered that a sacrifice. We wanted to keep the movie dark and we didn't want it to be colorful in the *Touch of Mink* sort of way."

According to Sonnenfeld: "What we talked about early on was having the elements of color in frame by sources of light, at least as much as possible, like with the neon and the Bud lights, so that the rest of the frame would be dark. That way it would be colorful but not garish. Joel, Ethan and I felt strongly that we wanted our blacks to be rich, with no milk quality. I think we were afraid that to shoot the film in black-and-white would make it look too 'independent,' too low budget." Actually, with the yellow light, and the khaki-colored Texas landscapes, *Blood Simple* is more of a *film jaune* than a film noir.

"We also used the lighting as a psychological tool," explained Sonnenfeld. "For the film to be effective, the film had to be dark and contrasty. The lighting itself became a character. The evil detective, in a bright bathroom, starts shooting bullets through a wall into a dark adjoining apartment where our heroine was hiding. As each bullet slams through the common wall light streaks through the darkened apartment at all kinds of crazy angles. By the time the detective runs out of bullets, the darkened room is sliced up into thirty tubes of light bleeding out of the six bullet holes."

The brothers decided early on that they wanted to move the camera around a lot, and "when the camera wasn't moving, we sometimes would dolly or raise or lower lights during the shot, so there was always some kind of apparent movement," Sonnenfeld explained. When they filmed the tracking shot along the bar and the camera hops over a passed-out drunk, Joel said, "No. It's too self-conscious." Ethan replied: "The whole movie is self-conscious."

There is an odd low, subjective tracking shot that sweeps across the lawn toward Marty trying to rape Abby. It seems to be from the German shepherd dog's POV. (There is a similar dog's-eye view in *Raising Arizona*.) It was achieved by having two grips racing the camera along the ground at full speed, approaching Abby and Marty. Owing to the extreme wide-angle lens, in a matter of a couple of seconds, the camera moves from an extreme wide shot into a super close-up of Abby as she bends back and breaks Marty's fingers. "In effect, all the shaking is smoothed out by the time the shakes reach the middle of the twelve-foot shakicam, and the camera seems to float," explained Sonnenfeld. "I would run behind the camera, not looking through the viewfinder, but still getting a sense of level and angle."

26 *Enter Frances*

For the role of the wife, the Coens wanted to cast a Southern actress, and approached twenty-five-year-old Holly Hunter, who was born in Georgia. They met when she was performing on Broadway in the Beth Henley comedy-drama *Crimes of the Heart*, the story of three Mississippi sisters, and asked her to be in *Blood Simple*. But she had another commitment and suggested Frances McDormand, the same age, who had been her roommate when they were both aspiring actresses. However, Holly warned Frances that it was a low-budget film being made by two brothers who had never made a feature before. Nevertheless, Frances went to an audition.

"Holly and another friend told me they'd met these two really weird guys and auditioned for a movie they were making. I thought they were much too young to make a movie, and geeky, two geeks sitting there," McDormand recalled. "They were my own age for one thing, which was odd. They were chain-smoking at the time and had this huge ashtray on the table, full of cigarette butts. They asked me if I wanted to smoke, which was amazing in an audition."

The brothers asked her to come back at four o'clock that afternoon, to read with John Getz, who was cast as the lover. To their amazement, she said she couldn't because she had to watch her then-boyfriend in his first acting job, a small role in a TV soap opera that was being broadcast at the same time. "Joel later told me that they thought I was crazy to watch a soap opera instead of coming to an audition. Anyhow, they changed the time to five o'clock. When finally I did come, they cast me. I was in total cultural and professional shock. That's why I look the way I do in the movie. When you look at the movie now,

where other people think I made the choice of looking dumb—that was me. I stood paralyzed until they told me what to do. When we were shooting I remember saying to Joel, ‘Don’t try to articulate intellectually what the scene’s about. Just tell me whether to breathe harder, breathe softer, talk louder, talk softer.’”

Frances McDormand was born in 1958 in Illinois and grew up with her older brother and sister in Pennsylvania. Her father, a preacher with the Disciples of Christ, moved the family around from one small town to another. “There’s a popular perception of preachers being fanatical, but my father’s denomination was really mild. It wasn’t like I grew up in a strict religious background—definitely not as strict as an Irish Catholic background. My mother was always in the choir and still is, and she’s the secretary of the church now. They still worry when I don’t have a job. ‘You doin’ okay? Lemme give you five bucks.’”

Frances realized that she wanted to become an actress when she was playing Lady Macbeth in a high school production. (Little did she know that she would be involved in an even more bloody affair with her first film.) After graduating as the only theater major in her class at Bethany College in West Virginia, she went on to study in the graduate program at Yale Drama School. “I had no choice,” she says. “I literally couldn’t do anything else. I went to Yale when I was twenty-one, which was good because I would have died if I’d gone to New York first. I’d always lived in small rural towns, so going to New Haven, Connecticut, was a really big transition for me.”

From Yale she began her career in some heavyweight productions around the country—George Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, Anton Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*, and Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons*, to name a few. She then took the plunge in New York, very quickly learning how difficult it is to support oneself in classical theater, and she made extra money as a waitress and sought out work in commercials and episodic television until *Blood Simple* helped her on the way to fame.

Despite her initial opinion of the Coens, and their very different backgrounds, Frances and the brothers soon clicked, especially she and Joel. They were soon living together in his uptown New York apartment. (Joel was about to get a divorce. “There was no ugliness and no money,” he insisted.) A couple of years later, after the release of *Blood Simple* in 1984, Joel and Frances were married—a “mixed” marriage, as she was from a strong Christian background and he from an orthodox Jewish one.

27 *Private Dick*

When it came to casting their first movie, the Coens hardly put a foot wrong. The part of Loren Visser, the sleazy private eye, was written for M. Emmet Walsh. The brothers had seen Walsh in *Straight Time*, and the 1978 movie, directed by Ulu Grosbard, was at the back of their minds when they wrote the script. In *Straight Time*, Walsh plays a cruel and slimy parole officer who seems to have a personal vendetta against ex-con Dustin Hoffman. The last we see or hear of him is when Hoffman blows his top, attacks him while he is driving, and leaves him handcuffed to a fence on the freeway, with his trousers around his ankles, and cars buzzing around him refusing to stop. Not quite as terrible a fate as the Coens had in mind for Walsh in *Blood Simple*.

“When I read the script, I said, ‘This character is so much fun. I’ll flesh him out and use him in an important movie six or seven years down the road.’ Because no one was going to hear about this movie. At best, it would be the third bill at an Alabama drive-in,” Walsh commented.

Walsh met the Coens for the first time in Austin just before shooting, and he thought, “These two scrawny kids must have rich parents who’re putting up the money. They showed me this two-minute film. I thought, ‘What the hell is this?’ Then I saw the storyboards and the shooting schedule, and I realized they knew exactly what they were doing.”

During the shooting, however, Walsh would sometimes say to Joel, “Let’s cut this sophomoric stuff. It’s not NYU anymore.” They would have arguments and disagreements, but, according to Joel, they would generally be fruitful. “One time I asked him to do something to humor me and he said, ‘Joel, the whole damn movie is just to humor you.’”

“If I need you again I’ll know what rock to turn over,” says Julian Marty, the husband who hires Visser to take photos of his wife and her lover together. This venomous gumshoe has a cigarette lighter—pointedly seen in close-up as he leaves it at the scene of his crime—marked “Loren Visser—Elks Man of the Year,” a comment on his so-called social respectability.

It is the detective’s voice we hear at the start of the film. “The world is full of complainers. But 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 even Man of the Year —something can always go wrong. And go ahead, complain, tell your problems to your neighbor, 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 is Texas, and down here, you're on your own."

Although the detective seems to be the narrator, he is not omniscient like the clock-keeper in *The Hudsucker Proxy* or the cowboy in *The Big Lebowski*, and a few seconds into the film the narrative device is abandoned in favor of a wider perspective. However, in the opinion of the German critic George Seessien, by putting Reaganite philosophy into the mouth of the "most immoral and unappetizing figure in the film," *Blood Simple* is "a radically anti-American film." If there was any political intent in this, or in their other films, despite a number of teasers along the way, the Coens want it kept a secret.

The obese and oily detective, in his canary-yellow suit and Stetson, has the air of a western heavy, and represents unadulterated evil, but his driving a beat-up Volkswagen Bug adds an absurdist element to his character. (The fat private snoop in *The Big Lebowski* drives a similar car: the Coens find big men in small spaces amusing.) Visser himself seems to appreciate the absurdity of the situation in which he finds himself. At the end of the film, as he lies dying under a sink, watching the rotting pipes, he utters a high-pitched Coenian laugh.

MARTY: So, uh . . . this wouldn't interest you.

VISSE: I didn't say that. All I said was you're an idiot. Hell, you been thinking about it so much it's driving you simple. I'm supposed to do a murder—two murders—and just trust you not to go simple on me and do something stupid. I mean real stupid. Now why should I trust you?

MARTY: For the money.

VISSE: The money. Yeah. That's a right smart bit of money.

28 *The Postmodernist Always Rings Twice*

The above title of a collection of essays by the British writer Gilbert Adair could apply equally to *Blood Simple*. Whether or not Ethan understands the term, the film is postmodernist in the way it alludes to 1940s film noir through a number of inverted commas. The film noir was a product of the psychology of postwar America, which expressed the nihilism and depression brought about by the Second World War and intensified by the Cold War—resulting in a general distrust of human nature and institutions. But *Blood Simple* does not come directly out of the social or political malaise. Most of the *noir* elements are there: oblique lighting, odd camera angles, compositional tension, chiaroscuro, the depiction of a dark world of crime and corruption, betrayal, cynicism, and a fatalistic mood, which the Coens used as a basis on which to build an amoral structure.

But this is no mere smart-ass film buffery. The film captures the soullessness of much of American pulp fiction. The main characters, though classic archetypes of the genre—The Husband, The Wife, The Lover—are caught in a Greek tragedy of errors. (The Greek husband tells the detective, who brings him the incriminating photos, “You know in Greece they cut off the head of the messenger who brought bad news.”) Everyone is in the dark (*noir*). None of them knows what is going on as they only see part of the whole. The audience knows everything and can only watch helplessly as the characters on screen stumble around without all the facts.

The restless, roaming camera reflects the mood of the characters, the atmospheric photography exactly fits the murky story. It is also littered with enough quirky images to please any Coenhead. A cigarette is stuck in the mouth of a stuffed bear, fish lie on an office desk, a surreal still life that one can almost smell. The husband holds a gun, his finger in a splint, the lover tries to mop up a pool of blood with a nylon jacket that will not absorb it. The climactic tour de force sequence, when the private eye tries to free his pinned hand by shooting holes in the wall, is one of the most bizarre and memorable in all their films.

In assessing *Blood Simple*, some critics, not entirely flatteringly, evoked

Hitchcock and Welles. Besides the *Torn Curtain* episode, Hitchcock's ability to create menace out of commonplace situations is apparent throughout, especially in the moment, during a tense scene, when a newspaper is thrown at the front door, sounding like a gunshot. And with many of the shadowy, high-angle shots, the film is as close to Welles's *Touch of Evil* as it is to *The Evil Dead*. It is only the latter's influence that is detrimental to *Blood Simple* in the more unsubtle horror movie elements.

The residue of slash picture mentality is most evident in the premature burial scene, and in the completely dispensable dream sequence. Abby wakes up coughing, goes to the bathroom, and washes her face. A wide-angle shot reveals the door behind her. There is a creepy rhythmic thumping sound coming from the next room. Abby goes into the living room. The camera tracks around the room. The dead Marty is there. He tells Abby he loves her before he vomits copious blood. She then wakes up. Because the whole sequence is shot realistically, and there is no hint that it is a dream, the Coens have tried to hoodwink the audience into believing that Marty has actually come back from the grave. It is a rather cheap trick that is risible rather than blackly comic. But, on the whole, the film rises above the crude idiocies of *The Evil Dead* and its kind.

29 Post-Production Trauma

After the main shoot of *Blood Simple*, the Coens ran out of money. Therefore, during re-shoots, the brothers were forced to stand in for actors. "After the body was covered with dirt that was me squirming under there," Ethan revealed. "I'm proud of that." As for the editing of the movie, they had the idea of approaching the Englishman Roderick Jaynes, who was credited with the editing on *Beyond Mombasa*, a ropy 1956 jungle film, starring Cornel Wilde and Donna Reed, which they admired for some perverse reason. What the Coens didn't know was that Jaynes had been taken off the picture after less than a week, because the director George Marshall found his cutting "too damned Prussian," and he was replaced by Jack Tuttle. Owing to union rules, Jaynes's name remained on the film. As Tuttle had since died, the Coens decided to ask Jaynes, who had not worked on a film for almost thirty years, to edit their first movie.

"I decided to accept . . . under two conditions: that I be left alone in the cutting room, that I not be asked to read the script before starting in cutting," Jaynes recalled. "Given a free hand on *Blood Simple*, I was rather proud of my first cut,

but when I screened it for the lads they responded to the action scenes with silence and to the dramatic scenes with alarming asthmatic laughter. They took the picture away and, along with a friend of theirs named Don Wiegmann, made rather a mess of things, I'm afraid, but due to union rules my name remains on the picture."

While trying to sell *Blood Simple* in Los Angeles, Ethan, Joel, and Joel's new wife, Frances McDormand, were so broke that they moved into Sam Raimi's apartment. "They crashed on the floor," recalled Raimi. "For some reason, Joel and Fran got the bedroom and Ethan and I ended up crashing on the floor. After the Coens moved out, Fran's friend Holly Hunter moved in. After she left, we took on a new tenant, named Kathy Bates."

Having failed to find a distributor in Los Angeles, they returned to New York where they killed time concocting "thought experiments"—high-concept movies they would have liked to see but couldn't bother making. One such was called *Adolf "Terry" Hitler*, which had young Adolf growing up and becoming a big Hollywood agent nicknamed Terry, running the Adolf Hitler Agency (AHA). He wears baggy suits, takes lunches at Mortons, waves to everybody, and reads *People* magazine. Where it went from there is anybody's guess.

However, their main preoccupation was trying to get *Blood Simple* distributed. All the major distributors passed on it, and a lot of the smaller ones as well. The word was that it was too gory to be an art film, too arty to be an exploitation film. "It wasn't easily pigeon-holed generically," Joel explained. "That was very frustrating for us, because at the same time we were being turned down, we were watching it at festivals with large audiences and knew that it worked, that audiences liked it. It's much easier for those guys to say no than it is to say yes."

They got their first big break when a talkative friend on a plane happened to be sitting next to the member of a panel that chooses films for the USA Film Festival in Dallas. But the watershed was when *Blood Simple* was shown at the Toronto Film Festival, where there were about four distributors who saw the film with an enthusiastic audience. "When you screen a movie for most distributors, they look at it all alone in a room while they're taking telephone calls. But seeing it with an audience is a very different thing. After that we started to get offers."

Finally, they found a distributor in Circle Films, a Washington, D.C.-based independent distribution company, with whom they signed a four-picture deal. Ben Barenholtz, the executive producer, said, "I've seen a lot of first films, and there was something about this first film that was so good and natural. The only

first film that impressed me as much was *Eraserhead*."

On the whole, *Blood Simple* gained good reviews, although one critic described it as having "the heart of a Bloomingdale's window and the soul of a résumé." The influential Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* wrote: "It comes on as self-mocking, but it has no self to mock. Nobody in the movie-making team is committed to anything, nothing is being risked except the million and a half." But it appealed to a wide spectrum. *New York*'s film critic David Denby called it "one of the most brazenly self-assured directorial debuts in American film history." *Fangoria*, a fanzine dedicated to gore movies, called it "an art film, a comic tragedy, a splatter film, a murder story that honors Hitchcock without insulting his memory."

To their surprise, the brothers began to be lionized. Steven Spielberg asked them to visit him, and Hugh Hefner invited them to his mansion. But they had no desire to make a picture for Spielberg and refused to hobnob with other Hollywood directors, nor did they go to many parties. They thought Hefner and his mansion a joke. Many years later, in *The Big Lebowski*, they created the character of Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara), a mordant portrayal of a Hefner-like producer of "interactive erotic software."

The success of their first film did not change the Coens much. They took a dingy office on the sixth floor of a West 23rd Street industrial building, occupied by graphics and printing shops, that might have served for Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, remaining aloof from both the big studios and the arty independent-film scene.

The independent movies that we see are not really avant-garde [Joel explained at the time]. John Sayles is an independent filmmaker that I like. I like what Alan Rudolph does. Also I like low-budget horror movies that are made independently. They're mass audience pictures. I've worked with a lot of people who have done that stuff like Sam Raimi. Those are the kind we feel closer to rather than, say, more avant-garde artists. I liked *Stranger Than Paradise* [Jim Jarmusch], though, which is closer. Our movies are a no-bones-about-it entertainment. If you want something other than that then you probably have a legitimate complaint. What's the Raymond Chandler line? "All good art is entertainment and anyone who says differently is a stuffed shirt and juvenile at the art of living." The distinction between art and entertainment is one we've never understood. If somebody goes out to make a movie that isn't designed primarily to entertain people, then I don't know what the fuck they're doing.

At the time of the release of *Blood Simple*, the Coens talked big about remaining small:

You can't get any more independent than *Blood Simple*. We did it entirely outside Hollywood. To take it a step further, we did it outside any established movie company anywhere. It was done by people who have had no experience of

feature films, Hollywood or otherwise. We'd like to continue as independently as possible. Not independent necessarily of the Hollywood distribution apparatus, which is really the best if you want your movie to reach a mass market. But as far as production is concerned, there's a real trade-off involved. It's true that certain movies require more money to produce right than *Blood Simple* did. But the difference with us is, while we may need more money for the next one than we did for *Blood Simple*, we're still not talking of the kind of budgets that the studios are used to working with. We did this film for \$1 and a half, and for me \$3–4 million is an incredible amount of money to make a movie. And that's attainable without going to the studios. If they're giving you the money, they can legitimately say, "Hey, it's our money, we're gonna have our input here." If you can keep it away from Hollywood studios, you can make it a lot cheaper. By virtue of the fact that it's cheaper, and it's away from the bureaucracy of Hollywood, the filmmakers can retain more control over the project.

Blood Simple grossed about \$1.5 million in its first six months, and it was reckoned that a typical backer who put up a thousand dollars made about 150 percent return on his investment. How things have changed since 1984! Sixteen years on, the Coens were ready to take on *To The White Sea*, budgeted at sixty million dollars. But now they were ready to raise more than just money.

V

HI STAKES

"Does it look wacky enough?"

30 *Virtuous Circle*

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, IN THE notes to his Hollywood novel, *The Last Tycoon*, wrote, “There are no second acts in American lives.” After the success of *Blood Simple*, audiences and the Hollywood establishment were watching to see, from different viewpoints, what the precocious Coen brothers were going to come up with next. More importantly, they wondered whether Ethan and Joel would be able to stick by their wish to “continue as independently as possible.”

Ben Barenholtz, fifty-two-year-old top man at Circle Releasing Corp., was determined that they should. A long-time distributor, and one of Circle’s founders, he had previously been unable to answer the Coens’ appeal for financing on *Blood Simple*. But he, along with his partners, Ted and Jim Pedas, distributed the film. Barenholtz sat down with Joel and Ethan on either side of a long desk and explained to them that they needed a buffer from the studios.

“They didn’t come on in the same way most people do that are trying to pitch movie ideas,” Barenholtz explained. “And they certainly didn’t look the typical young filmmakers. But there was a determination to them, not a cockiness, but they were so self-assured that you sort of felt, ‘Yes, they’d do it.’ They’re sensitive, determined, and know what they want. Their objective is to have total artistic freedom. The priority was never the money. They want to work without interference. So I created a context. What director do you know who had final cut and total artistic control on his second picture? Well, that’s what Joel had.”

Raising Arizona was the much-awaited second picture. It was half-financed by Circle, who put up about four million dollars, the other half coming from Fox, which distributed the film. And the only strings that were attached were purse strings. Joel remarked: “We became victims of our own choices. We became

spoiled. We'd financed *Blood Simple* ourselves, by going through the laborious process of finding individual investors, and we had complete freedom. We part-owned the movie as a limited partnership and we could do whatever we wanted in terms of production. So from then on, we figured that was our prerogative. It seemed perverse to make a second movie and relinquish the control we had on the first one. So we insisted on it. If we had had the chance to sell out on *Blood Simple*, our whole history would have been defined by that experience. It wouldn't have been a good thing. The fact that we didn't have any options and no one was willing to give us the time of day was probably the best thing that could have happened to us."

31 *Looney Tunes*

The Coens wanted to make their next movie totally the opposite of *Blood Simple*, which was slow and deliberate. "We were labeled film noir, so we wanted to try something faster and lighter." In fact, throughout their career, although their films can be linked thematically and stylistically, they have tried to change the tone of each from the movie that preceded it.

Crimewave (the initial title, *X, Y, Z Murders*, was changed for video release), the film the Coens wrote with and for Sam Raimi the year before, prefigured *Raising Arizona*. Set in Detroit, where Raimi, Robert Tapert, the producer, and the leading actor Bruce Campbell all went to school, *Crimewave* has many elements that anticipated their second feature. "*Raising Arizona* is definitely influenced by Sam, because we were working with Sam at the time," Joel acknowledged. Like *Raising Arizona*, *Crimewave* had a naive loser hero and two-dimensional comic-book characters, including a pair of murderous pest exterminators, screaming wildly, who drive a van with a giant stuffed rat on top and the slogan "We Kill All Sizes" painted on it. (See Gale and Evelle in *Raising Arizona*.) Called Crush and Coddish, they resemble malign versions of Laurel and Hardy as itinerant mousetrap salesmen in *Swiss Miss*.

Unfortunately, *Crimewave* suffered from studio interference, a salutary lesson for the Coens to learn. They were not happy with this "lost" film. "We like it lost. It's no big deal for us, but Sam wasn't thrilled with it. He never had his own cut."

Before *Blood Simple* was released, the Coens and Raimi were writing the script of *The Hudsucker Proxy*, but the shooting was delayed nine years until they were able to obtain the kind of high budget the film needed. As *The Hudsucker Proxy* had been shoved into a drawer, optimistically awaiting the propitious moment

when it would be filmed, some of that script found its way into *Crimewave*. Somebody falls from the window of a building and survives (like a cartoon character), and a “miracle” takes place involving a black man. The prison in which the protagonist, Victor Ajax, finds himself awaiting execution is called Hudsucker State Penitentiary. Hi in *Raising Arizona* works for Hudsucker Industries, where M. Emmet Walsh (from *Blood Simple*) has a cameo as a gabby machine-shop worker.

Variety thought *Crimewave* was “more storyboarded than directed.” “Storyboarding has always been an important part of our figuring out how to do a movie,” admits Joel. Because of this “security blanket” dependency on storyboarding, the Coens were lucky to find J. Todd Anderson, a storyboard artist from Dayton, Ohio. Everybody calls him J. Todd, the single initial lending a wisp of mystery to this pleasant, forthright man. It seems that he and the brothers are so empathetic that Anderson has continued to storyboard every film of theirs since *Raising Arizona*. “I just try to be their extension cord,” J. Todd explained. As well as being a storyboard artist, Anderson is a perfect sounding board for their ideas.

“They pretty much have a good idea within twenty or thirty degrees what they want. Though, over time, I’ve noticed that they see shots from opposite directions. Ethan will see it running from left to right and Joel will see it running from right to left,” J. Todd said after some years of working with the Coens.

What is a storyboard but a sort of wall-size comic strip? There is a horror-comic book feel to the scene in *Blood Simple* of the detective punching a hole in the wall with one hand in order to pull the knife out of his other one trapped in the window on the other side. In both *Crimewave* and *Raising Arizona*, there is a *Road Runner* Coyote-like indestructibility to some of the characters. Tom Reagan in *Miller’s Crossing* gets brutally beaten up so many times but, like a cartoon character, he keeps bouncing back with hardly a scratch.

The look the Coens wanted for *Raising Arizona* was “sort of pop, like opening an illustrated children’s book. Everything’s sharp and bright.” In order to reinforce their visual ideal, they screened *The Conformist* and *The Third Man* again. The influence of these two films on *Raising Arizona* seems even less discernible than on *Blood Simple*. In *The Conformist*, according to cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld, “expressionistic visuals vie with the plot for your attention; Venetian blind shadows prowl across the screen. We wanted to give you the impression there was a real director and DP working on this. Though I regret that some of

it's grainy, low contrast, and has a salmon cast."

More pertinently, they also watched *Mad Max*, mainly in order to see how to stage the fight at the end, which is a semi-homage to the George Miller money-spinner, a film that proved that an Aussie movie could out-bike, out-stunt, out-Corman, and out-cult any Yankee exploitation movie. *Mad Max* was certainly at the back of the Coens' minds when they invented the incongruously named Leonard Smalls, the Lone Biker of the Apocalypse, played by the intimidating-looking black-bearded ex-boxer Randall "Tex" Cobb. The only thing Hi and Leonard Smalls have in common are similar tattoos that resemble Woody Woodpecker.

Actually, Randy Cobb was lousy on a bike and often missed his mark during the shoot and stalled. In one scene, when he has to drive up to the hole out of which the fugitives made their escape, the bike kept rolling, fell into a hole, and threw Cobb face down in the dirt. There was an ominous pause, before Cobb let out a muffled "Cut." Joel grinned and said, "Print that take. I liked it." However, it didn't make it to the finished movie.

In the final cartoon confrontation between Hi and the Biker, the latter hurls a knife at Hi, who swings a plank as a shield at the last moment, and the knife sticks in the plank. The effect was designed by Ethan; the knife was already in the plank, spring-loaded on the non-camera side. Nicolas Cage as Hi released the spring to sync with Cobb's throw, and it jabbed through the plank. He is then blown up by his own hand grenade, and all that is left of him is a smoking boot with his foot in it.

32 *Casting Around*

After handing in the script to Circle, who sound like the last altruistic producers in the universe, the Coens finally got some money, which they used to upgrade their lifestyles somewhat. Ethan moved downtown to a big sublet in Chelsea—"more pacing space"—with his girlfriend Hilary. Frances immediately set about redecorating Joel's Riverside Drive apartment, disposing of Ethan's *Blood Simple* souvenir—a huge bloodied wall used for the hand-stabbing scene. The Coens also rented a share in a Chelsea office. One day in December 1985, just before filming began on *Raising Arizona*, Ethan asked Joel, "Is it okay if I cut out early today?" Joel said, "Sure. What for?" Ethan said, "Hilary and I were thinking of going down to City Hall and getting married. Wanna come?" "Sure," said Joel, who served as best man.

Just as Holly Hunter recommended Frances McDormand for *Blood Simple*, a gesture that led to her stardom and marriage, so Frances reciprocated by suggesting her friend Holly to Joel and Ethan for the part of Prison Officer Edwina (“Ed”), and they duly wrote it with her in mind. It was a big-screen break for Hunter, who had previously appeared in a lousy schlock horror movie, *The Burning*, and who had only had small roles in three other films. (In *Raising Arizona*, Frances, with big earrings and blonde hair, has the small part of Dot, the vulgar wife of Hi’s boss, with all the unruly children.) Unlike Hunter, twenty-four-year-old Nicolas Cage was a veteran of eight movies, including three for his uncle Francis Ford Coppola, *Rumble Fish* (as Nicolas Coppola), *The Cotton Club*, and *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Cage was more at ease away from the avuncular control, and his best performances had been in *Birdy* (Alan Parker) and *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison), both in 1984. In *Raising Arizona*, Cage was able to emulate Jerry Lewis, whom he admired for “his freedom, his craziness.” There is certainly something frantically demented about his Hi McDunnough, the doleful, maladroit thief trying to settle down with a lady cop and a kidnapped baby. Cage is a “leading man in a character role” as the Coens describe him.

However, Cage later complained, in *American Film Magazine*, about the Coens’ “autocratic nature.” Mainly, perhaps, because they stick rigidly to the written script. John Turturro compared the Coens’ style on the set to that of a conductor working with a classical music score as opposed to the jazz-like approach of Spike Lee. “With Joel and Ethan, it’s a little harder to improvise,” Turturro explained.

Joel thinks that the “autocracy” is a function of economics. “You have to maximize the money. The way to maximize the budget is to be real specific about how you’re going to direct the production elements ahead of time, as opposed to in the middle of the chaos on the set.” Barenholtz contended that the Coens worried more about how the budget was being spent than he and his partners did.

The six-foot-three-inch, three-hundred-pound John Goodman literally burst his way into the Coens’ repertory company in *Raising Arizona*. For the dramatic escape from prison, which takes place during a raging storm, a deep hole was dug and covered with a mud-packed foam sleeve. Boards were placed in the hole for reinforcement. After John Goodman emerges, he reaches back down to grab the hand of William Forsythe, whose leg was attached to a cable, and as Goodman pulls him up, a crane helps lift Forsythe out of the mire.

It was Goodman’s tenth movie, but the first in which he made much impact.

The actor should be grateful to the Coens for giving him some credibility on the big screen away from such cartoonish inanities as *Revenge of the Nerds*, *King Ralph*, and *The Flintstones*. Cartoonish as *Raising Arizona* may be, it was cinematically eons ahead of any other Goodman vehicle.

33 Baby Talk

When W. C. Fields was asked how he liked babies, he replied, “Fricasseed!” The Coens might have agreed with him after the filming of *Raising Arizona*. The typically cryptic title means the raising of a baby, Nathan Arizona, Jr., but could also imply a homophonic razing Arizona. The Coens recalled an unfinished furniture store in Minnesota called Plywood Minnesota, and thus Unpainted Arizona became a similar shop owned and run by the wealthy Nathan Arizona (Trey Wilson) in the film. He is the father of quintuplets, one of whom is kidnapped by petty crook Hi and prison officer Ed.

When asked what the vital ingredients of *Raising Arizona* were, Joel explained that the film contained all the essential elements of popular cinema: “Babies, Harleys, and explosives.” At that stage, neither brother had children. (Nine years later, Joel and Frances were to adopt a baby through legal channels, unlike Hi and Ed.) “The movie is about parenting, and neither of us is a parent. But we’re really not intimately acquainted with murder either, and we made a movie about killing people,” Joel commented at the time.

But the Coens had to direct a babble of bawling babies, potential mini-Harry Langdons, three hundred of whom they auditioned. Perhaps they could have used *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care*, the manual that is passed from hand to hand in the film as a circular joke. They were looking especially for crawlers. “We kept firing babies when they wouldn’t behave. And they didn’t even know they were being fired, that’s what was so pathetic about it. Some of them took their first steps on the set. Ordinarily you’d be pretty happy about something like that, but in this case it got them fired. They’d make the walk of shame. The parents were horrified. One mother actually put her baby’s shoes on backwards so he wouldn’t walk.”

The Coens found themselves part of the Hollywood Zeitgeist again in spite of themselves. Just as sexy and violent films noir were regaining popularity when they made *Blood Simple*, and *Miller’s Crossing* was released at the time mobster movies were busting out all over, babies had become rather fashionable in

pictures of the mid to late 1980s. In the same year as *Raising Arizona*, there appeared *Baby Boom* and *Three Men and a Baby*, gooey coochie-coo films on the theme of coping with a tiny tot's wee-wees and poo-poos. Even worse were the sequels to *Three Men and a Baby*, as well as *Look Who's Talking* and its sequels, plus the TV series *Baby Talk*. But the Coens' movie, which they claimed to have been the first film "from the baby's point of view," had little in common with the others, as it cynically viewed babies as both consumer goods, good publicity, and as objects for kidnapping, not a subject one generally makes jokes about.

"We were worried about it a little. But we thought that as long as it was clear that there was never any physical threat to the baby and that the motives of everybody involved were pure, that even though it was a kind of taboo subject, we'd be able to put it over. The major obstacle was making the characters sympathetic to the audience so that it wouldn't be offensive. And also to make it clear that when the baby is supposedly in some kind of danger, he's enjoying himself. You can put a baby up on the handlebars of a Harley-Davidson as long as you have him laughing." The motorcycle was placed on a big trailer and there were people standing all around within inches of the baby.

In another scene, when Gale and Evelle realize they have driven off without the baby, having left him in the middle of the road, they return and stop the car just inches from him. The scene was shot in reverse, as the Coens could not have had complete confidence in even the best stunt driver. A few years later, when Ethan was a father, he admitted that he would not have liked to use his own baby.

Nathan Arizona, Jr., was played by eight-month-old T. J. Kuhn, the son of a Phoenix detention officer and his nursing assistant wife. "T. J. was the main baby. There were others for long shots. A baby is somewhere between an actor and a prop. You can't talk to it and tell it what you want it to do. And you can't just put it some place in a shot and reliably predict it'll stay there. The movie took three months to shoot, so we tried to get all his scenes in the first two months because we didn't want him to get too cranky—he was a placid and cheerful baby, but he did have his cranky moments. You just roll a lot of film to avoid that. Above all we didn't want him to age noticeably over a three-month shoot."

HI: Lookahere, young sportsman. That—there's the kitchen area where Ma and Pa chow down. Over there's the TV, two hours a day maximum, either educational or football so's you don't ruin your appreciation of the finer things. This—here's the divan, for socializin' and relaxin' with the family unit. Yessir, many's the day we sat there and said wouldn't it be nice to have a youngster here to share our thoughts and feelin's . . .

34 *Shake, Rattle and Roll*

Raising Arizona was shot in the state of the title, at and near Carefree Studios (the home of the *New Dick Van Dyke Show*) in Greater Phoenix. Ethan, Joel, and cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld spent ten weeks before the shoot not only rehearsing actors but running through scenes on location, so they were able to storyboard the whole film based on the actual locations.

As with *Blood Simple*, Sonnenfeld was involved early on and had a lot to say about camera set-ups, movements, and lighting, because the Coens work out the look of the film as much as they work out the story. The script, which made it to the screen almost verbatim, was complete with camera directions and editing notations.

Sonnenfeld preshot Super 8 video to test the feasibility of the settings and camera movements. For example, they were hoping to use a lake with the “World’s Tallest Fountain”—a man-made 250-foot spout—as backdrop to the picnic scene. They discovered that the fountain was invisible on film and the lake fired off too much glare, and were able to reconsider the setting in time.

In the extended prologue, the directors worked with Sonnenfeld for a look that would be “colorful and beautifully lit.” The dramatic desert sunset was filmed over the course of forty minutes with motionless standins. For an Arizona sunrise later in the film, they shot a far more spectacular sunrise upside-down and reversed the negative.

The Coens exemplify the concept of self-conscious camera, no more so than in *Raising Arizona*, which meant Shakicam, not Steadicam, which they avoided. “The Coens are control freaks,” claimed Sonnenfeld. “With the Steadicam the camera just floats there out of control.” However, when used with a wide-angle lens, the Shakicam is not all that shaky. It took a bit of persuading to get professional grips and gaffers, who are accustomed to doing things smoothly, to loosen their camera mounts, to allow a little vibration to add a sense of energy to the shots. Sometimes they even re-shot scenes that seemed too slick. The early dailies so worried the film’s producers that they considered selling public shares in the picture.

The continuously experimenting Coens had the idea that when the Biker throws a punch at Hi, it should be seen from the recipient’s point of view. For

this shot, Sonnenfeld designed what he called a Barrycam, with which he and his camera were strapped to a wooden plank resting on a pivot. When the Biker unleashed his punch at the camera, the grips dropped the Barrycam to the ground, simulating Hi's point of view, reeling from the mighty blow. But even the Coens found the shot too weird-looking to use. Another shot that didn't make it to the screen was the camera itself punching Hi. Why this was abandoned one cannot judge without seeing the shot. But, as long ago as 1946, Robert Montgomery, directing himself as Philip Marlowe in *The Lady in the Lake*, used a "camera I" throughout, even being knocked out at one stage, seen from his point of view.

During the long chase sequence, when a dog is after Hi, the Coens thought of having Nicolas Cage holding a camera pointed at his face as he ran through the house. But it looked like a close-up with a bad back-projection. Elsewhere in the picture, when Hi is attempting to kidnap the quints, and they prove "more than he can handle," there is a sequence of shots from the infants' points of view. The goal was "to see the movie as much as possible from a baby's perspective, and low angles can be very dynamic."

As always the Coens played with the soundtrack. Subjective sound joins subjective camera as Hi takes a family portrait. He plants a camera on a tripod and sets the timer. The Coens' camera tracks in toward Hi's camera as the sound builds, creating farcical suspense. "Initially," recalled Joel, "we shot it static. We went back four weeks later and shot it as a tracking shot. It wasn't storyboarded as a tracking shot, it was something we decided to do after we shot the scene. We looked at it and said, 'Wouldn't it be nicer if it were tracking in?'" They asked supervising sound editor Skip Lievsay to create a mix of low-level beep (the timer), thunder, and the sound of a photo flash warming up.

One of the most spectacular sequences in the movie is when the mother of the quints discovers that one of them is missing. The camera races down the streets, through car windows, and up a ladder toward the kids' bedroom window, ending with a shot of the mother's mouth, in close-up, screaming. It was achieved by two grips running like madmen with the Shakicam, lifting it over a car and approaching the house. They then stopped at the foot of the ladder as a remote camera rode up toward the bedroom window and came to a stop at the curtains. The Coens had to cut the "tail" of this shot, an astounding close-up of the vibrating epiglottis of the woman screaming at the window, because it came after the camera movement had ceased, and it diffused the excitement of the rapid

motion.

35 *Through a Lens Widely*

Wide-Angle Lens: A wide-angle lens creates an increased depth of field, thus keeping in focus both foreground and background. For this reason this type of lens is especially effective in showing simultaneous planes of action.

Wide-Angle Shot: Such shots are effective for giving a wider panorama of a location, and for placing a character in the context of an area. Since objects in the rear are abnormally small and those close to the camera are abnormally large, the area between the various planes seems to be exaggerated and action to or away from the camera appears accelerated.

The Complete Film Dictionary (Ira Konigsberg)

The Coens have always favored the wide-angle lens, the most extreme example being in *Raising Arizona*, in which there is the kind of baroque distortion mentioned in the quote above. It is partly their use of the wide-angle lens that has led some critics to accuse the Coens of attempting to create a distance between the audience and the characters, producing an alienating effect. However, in the case of *Raising Arizona*, it was germane to the farcical and cartoon nature of the film.

The Coens are fast workers, but the chase scene after Hi robs the convenience store ate a large part of the shooting schedule. The night shooting with wide-angle lenses meant problems for Sonnenfeld. “A major pain of using wide angles is the lighting—there’s nowhere to put the lights.” But the Coens were willing to sacrifice lighting for depth of field, which meant Sonnenfeld needed the wider lens and fewer lights, and necessitated the use of high-speed Kodak 5294 film. The Coens also prefer to cover a scene with quick set-ups from several angles rather than fuss with lighting for one angle.

Raising Arizona also established what has become a cliché in Hollywood films of the 1990s: the floor-level chase sequence. “The lower the camera, the more dynamic it is. You get a sense of power from the legs, from the things on the floor,” Sonnenfeld remarked in order to explain the many ground-level shots in the movie. When Hi is chased through the supermarket, Sonnenfeld wanted to raise the low camera six inches, because the fluorescent lights on the ceiling distracted the eye and caused a flare on the lens. The Coens said that a high camera wouldn’t be as wacky. “Every time I put on a lens, Joel and Ethan would ask, ‘Does it look wacky enough?’” No one disputed that the film was wacky.

“We’re certainly not willfully different. We don’t sort of say, ‘Let’s do something different.’ Our tastes are actually fairly mainstream. We are struggling

to get into the mainstream. I hope it's more mainstream, if mainstream means reaching a wider audience. But, I mean, if you're going to be real calculated about it, to make a mainstream movie that's going to go over big with everybody, you don't make a comedy about kidnapping."

36 *Running Around in Circles*

"There's an old Mack Sennett studio that used to bring someone in from the insane asylum to sit in on the story conferences and blurt things. They called them wildies. If it sounded good to the writers, they'd write it into the script. We make up our own wildies."

It is appropriate that Joel should evoke Mack Sennett in relation to *Raising Arizona*. James Agee described the Sennett comedy chase as a "majestic trajectory of pure anarchic motion that cops, dogs, cats, babies, automobiles, locomotives, innocent bystanders, sometimes what seemed like a whole city, an entire civilization, were hauled along head over heels in the wake of that energy like dry leaves following an express train."

In *Raising Arizona*, there is a spectacular slapstick chase that pays homage to the Sennett trademark while technically surpassing most chases of its kind. Ex-con Hi, with pantyhose over his face, is holding up a convenience store where he has stopped to get some Huggies for the baby. His wife, Ed, waiting outside for him in the car, is shocked by his recidivist action and drives away. The alarm goes off. Hi runs out of the store chasing the car. He leaves the Huggies in the middle of the road. The police are after him. He flags down a car and jumps in, getting the driver to take him home. They are faced by the young store cashier holding a .44 Magnum that blasts into the car, which plows into a wall of a suburban house. Hi vaults a fence into a yard, where he is confronted by a vicious Doberman. The dog, whose POV we see, leaps and stops within inches of Hi's face, reaching the end of his chain. (The surprise of the yanked chain is comparable to the thump of the newspaper on the door in *Blood Simple*.) Hi runs through the house, a Shakicam tracking along behind him. The dog breaks loose and chases Hi, as do other dogs. He arrives back at the supermarket to get more Huggies, pursued by a trigger-happy cop and the store manager, who blasts away with a shotgun while a shopper screams through the aisles with her cart. He finds the original Huggies he abandoned in the road and picks them up.

The scene described could easily be one in any broad Hollywood comedy, but it is done with breathtaking skill and wit, as well as emphasizing the cyclical

nature of the screenplay. The characters get nowhere very fast. At the beginning, Hi keeps returning to prison where he sees the same menacing convict mopping up in the same place, and he has to listen to the same boring tales of eating crow told by the prisoner in the bunk above him. He keeps reoffending and comes before the same parole board.

When Gale and Evelle hold up the “hayseed” bank, they accidentally leave Nathan Jr. in the middle of the road, as Hi left the Huggies, and so have to return to the scene of the crime. There are even repeated actions. Hi pulls a baby out from under a cot by his feet in the same action (and camera set-up) as the Biker pulls Hi from under a car. In the end, the baby is returned to his parents, and Hi and Ed are exactly as they began, in love but without a child, still living in the trailer, and Gale and Evelle return to prison down the hole from where they escaped. Despite its cinematic maturity, *Raising Arizona* is a young man’s film (Joel was thirty-one and Ethan twenty-eight when they made it), demonstrating an unruly delight in filmmaking. It also displays a healthy distrust of institutions like work, prison, marriage, and parenthood. If *Blood Simple* was considered by some as “anti-American,” a catchall phrase that means different things to different people, *Raising Arizona* has more claims to that label. “Un-American” might be a better description had it not another specific connotation.

Primarily, the film has at its heart an implicit censure of family values. Although Hi and Ed dream of having a child, the reality becomes too much for them to handle. Respectable married life is represented by Glen, Hi’s cretinous boss, and his wife Dot (Frances McDormand), who come to visit with their brood of brats. Dot wants another baby, because her other children are now “too old to cuddle.” As Dot rattles on with a litany of all the responsibilities and obligations toward a baby, from diphtheria injections to life insurance, Hi wants to opt out.

When Nathan Arizona, the father of the quints, is being interviewed by the media about the kidnapping, he can’t resist cynically using the occasion as free publicity for his store. “If you can find lower prices anywhere my name ain’t Nathan Arizona.” The point is, it ain’t his name; it’s really Nathan Huffhines.

The underlying critique of Reaganite policies is also present. Asked by the police if he had any disgruntled employee who might have kidnapped the baby, Nathan Arizona says, “They’re all disgruntled. My motto is ‘Do it my way or watch your butt.’” Hi’s blaming Reagan for his recidivism (“Not a pretty name, is it, Hi?”) is double edged, because we are able to laugh at him and agree with him at the same time. “I tried to stand up and fly straight. It wasn’t easy with that son-

of-the-bitch Reagan in the White House. They say he's a decent man, so maybe his advisors are confused."

DOT: —and then there's diphtheria-tetanus, what they call dip-tet. You gotta get him dip-tet boosters yearly or else he'll get lockjaw and night vision. Then there's the smallpox vaccine, chicken pox and measles, and if your kid's like ours you gotta take all those shots first to get him to take 'em. Who's your pediatrician, anyway? . . . Well you just gotta have one! You just gotta have one this instant! . . . even if he don't get sick he's gotta have his dip-tet! You started his bank accounts? . . . That-there's for his orthodonture and his college. You soak his thumb in iodine you might get by without the orthodonture, but it won't knock any off the college. Anyway, you probably got the life insurance all squared away . . . You gotta do that . . . What would Ed and the angel do if a truck came along and splattered your brains all over the interstate? Where would you be then . . . Or you got carried off by a twister?

Raising Arizona

37 *Arizona Dreaming*

"The cinema is a dream we all dream at the same time," said Jean Cocteau. For the Coens this is particularly pertinent. Since films began for them as a means of escape while incarcerated in "Siberia, USA," they would dream themselves out of prison, like George du Maurer's Peter Ibbotson. The 1935 Henry Hathaway movie, *Peter Ibbotson*, starring Gary Cooper, was taken up by André Breton and the Surrealists as the cinematic embodiment of *l'amour fou* and the thin membrane that exists between dreams and reality. Surrealism is too precise and associative a term to apply to the Coens, but most of their films aspire toward the condition of surrealism. This allows them more creative scope within the commercial structure that is American cinema. With experiments in color, high overhead shots, vertiginous tracking shots, superimposition, trick photography, and juggling with time and space, the Coens have been an important force in imaginative filmmaking without being accused of avant-gardism by cautious studio moguls. It is also, perhaps, a reason why their films hark back to earlier products of the Hollywood Dream Factory, where realism (not reality) was kept at bay.

Miller's Crossing sets its tone by beginning with a dream. *Barton Fink* moves further and further from reality into an apocalyptic nightmare, ending with Barton dreaming himself into the calming photograph of a girl on a beach looking out to sea that broke the monotony of the peeling wallpaper in his hotel room.

The Hudsucker Proxy is a magical fable and dreamlike in conception.

Therefore, the dream that Norville has of doing a ballet with a woman representing his lover is utterly redundant, and seems more of an excuse for the Coens to get in a musical number. Just as irrelevant are the crass dream sequences in *The Big Lebowski* that are tenuously related to the plot or the characters' own obsessions, and smack of the Coens showing off.

In *Raising Arizona*, Hi dreams of his nemesis, the Lone Biker of the Apocalypse, before he has ever seen him. There is a strong case to be made for Leonard Smalls being a product of Hi's imagination. When Gale and Evelle, the two dim-witted, giggling brothers, escape from prison, they emerge like some primordial creatures through the mud as thunder and lightning rages. They, too, have come to ruin Hi's life. Is it all a dream that Hi is having in his prison cell? If so, they are dreams within dreams. There is a clue: when Hi, who is the I of the film, is blissfully contemplating starting a family with Ed, he says, "This whole dream, was it wishful thinking? Was I just fleein' reality, like I know I'm liable to do?"

At the end of *Raising Arizona*, Hi has a sentimental dream of the future. He imagines Nathan Arizona, Jr., becoming a high-school football hero, and that he and Ed would have a brood of children and grandchildren. It is a vision that could be taken at face value or as a send-up of a typical Hollywood happy ending. It's a pity, therefore, that the Coens destroy the ambiguity by undercutting it with a jokey reference to Utah, a state which borders on Arizona.

"The shades and shadows of the people in my life wrestled their way into my slumber . . . It seemed like us. It seemed real. And it seemed like . . . well, our home—if not Arizona, then a land not too far away, where all the parents are strong and wise and capable, and all the children were happy and beloved. I don't know . . . Maybe it was Utah."

VI

DOUBLE CROSSING

*“It’s about time at that point to shed a little blood.
The movie’s in danger of becoming tasteful, you know?”*

38 *After the Fox*

ON THE NIGHT OF THE first New York screening of *Raising Arizona* at the Gotham Theater in February 1987, the Coens were on the other side of town to see a small screening of Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead 2: Dead By Dawn*. Someone noticed them there, and said, “I thought you guys would be at the other movie?” “Nah,” said Joel. “We’ve seen that one.” During *Evil Dead 2*, they “heh-heh-hehed” at the chain-sawings, shotgunnings, and battles with demons from the Beyond.

The Raimi connection continued with *Darkman* (1990) when the Coens contributed, uncredited, to the screenplay. It starred Liam Neeson and Frances McDormand. One line that came from the brothers was McDormand’s: “If you’re not going to kill me, I have things to do.”

“I should have had more fun with it, and embraced the damsel-in-distress thing,” Frances recalled. “I was playing a character that has a master’s in real estate law, but in the end I was still handcuffed to a building waiting to be rescued. I really should have gotten into that. I was really bored out of my mind just being a kind of prop, and a woman in an action film is a prop.”

The comic-book type plot has Neeson as a scientist hot on the trail of a formula for cloning body parts by computer when his lab is burned down by thugs and he is left for dead. Horribly disfigured, he becomes Darkman and uses his invention of synthetic skin to take on the shape of other people in order to seek revenge.

Raimi wanted high-school friend Bruce Campbell (star of the *Evil Dead* trilogy) for the lead but had to bend to studio wishes for the rising Neeson and could only give Campbell a cameo at the end. Raimi was moving into bigger

budget territory and losing some of his edge and independence. The Coens, too, were given a much bigger budget for their next film, *Miller's Crossing*, the responsibility of which might have contributed to the writer's block they suffered while working on the screenplay.

Raising Arizona was made for about five million dollars and grossed twenty-five million, which got the moguls sensing that the Coen brothers could become hot. So hot in fact that Warner Bros. offered them *Batman* with a budget they could never have dreamed of when they were going around cap in hand, or facing businessmen across large desks, only a few years before. Sticking to their principles of only doing original work on their own terms, they dauntlessly turned Warner Bros. down. One could amuse oneself in contemplating how different their *Batman* might have been from Tim Burton's. In fact, Sam Raimi might have been ideal as he had a collection of twenty-five thousand comic books. The Coens were into comics and cartoons, but although there are elements of these in their first two features, fleshy and bloody characters interested them more.

For *Miller's Crossing*, they turned not to comic books but to Dashiell Hammett for inspiration, and to Fox for money. It was financed completely by Fox, but, according to Ben Barenholtz: "Fox did not have a say in cast, title—nothing. Do you think *Miller's Crossing* would have looked like that, would have had that ending, if Fox—or any major—had final cut? Of course not. They would have pigeon-holed it. Circle has the contract with the Coen brothers, but I don't have artistic control."

Barenholtz made a deal with Fox in which the studio paid for an option based on a two-line description of the project. Two lines! A summary of the convoluted plot would take almost as long as the film to recount. Did Fox go for something like the two lines below?

Leo likes Tom, but hates Johnny. Leo loves Verna. Tom loves Verna.
Tom loses his hat. There is much shooting and killing.

Once the script was presented to Fox, the studio had the option to either turn it down or accept it. If Fox refused, its money would have been returned and Barenholtz would have taken the film elsewhere. If they accepted, they were not entitled to dictate anything, from the cast to the title. The only way Fox could intercede creatively during production was if the Coens had deviated substantially from the screenplay.

"It's a unique deal. And it shows that there is room to work within the system

and get good films made,” Barenholtz crowed. *Miller’s Crossing* would cost fourteen million dollars, more than twice *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona* put together. If the definition of an indie movie means a low-budget picture made outside the system, then the Coens were moving away from the indie scene, despite their having no artistic restriction put on them.

39 *Bigheads*

Someone once said that the process of writing a screenplay was the solving of a series of problems. There seemed to be more problems than usual for the Coens on *Miller’s Crossing*, even though they had ready-made models in Hammett’s *The Glass Key* and *Red Harvest*, the latter giving them the idea of making a movie where everybody is a gangster; the good guys and bad guys are gangsters—even the cops. Also typical of Hammett is the enigmatic central character, here called Tom Reagan. “It’s a wonder the Hammett estate didn’t sue for plagiarism,” wrote the critic John Harkness in *Sight and Sound*. Naturally, Raymond Chandler was not far away, and the girl’s name of Verna echoes Velma in *Farewell, My Lovely*. In *The Big Sleep*, there is a bootlegger called Rusty Regan, “a big curly-headed Irishman . . . an adventurer who happened to get himself wrapped up in some velvet.”

The screenplay took longer to write than their previous two scripts—about eight months—because they got stuck halfway through. Referring to the untitled film as *The Bighead*, a nickname they had given the Tom Reagan character, the writing brothers found the plot had become too complicated for them to figure out. They tried various techniques to overcome the block, including different locations. They remember banging their heads against the wall and wearing out the rug pacing the floor, but artistic angst isn’t something either will admit to.

They spent two weeks with Sam Raimi. They talked at length to John Turturro. They called Barry Sonnenfeld. Nothing worked. They went to stay with their friend William Preston Robertson for a week during which, according to Robertson, they listened to Clancy Brothers records, drank coffee, ate doughnuts, and watched *Jeopardy* on television. One night, having made no progress with *The Bighead*, they went to see *Baby Boom*, and left for New York the next morning.

They abandoned *The Bighead*, and wrote *Barton Fink* instead, which concerned a screenwriter with writer’s block. Two months later, they returned undaunted to *The Bighead*, now called *Miller’s Crossing*, “because we couldn’t

think of a better title," and attempted to solve the plot problems to their satisfaction. "*Barton Fink* sort of washed out our brain, and we were able to go back and finish *Miller's Crossing*." However, when the shoot was delayed for two weeks, due to tragic circumstances, the Coens took advantage of the break and rewrote the entire second half of the screenplay.

The role of the Irish gangland boss, Liam "Leo" O'Bannion, was written for Trey Wilson, the actor who played Nathan Arizona, the father of the quints, in *Raising Arizona*. But a few days before rehearsals began, the forty-three-year-old actor had a stroke and died of a brain aneurysm. Luckily, the powerful British actor Albert Finney was available to take over. "Ironically, the character wouldn't have been written if it weren't for Trey," Ethan remarked. "Now it's impossible to imagine another actor than Finney in the part." Finney is out of the movie for most of the last two-thirds, yet such was his performance that he loomed large *in absentia*.

The dialogue was not rewritten for Finney, nor was it written with an Irish accent in the mind's ear of the Coens, despite the fact that Leo O'Bannion and Tom Reagan (portrayed by the Dublin-born actor Gabriel Byrne) were Irish-Americans. But when Byrne read the script, he found that it had an authentic Irish lilt and rhythm to it. In the event, Finney and Byrne's accents hover a little uneasily between American and Irish.

A description of the mobster Shad O'Rory in *The Glass Key* seems to fit the Finney character. "He wore a dark blue overcoat over a dark blue suit and carried a brown derby hat in a black gloved hand . . . His voice was a musical barytone[sic]. The faintest of brogues colored his words."

Another character in *The Glass Key* is described thus: "Bernie Despain was a small man, short and stringy, with a head too large for his body. The size of his head was exaggerated until it seemed a deformity by long thick fluffy waved hair. His face was swarthy, large-featured except for the eyes, and strongly lined across the forehead and down from the nostrils past the mouth."

This resembles Bernie Bernbaum, the slimy, small-time gangster, played by John Turturro, the most significant member of the cast in terms of his relationship with the Coens' work. Turturro first came to their notice as a double-crossing convict in *To Live and Die in LA* (1985). "It's extraordinary how he allows himself to be humiliated in front of the camera," the Coens commented. Turturro, who looks like an Identikit portrait of both Ethan and Joel, and was born in the same year as the former, was to become a kind of talisman for the Coens. He was their quasi-surrogate in *Barton Fink*, would have

an outrageous cameo as Jesus Quintana in *The Big Lebowski* and an important role as a dim escaped convict in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* For Turturro, “Bernie is a conglomerate of Joel, Ethan, people that I’ve met, and imagination.”

Another actor who would become a member of the Coen repertory company was the short, round, and bald Jon Polito, who plays Leo’s hot-headed mobster rival. “I saw *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona* and I was in love. I read the script in August, and I said, ‘I only want to play Johnny Caspar.’ They weren’t looking for anybody my age—I’m thirty-eight, and it’s written for a fifty-five-year-old man. They wanted me to read for all the other gangster characters, but I said no.” Polito had played racketeers before; the first part he won when he first came to Hollywood was in the television series *The Gangster Chronicles*. Polito was also Detective Steve Crosetti on the 1993–94 season of *Homicide: Life on the Street*.

“The actors never changed one word of dialogue,” Polito stated. “We followed the scenario extremely faithfully. A large amount of direction is already in the screenplay. I remember going through my opening monologue at first and I got one word wrong. ‘You’ve missed that word.’ They don’t let actors change a single word. They sort of giggle and make you laugh along with them, until finally you realize you’re going the way they planned years before. They have a wonderful way of catching you off guard.”

The Coens flew Marcia Gay Harden, who plays Verna, and who was making her screen debut, to the New Orleans location for an unscheduled costume fitting that went on “until the wee hours of the morning.” They redesigned her dresses to make them more clingy, had her spend a week on make-up tests, had her eyebrows plucked and her hair cut. “That was important to them. But they left me on my own conceptually. They’d use words like ‘smoky, sensuous, sexy.’”

There are rare occasions when one feels that a little more “conceptual” directing might not go amiss, especially in the case of Polito, who gives a hammy, eye-rolling performance. For Gabriel Byrne it was, “Close the door after you, that sort of thing. It wasn’t a fun set at all. People were there to work really hard.” Joel was surprised by Byrne’s comment. “Did he really say that? Well, I don’t think you’ll find that to be a particularly widely held perception. Actually, Gabriel had a thankless task in that he was in practically every shot and was a foil for the other characters.” “Also he got hit a lot,” Ethan pointed out. “Yeh, I suppose you cannot really blame him for saying that. He got up at five in the morning, went into make-up for an hour and then spent twelve hours being hit.”

Tom Reagan gets beaten up as much as the hero Ned Beaumont in *The Glass Key*, who also keeps bouncing back. The gangster’s henchman Eddie Dane calls

Tom “Little Miss Punching Bag.” The Coens found the character getting his face smashed up rather funny. “Well, violence is frequently very funny. There is no funnier part of *The Apartment* than when Jack Lemmon is smacking Shirley Maclaine when she has passed out,” they claimed rather perversely.

40 *Way Down Yonder*

Miller's Crossing was the Coens' first period piece and was a break from their previous “hayseed sagas,” which they would return to with a vengeance in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Like *The Glass Key*, *Miller's Crossing* is set in an unnamed American city in the 1920s, yet the city resembles Personville, nicknamed Poisonville, in *Red Harvest*. The film was actually shot in New Orleans, although almost nothing was shown that could identify the city. Only those local residents familiar with the office buildings and private clubs that were used would twig where the film was shot.

“We looked around San Francisco, but you know what that looks like: period but upscale—*faux* period.” New Orleans was chosen for the location because of the late 1920s period architecture, which meant it could pass for the generic Anytown. “There are whole neighborhoods here of nothing but 1929 architecture. New Orleans is sort of a depressed city; it hasn't been gentrified. There's a lot of architecture that hasn't been touched, store-front windows that haven't been replaced in the last sixty years.” Some cosmetic restoration was done in some neighborhoods, but most of it remained the same, representing perfectly those Hammett cities festering with corruption.

For the scene in Leo's club, the members of the staid International House opened their doors for the first time to a film crew. During the days when the downstairs dining-room was needed for filming, the members took their lunch in a smaller upstairs room, where little cards on the table informed them that they were being inconvenienced “to facilitate filming in New Orleans.”

On Magazine Street several blocks looked like the 1920s, and Picayune Street was the location for an exterior scene between Tom and Verna. The place of the title was a tree farm ninety minutes from the city. All of the scenes there were shot on Fuji film, because Fuji's greens are much more muted than Kodak stock.

The South was also chosen because the schedule necessitated shooting in winter, but the brothers didn't want to show any snowy exteriors. They would make up for it a few years later in *Fargo*, which had more snow and ice than any film since *Scott of the Antarctic*.

Because the Coens always want to work with the same people as much as possible, *Miller's Crossing* had the same team of Barry Sonnenfeld (cinematographer), Carter Burwell (composer), Skip Lievsay (sound editor), J. Todd Anderson (storyboard artist), and Richard Hornung (costume designer), all of whom had worked on the previous picture. Only the scene designer, Jane Musky, wasn't free, so Dennis Gassner, who had worked with Francis Coppola, came in. He helped them in the choice of colors, which are more controlled than in the precedent films. Gassner had the idea of columns in architecture that corresponded to the trees of the forest.

41 Hats On!

"We didn't want to do another out-and-out comedy like *Raising Arizona*. We wanted to do something that was a little morbid. We've always liked gangster movies. Though, it's closer to a film noir than a gangster movie. But we're attracted to the genre more in the literary than the cinematic."

It just so happened that there was a revival in the late 1980s and early 1990s of gangster movies, sparked off by the success of Brian De Palma's unsubtle *The Untouchables* (1987). In the same year as *Miller's Crossing*, there appeared Martin Scorsese's amoral *Goodfellas* and Francis Coppola's conclusion to his mafia saga, *The Godfather Part III*. The Coens felt, quite rightly, that of all the gangster films on offer theirs was the most "mythical," although Ethan once generously confessed that he thought *Goodfellas* better. The opening of *Miller's Crossing* is almost a pastiche of the opening monologue in *The Godfather*. The final scene, however, between Leo and Tom after Bernie Bernbaum's funeral, harks back to the walk-away at the end of *The Third Man*, though in reverse.

Hats are an essential part of the aesthetic of the gangster movie from the 1930s to the 1950s. Difficult to imagine James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson walking bareheaded in the streets when going off to blast someone to smithereens. A hat is also an important plot point in *The Glass Key*. In *Miller's Crossing*, a child comes across a dead man, Rug Daniels, in an alley, takes off his toupee, and runs away with it. In *The Glass Key*, a man is found dead in an alley, but his hat has disappeared. "He won't need it now" is the remark, both about the rug and the hat.

The film had its genesis in the image of a black hat coming to rest in a forest clearing, then lifting to soar away again down an avenue of trees, an image that accompanies the main title.

“The hat thing, what can you say about the hat? It’s not that there’s any hidden mysteries or anything. It’s just because, you know, it’s there.” Working on the principal that, “If you want to get ahead, get a hat,” the Coens “wanted to make a film with people who were dressed in a certain manner, hats, long coats, and put them in an unusual context like a forest.”

“The characters in this movie don’t open up, don’t reveal themselves at any point, so the Coens wanted brims very broad and down over people’s eyes, often shadowing them,” said the designer Richard Hornung. “People are very covered up in this.”

The selection of Byrne’s hat was a long process. Five identical hats were made for Byrne to wear during the filming. The one in the opening shot was filmed at high speed using a special lightweight hat that could be controlled with a fishing line. “The hat really becomes a big symbol in the film,” Hornung continued. “Every time Tom gets knocked down, the hat falls off and people are always handing it back to him.” A question of boy gets hat, boy loses hat, boy gets hat.

The Coens also remembered, in their childhood, attending the synagogue where they were surrounded by men wearing old-fashioned hats, while others wore yarmulkes. However, you couldn’t have a gangster in a yarmulke, could you? Well, Albert Finney as Leo wears one at Bernie Bernbaum’s funeral.

Are any of your brother’s hats missing? Paul says he had a hat on. There was none there when I found him. See if you can find out how many he had and if they’re all accounted for—except the one I borrowed. . . . Why are you so interested in the hat? Is it so important? He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I’m only an amateur detective, but it looks like a thing that might have some meaning, one way or another.

The Glass Key (Dashiell Hammett)

42 Shoot the Tenor

“Before we shot the movie, they were saying it should be like *Unbearable Lightness of Being* [shot by Sven Nykvist],” remarked Barry Sonnenfeld. “And I would disagree and tell them why not. And we would go back and forth and back and forth. Finally, and this is what’s happened on every movie, I say, ‘How about this: What if we just make it look nice?’ And they’ll go, ‘Yeah, that would be great, that’s exactly what we’re talking about.’”

“It’s about time at that point to shed a little blood. The movie’s in danger of becoming tasteful, you know?” the Coens commented before the long, spectacular sequence in which four of Johnny Caspar’s gunmen are sent to rub

out Leo. The tightly edited montage was shot over a period of several weeks in various locations, ranging from studio interiors, to a residential street in the suburb of Metairie, to a house near the French Quarter, to a vacant house in the Garden District (now occupied by the novelist Anne Rice).

“Exactly which part was filmed when is hard to remember,” said Joel, “with one exception. We burned down the house the night of the Academy Awards.” This was on March 29, 1989, the night Barry Levinson’s *Rain Man* won Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. Was it some kind of rebellion against the Oscar ceremony, from which so-called “indies” like the Coens were usually excluded, or a huge bonfire to celebrate this annual Hollywood rite? Six years later, however, Frances McDormand and the Coens would be on the podium at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion accepting the gold-plated statuettes for *Fargo*.

The hardest shot of the film to get right was the one in which Leo rolls under the bed to shoot. The Coens used an elevated set, about three feet off the ground, so the camera would be level with the bed. Two men played the second gunman, but the reverse shots required a stunt coordinator. “Thompsons are not light guns. It’s difficult to hold one while it’s firing and bucking, and also with squibs going up your back,” Joel explained. “You have to sell all that body language, taking the bullet hits. What sells the hit is the dance. He shoots up the chandelier, the paintings, his toes. All kinds of fun things. It was a lot of fun blowing the toes off. The only regret is that it goes by so fast, you almost kind of miss it. They’re a highlight.”

In the course of planning this scene, the peacenik-looking Coens became experts in the lore of Thompson guns, several of which they procured for the film. While they were enamored of the gun’s output—given sufficient ammunition, they can fire eight hundred rounds a minute—they had to accept its predisposition to jam, a drawback that forced innumerable retakes. “The gun is incredibly loud, and it does vibrate. You can see it sort of jingle. The whole thing was a very satisfying experience.”

Toward the end of the segment, as Leo walks down the street firing the gun at the speeding getaway car, Finney had to maintain a cool demeanor while controlling the powerful weapon. As an added challenge, the Coens set up a bucket behind him to see how many expelled cartridges he could land in it. “He got a very high percentage,” said Ethan. “Technically, he’s a very good actor.”

The Coens recruited Irish tenor Frank Patterson, who played the vocalist in

John Huston's final film, *The Dead*, to perform "Danny Boy," the song that Finney is listening to on the Victrola when the gunmen burst in, and which continues throughout the entire sequence. After the scene was edited, Patterson went into the studio with an orchestra to record the song, tailoring his cadences to fit the action.

Gabriel Byrne helped in the selection of the music, including "Danny Boy" and "Come Back to Erin," an Irish tune that Carter Burwell used as the principal theme of the film. "My first preference is for variety," commented Burwell. "I would not like to do the same things again and again. One of the reasons I love working with Joel and Ethan is that they never ask me to do the same thing. In *Miller's Crossing*, we all agreed that it should be an orchestral score, but we also knew that I knew nothing about orchestral music! That didn't faze them at all; they were perfectly willing to give me the job. I figured I would learn orchestral film music and do it."

Although Carter Burwell (born 1955) learned classical piano, his interest in music was first sparked when a friend taught him how to improvise blues in high school. It was soon after that he discovered his love for composition. As a fine arts major at Harvard, he continued this growing attachment to music by playing piano whenever he could. When he was about to graduate, he joined a band for fun and was serendipitously discovered in a club by Lee Orloff, the sound mixer on *Blood Simple*.

"Going into it, I wasn't sure what it was going to be like. I thought they were going to be breathing down my neck, but it was quite the opposite," recalled Burwell. "They were very supportive. They let me do what I wanted to do. I didn't get a lot of specific instructions from them. They told me what they liked and what they didn't like, but they weren't specific about what a piece of music should do. One thing they did say with some sections, though, was if they felt it was getting too dark, they would say, 'It's got to be fun; it's got to be fast!' If it got to be too much fun, they would say, 'There's got to be a dark side.'" In general, Burwell's music is characterized by gripping but simple melodies, incorporating touches of contemporary styles like jazz or heavy metal and quiet, somber, instrumental sequences using guitar or piano. In *Blood Simple*, Burwell provided a haunting theme played on the piano, and other eerie music including chanting and drums. Burwell went on to do the music for almost all the brothers' subsequent movies.

43 *Tutti Fruity*

It could be said that *Miller's Crossing* was the first of the Coens' films not to be "politically correct." An unusually hypersensitive Greek or Texan just might have taken exception to *Blood Simple*, but *Raising Arizona* actually made an idiot out of a man who told Polack jokes. In *Barton Fink*, "kike" is thrown around without discrimination, but only by a fellow kike (Jack Lipnick), whereas there are references to potato eaters, eye-ties, and sheenies in *Miller's Crossing*. "It ain't right all this fuss over one sheeny. Let Caspar have Bernie—Jesus, what's one Hebrew more or less?" says police chief O'Doole.

The Irish and Italians don't come off too well, both being equally corrupt. The Jews, as represented by Bernie Bernbaum, come off worse. But Bernie is also a homosexual, which seems more contemptible in the characters' eyes (as distinct from those of their creators). The homosexuals are the most irredeemable people in the picture. The despicable Bernie is having an affair with Mink (Steve Buscemi), who is "Eddie's boy"—that is Eddie Dane, Caspar's vicious henchman.

"What's going on between you and Bernie?" Tom asks Mink. "Nothing, Tom, we're just friends, you know, amigos?" "You're a fickle boy, Mink. If the Dane found out you had another 'amigo'—well, I don't peg him for the understanding type." For Joel, the relationship of Bernie, Mink, and Eddie was "just a mirror image of the central triangle" of Tom, Verna, and Leo, a feeling for symmetry and counterpoint that is inherent in most of their screenplays.

The homosexuality was so obliquely treated that the film escaped the ire of gay groups who vociferously objected to two films the following year, which, they felt, treated gays in an extremely negative manner. In Oliver Stone's *JFK*, there is an implicit assumption of a homosexual mafia having been involved in the killing of President Kennedy, and the portrayal of a gay transvestite serial killer, who skins the bodies of his young female victims, in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* was less than flattering. In *Miller's Crossing*, Eddie Dane is a woman-hater and, grabbing Verna, tells her, "I'll track down all you whores."

In *Barton Fink*, Jack Lipnick, head of Capitol Studios, says he has heard that Barton's play was "a little fruity, but I guess you know what you're doing." Later the two cops, when inquiring about Charlie Meadows, who turns out to be a serial killer, ask Barton, "You two have some sick sex thing?" "Sex! He's a *man!* We *wrestled!*!" "You're a sick fuck, Fink."

In *The Big Lebowski*, it is not spelled out whether Jesus Quintana (John Turturro) is a homo-or heterosexual "pedophile," or whether it is only in

Walter's imagination. "Yeh, he's a fucking pervert, Dude . . . Your man is a sex offender. With a record. Spent six months in Chino for exposing himself to an eight-year-old."

In Ethan's gangster story "Cosa Minapolidan," a rumor starts about how, in the prison showers, a gangster "got his throat slashed by a homo . . . Joe de Louie had rebuffed the homosexual advances of a man convicted of soliciting sex from a state trooper." The "persevering homo" then steals a spoon from the mess and spends two months honing it, and "used it on the throat of the by now unsuspecting de Louie."

In another story, "Red Wing," a couple have a gay son, Kyle, living in Minneapolis. When the husband is not in the mood for sex one night, the wife accuses him of being gay as well. "Well, I guess it's true what they say . . . that the fruit don't fall far from the tree . . . Maybe you prefer sticking your thing into Norm Wollensky's big old butt," she says.

But the Coens have no *parti pris* or "hidden agenda." It is part of the maturity of their approach to their characters that they recognize the existence of racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia.

44 "I'm Talkin' about Ethics"

Although most of Raymond Chandler's and Dashiell Hammett's novels are written in the first person, *Miller's Crossing*, unpredictably, does not have a narrator. Instead it starts with a long speech delivered by Johnny Caspar to an impassive Leo. "I'm talkin' about friendship. I'm talkin' about character. I'm talkin' about—hell, Leo, I ain't embarrassed to use the word—I'm talkin' about ethics." This from a brutal hoodlum. It echoes the equally ironic opening monologue of *The Godfather*, in which a minor Mafia figure intones, "I believe in America. America has made my fortune. And I raised my daughter in the American fashion . . ." It is a typically audacious thing for the Coens to do, leaving audiences wondering whether it is a homage, a rip-off, or a takeoff.

A more rarefied allusion is the playing of the tune "Runnin' Wild" in the background, the song sung by Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*, the Billy Wilder movie set in the same gangster era. But could there possibly be any deliberate reference to Alan Parker's kiddie gangster movie, *Bugsy Malone*, especially in the scene at Miller's Crossing? Parker claims that he was inspired to write the movie while watching *The Godfather*. Another frivolous reference in what is essentially a dark and violent film is one to the Keystone Kops.

It is in the nature of the Coens that they are willing to shift gear at any moment from drama to comedy, sometimes sacrificing the dramatic impact for the sake of a joke. After Tom has told Leo that he was sleeping with Verna, an enraged Leo follows Tom (and so does the camera in a flowing long take) out of the Shenandoah Club, punching him as he does so. Tom falls down the stairs, and is punched again. As Tom rises bleeding, he grabs the skirt and bodice of a fat lady, who screams and hits him vigorously on the head with her handbag.

The characters, articulate phrase-makers no matter how stupid, sometimes move into Damon Runyon territory: “I was just speculating about a hypothesis,” says a cop. But, no matter how much spoofery there is in the film, it does not undermine the intrinsic melancholia of the subject or the treatment, reflected in the autumnal colors. It is about betrayal (as most gangster movies are), but also, as Johnny Caspar says, “friendship, character, ethics.”

TOM: Do you always know why you do things, Leo?

LEO: Course I do. It was a smart play. Jesus, Tom! I’d give anything if you’d work for me again. I know I’ve made some bonehead plays! I know I can be pig-headed but, damnit, so can you! I need your help, and things can be like they were, I know it! I just know it! As for you and Verna—well, I understand, you’re both young, and—well, damnit, Tom, I forgive you!

TOM: I didn’t ask for that and I don’t want it . . . Goodbye Leo.

Miller’s Crossing

VII

HOLLYWOOD NUTS

“Barton Fink is very far from our own experience.
Our life in Hollywood has been particularly easy.”

45 *Fade In*

FOLLOWING *MILLER'S CROSSING*, THE COENS went almost immediately into production on *Barton Fink*, which started shooting in June 1990 in Los Angeles. They hired an office above a nondescript car rental agency near the beach, where hand-lettered cardboard signs, bearing the word “Fink” and an arrow, pointed the way to their makeshift production offices. Most of the film was shot in LA. The New York bar and restaurant at the beginning of the film was shot on the liner *Queen Mary*, and the last scene near Zuma Beach. Despite the relatively poor showing at the box-office of *Miller's Crossing*, the faithful Circle had the same deal with Fox as for the previous film, but this time retained the foreign rights.

The brothers wrote *Barton Fink* in three weeks before returning to *Miller's Crossing*. “Perhaps because it was a relief from *Miller's Crossing*, it came easily. Certain films come entirely in one's head. You know how it will look. Even if you don't know the ending. You have an intuition about the conclusion. In contrast, other scenarios are like a voyage where you don't know exactly where you're going. We just sort of burped out *Barton Fink*.”

“It makes things much easier if you know in advance where the characters are leading you. It also helped because we knew the actors very well. We wrote the part of Charlie Meadows for John Goodman, because of his warm and likeable image, so the public are at ease with him. We exploited that image. There is something menacing and worrying about the character.” The Coens did the same again with Goodman's cuddly bear image in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, in which he plays a crooked bible salesman and member of the Ku Klux Klan.

In case anyone would associate their bilious view of Hollywood with their own experiences, the Coens were quick to dissociate themselves from the Barton Fink character. “*Barton Fink* is very far from our own experience. Our life in Hollywood has been particularly easy. The film isn’t a personal comment. We don’t have any rejected scenarios in our drawers. There have been projects on which we started work, but we didn’t finish them for one reason or another. Artistic problems that we were unable to solve or the cost was prohibitive.” Thus, they give the lie to the belief that artists must suffer to understand the suffering of others. Much to the frustration of other struggling film directors (and of biographers thirsting for drama and tragedy), the Coens have been given a comparatively easy ride by the industry.

The dictionary meaning of “fink” is an informer, strike-breaker, or unpleasant person. Like his surname, “Barton is in a lot of respects a shit, but it’s not as if we’re not interested in the audience having some access to him as a human being. We have a lot of affection for our characters. Even the ones that are idiots! There’s comedy in idiocy, just like there can be comedy in violence, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re condescending. People get very uncomfortable when the main character in the movie is not sympathetic in a Hollywood formula way. And what’s irritating about that is the implication that the only stories you can tell are stories about sympathetic characters, which is an absurd idea.”

“I felt I could bring something more human to Barton,” John Turturro remarked of the role written for him. “I felt I could bring a little something extra. Joel and Ethan allowed me a certain contribution. I tried to go a little further than they expected.” Turturro spent a month with the Coens in LA before the shoot, just to get in sync with them. He also learned to type, although with Barton Fink having writer’s block he didn’t need to do much. (There are two slightly facile cuts from Barton, unable to put words down on paper, to the rapid typing of a secretary.) Although Barton spouts about the common man, he doesn’t really give a hoot about them. When Charlie Meadows tells him he has stories to tell, Barton doesn’t listen but talks about his own theories. At the USO dance, Barton refuses to let a sailor cut in while he’s dancing. “I’m a writer! Celebrating the completion of something good! Do you understand that, sailor! I’m a writer! . . . This is my uniform (*tapping his head*). This is where I serve the common man.”

As if to compensate for Barton’s egotism, Ethan gave the “common man” a voice in his story “There is an Ancient Mariner,” in which a man, probably a

salesman, bends the ear of a fellow customer in a bar, telling him a tale of how a man was stabbed in the neck by his wife while on the bar stool occupied by the listener.

BARTON: I've always found that writing comes from a great inner pain. Maybe it's a pain that comes from the realization that one must do something for one's fellow man—to help somehow to ease his suffering. Maybe it's a personal pain. At any rate, I don't believe good work is possible without it.

Barton Fink

46 1941 and All That

Barton Fink, the second in the Coens' chronological period trilogy, was set in Hollywood in 1941 on the eve of the USA entering the Second World War. It was the year both John Huston and Orson Welles made their feature film debuts: Huston with his version of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and Welles with *Citizen Kane*. It was also the year of Preston Sturges's Hollywood satire, *Sullivan's Travels*, which was to inspire *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and, marginally, *Barton Fink*.

At the end of the preceding year, Scott Fitzgerald and Nathanael West, authors of two of the great Hollywood novels, *The Last Tycoon* and *The Day of the Locust*, had died within twenty-four hours of each other. West's novels are strange fables of innocence and corruption in which naive heroes, not unlike Hi, Barton, and Norville, are invariably crushed by the world's pitiless indifference to their good intentions.

The great novelist William Faulkner had left Hollywood disillusioned with the industry after working as a script doctor at MGM and Fox. "I'm a motion picture doctor," Faulkner said. "When they run into a section they don't like, I rework it and continue to rework it until they do like it . . . I don't write scripts. I don't know enough about it."

Faulkner returned to Hollywood in 1946 to work on *The Big Sleep* mainly as an act of charity by Howard Hawks. He went there in the first place to earn more money than his novels made. Clifford Odets, the hero of the left-wing Group Theater in New York, was also doctoring scripts in Hollywood and being accused by his erstwhile colleagues in the theater of having sold out—in fact, of being a fink. Odets tied himself into psychological knots trying to justify writing for Gary Cooper and Joan Crawford, and, much later, Elvis Presley. "Great audiences," he proclaimed in 1937, "are waiting now to have their own experiences explained

and interpreted for them.” Compare this with Barton Fink’s language. “We have an opportunity to forge something real out of everyday experience, create a theater for the masses that’s based on a few simple truths . . . The hopes and dreams of the common man.”

In 1941, Harry Cohn, Louis B. Mayer, and Jack Warner were the most powerful moguls in Hollywood, hiring and firing, making and breaking people. The Coens’ fictional Capitol Studio boss Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) is an amalgam of Cohn, Mayer, and Warner. His girth resembles Mayer’s, but he has many of the vulgar traits of Cohn. (Lerner, who was in Bob Rafelson’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, had played both Jack Warner and Harry Cohn in TV movies previously.) The scene in the film when Lipnick puts on an army uniform derives from Warner. After the U.S. entered the war, Warner used to strut around in a uniform borrowed from the costume department. It was Warner who described scriptwriters as “schmucks with Underwoods,” as demonstrated by Barton struggling to write his script on an Underwood typewriter.

The writer W. P. Mayhew (John Mahoney) is plainly based on William Faulkner. He is a novelist of repute, wears a white suit, has a Southern accent, and drinks. And for eagle-eyed spectators, the words “Slave Ship” written on the door of Mayhew’s office in the Writer’s Building at the studio is not only an ironic description of the writer’s position at the studio but was also the title of a 1937 Tay Garnett movie, on which Faulkner was one of four writers credited. The film was about a rebellion on a slave ship, with Wallace Beery as one of the leaders, which could be seen as emblematic of a writers’ strike.

Faulkner also contributed to *Flesh* (1932), an unusual picture from John Ford, which starred plug-ugly Beery as a German wrestler who is thrown into a mire of corruption in America. It was a film obviously influenced by German Expressionist cinema and the films starring Emil Jannings, similar to “Devil on the Canvas,” the wrestling picture directed by “Victor Soderberg” in *Barton Fink*. The name of the director is meant to remind audiences of the great Swedish director Victor Sjöström, who made nine films in Hollywood under the name of Victor Seastrom. The fact that Sjöström’s last American film was in 1930, eleven years before the action in *Barton Fink* takes place, did not deter the Coens from making the film-buffy reference.

The Coens were alerted to *Flesh* by reading *City of Nets* (“City of Nuts,” as one critic called it) about Hollywood in the 1940s, in which the author, Otto Friedrich, mentions that Faulkner worked on a wrestling picture with Wallace

Beery. "It was mostly about German expatriates in Los Angeles in the forties, and not exclusively about the movie business. It started us thinking about that location and that period as a context for a story."

"Wrestling pictures were a weird sub-genre," commented Ethan. "There were all sorts of reasons in seeing two guys in their underwear grappling with one another. The whole sort of queasy homoerotic thing. The weird connection between the characters. Barton is a self-important figure, wrestling with his problems, reduced to writing a vulgar genre movie." When Barton finally delivers his script of "The Burlyman" to Lipnick, the mogul says, "This is a wrestling picture; the audience wants to see action, drama, wrestling and plenty of it. They don't wanna see a guy wrestling with his soul—well all right, a little for the critics—but you make it the carrot that wags the dog . . . We don't put Wallace Beery in some fruity movie about suffering . . ."

Wrestling obviously fascinated/amused Ethan, because seven years later, without Joel, he co-wrote *The Naked Man*, the first feature directed by J. Todd Anderson, the Coens' storyboard artist. It was about a man who is a respected chiropractor by day but becomes a masked super wrestler, in a body suit, by night.

As the allusion to *Flesh* and Victor Sjöström indicate, the Coens, for all their knowledge of Hollywood history, seem to be rather out of sync with the time in which *Barton Fink* is placed. By 1941, the brave new socially conscious theater that Fink burbles about had already erupted. Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, about a taxi drivers' strike, had blazed the trail six years earlier. And by 1941, Wallace Beery was too old at fifty-six for wrestling movies—a genre that Hollywood never really cultivated, though any actor can be taught to wrestle, just as every wrestler is taught to act. When Lipnick tells Barton that the wrestling character needs someone to care about—"a girl, a little orphan boy"—he could be referring to King Vidor's *The Champ*, a maudlin 1932 movie about ex-prizefighter Beery and his small son (Jackie Cooper), trying to scrape a living in Tijuana.

Though physically he was made to resemble George S. Kaufman, a commercially successful Broadway playwright, the character of Barton Fink was loosely based on Clifford Odets. Barton's play called "Bare Ruined Choirs: Triumph of the Common Man," was a brilliant pastiche of American realist drama of the 1930s, such as Odets's *Awake and Sing* (1935), which concerned a financially embarrassed Jewish family's frustration and revolt. (Coincidentally, Frances McDormand appeared in the latter play on Broadway.)

“I’m blowin’ out of here, blowin’ for good. I’m kissin’ it all goodbye, these four stinkin’ walls, the six flights up, the el that roars by at three a.m. like a cast-iron wind. Kiss ’em goodbye for me, Maury! I’ll miss ’em—like hell I will!” ‘Dreaming again?’ ‘Not this time, Lil! I’m awake now, awake for the first time in years. Uncle Dave said it: “Daylight is dream if you’ve lived with your eyes closed.” Well my eyes are open now! I see that choir, and I know they’re dressed in rags! But we’re part of that choir, both of us—yeah, and you, Maury, and Uncle Dave too!” ‘The sun’s coming up, kid. They’ll be hawking the fish down on Fulton Street.’ ‘Let ’em hawk. Let ’em sing their hearts out.’ ‘That’s it, kid. Take that ruined choir. Make it sing!’ ‘So long, Maury.’ ‘So long. We’ll hear from that kid. And I don’t mean a postcard.’ ‘Fish! Fresh fish!’ ‘Let’s spit on our hands and get to work. It’s late, Maury.’ ‘Not any more, Lil. It’s early.’”

Barton Fink

“Did Jake die for us to fight ‘bout nickels? No! Awake and sing, he said. Right here he stood and said it. The night he died, I saw it like a thunderbolt! I saw he was dead, and I was born! I swear to God, I’m one week old! I want the whole city to hear it—fresh blood, arms. We got ’em. We’re glad we’re living.”

Awake and Sing (Clifford Odets)

The Coens must have been aware of a 1946 film noir, *Deadline at Dawn*, the only movie directed by Harold Clurman of the Group Theater, in which a sailor on shore leave in New York wakes up to find the woman he was with the night before murdered. He believes he must have killed her while he was out cold. It was written by Odets, and based on a novel by William Irish (Cornell Woolrich), the noir writer who lived a reclusive life in seedy hotels.

Barton Fink, like Odets, Faulkner, Chandler, and Aldous Huxley, is convinced that Hollywood is beneath him. *The Big Knife* (1949) was Odets’s melodramatic indictment of the Hollywood film industry. In *Sullivan’s Travels*, the situation is the opposite of the artist reduced to a hack. John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) is a successful Hollywood director who has made nothing but lightweight pictures such as “So Long, Sarong” but suddenly gets the notion that he wants to make a searing drama about deplorable social conditions and human suffering called “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” However, he discovers that to make people laugh is a greater social function. Sturges, in his autobiography, *Between Flops*, wrote: “I wanted to tell some of my fellow filmwrights that they were getting a little too deep-dish, and to leave the preaching to the preachers.” Getting “a little too deep-dish” is what the Coens always wanted to avoid without being superficial. “We’re not trying to educate the masses. Does that make us bad people?” they

said.

47 *Down the Plug-hole*

“We made a detailed storyboard. But there were changes when we were on the stage. It was simpler to do than *Miller’s Crossing* and the budget was a third of the cost. The time of the shooting was eight weeks as against twelve. In *Miller’s Crossing*, we had lots of film we didn’t use. It wasn’t the case with *Barton Fink*. We used almost everything we shot. We *did* shoot some scenes of the life in the Hollywood studio, but we found them banal.”

Barry Sonnenfeld, the Coens’ cameraman on their first three films, was busy launching a lucrative career as a director with *The Addams Family*, and would go on to make mindless mainstream movies such as *Men in Black* and *Wild Wild West*, and become very much part of the Hollywood establishment. The brothers turned to British cameraman Roger Deakins, because “we loved the night images and interiors in *Stormy Monday*, *Sid and Nancy*, and *Pascali’s Island*.”

Deakins, who grew up in Torquay, Devon, was a painter before he turned to photo-journalism and then film, studying at the National Film School in London. His first features were *Another Time, Another Place* and *1984*. Deakins’s agent sent him the script of *Barton Fink* but advised against accepting it. Deakins rejected the recommendation and met the Coens to discuss it in a café in Notting Hill, where they hit it off immediately.

“I remember the first day of the shoot. I hadn’t worked with them before. It was the theater scene [shot at the Orpheum Theatre in New York]. They had storyboarded a few set-ups. We wrapped at 11:30 in the morning. We had nothing else to do for the rest of the day. That was rare.”

Deakins proved an ideal collaborator, doing almost anything the brothers asked of him. “There was only one moment when we surprised him,” Joel remarked. “It was when we asked him to track down a plug-hole.” The shot comes when Barton is in bed, about to make love to Audrey (Judy Davis). The camera moves from the bedroom into the bathroom and down the drain and through an endless shaft that leads to a wailing underworld.

“The shot was a lot of fun and we had a great time working out how to do it,” the Coens commented. “After that, every time we asked Roger to do something difficult, he would raise an eyebrow and say, ‘Don’t be having me track down any plug-holes now.’” There has been no shot of a plug-hole to equal it since the last shot of the shower sequence in *Psycho*. It is also the most blatant sexual

metaphor since Hitchcock's train in the tunnel at the end of *North by Northwest*.

Besides the modesty of putting their names only on the end credits, the Coens discreetly avoid the obligatory sex scenes that are found in most adult films. In *Blood Simple*, there is a long shot of the lovers in bed; otherwise there is no bonking in any of the other films, excepting a comic and un-erotic scene of the two kidnappers strenuously having sex with two hookers in *Fargo*.

48 *The Ghost Hotel*

The production designer, Dennis Gassner, who had designed *Miller's Crossing*, got to work on the hotel, the pivotal set of *Barton Fink*. Joel explained: "We spent three weeks shooting in the hotel, where half the film takes place. We wanted an art deco style. It had to be organically linked to the film. In a way, it was an exteriorization of the John Goodman character. The sweat falls from his brow as the wallpaper falls from the walls. At the end, when Goodman says that he's a prisoner of his mental state, that it is like hell, the hotel should suggest an infernal place." Ethan added: "We used a lot of green and yellow to suggest putrefaction."

"Ethan always describes most hotels as ghost ships," said Joel, "where one notes signs of the presence of the other passengers, without ever seeing them. The sole indication are the shoes in the corridors. One imagines that it's peopled by unsuccessful travelling salesmen, with a sad sexual life, and who are crying alone in their rooms."

It was in Austin, Texas, during the shooting of *Blood Simple* that they saw the sinister hotel that stayed in their minds when it came to writing *Barton Fink*. "We thought, 'Wow, Motel Hell.' You know, being condemned to live in the weirdest hotel in the world. On presenting the hotel, we suggested on Barton's arrival in Hollywood that it was not totally normal."

The climax—the conflagration of the hotel, when John Goodman runs down the flaming hallway—proved to be the most complicated part of the film to set up. It was originally going to be done in the cutting room, with flames placed around the actors by an optical process. But the Coens wanted real heat. So the corridor was built in a disused aircraft hangar at Long Beach, which had once housed the *Spruce Goose*, Howard Hughes's giant seaplane.

The wallpaper was scored and perforated and a system of gas plumbing was set up behind the walls, using a gas that burns cooler than normal. There was a

master switch that could cut off the gas in a second. There was also the problem of getting the fire to follow the running Goodman without getting ahead. For this they employed a man on a catwalk above the corridor, turning on each jet as Goodman passed it. The whole thing was lit for a cameraman by wall sconces. After each take the whole corridor had to be rebuilt, so there was a spare one without the gas equipment to which they could retire and do pick-up shots. “Actually, we just set it up very crudely and burned lots of stuntmen to death . . . Just kidding,” Joel commented. “It’s a very considerable fire. A very philosophical fire,” Ethan added.

“The image of the woman on the beach came early. We asked ourselves what would be in his room. We wanted the room to be sparsely decorated. That the walls were bare and that there was no particular view from the window. We wanted the only opening on the outside world to be this image. It was important to create a feeling of isolation. Our strategy was to immediately establish the protagonist’s state of dislocation. The image on the beach gives a sense of relief. Perhaps it contrasts with the oppression of the room or accentuates it. We like the idea of the woman in the picture. In a weird kind of way it’s emotional, evocative, rather than having a specific kind of meaning.”

The strange but overly neat conclusion has Barton on the beach he had seen in the photo in his room, sitting with the box that most likely contains the head of a woman. The girl from the picture in his hotel room walks toward him. She says something but her voice is lost in the crash of the surf. She repeats herself. “I said it’s a beautiful day . . .” (Marge Gunderson says exactly the same words toward the end of *Fargo*.) She sits down on the sand. “You’re very beautiful. Are you in pictures?” Barton asks. She laughs. “Don’t be silly,” she says, proving herself untainted by Hollywood. She then takes up the same posture as in the photograph.

This scene cannot but evoke the last scene of Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*, when Marcello encounters an innocent young girl on a beach after a night of orgies. She is not part of his “sweet life” world but works as a waitress. She shouts something to him. But he cannot hear her because her voice is lost in the crash of the surf.

There were two open-grille elevators but only one seemed to be running and that not busy. An old man sat inside it slack-jawed and watery-eyed on a piece of folded burlap on top of a wooden stool. He looked as though he had been sitting there since the Civil War and had come out of that badly . . .

In the lobby of the Belfont Building, in the single elevator that had a light in it, on the piece of folded

burlap, the same watery-eyed relic sat motionless, giving his imitation of the forgotten man. I got in with him and said, "Six." The elevator lurched into motion and pounded its way upstairs.

The High Window (Raymond Chandler)

49 Kafka Who?

Barton Fink is again a richly allusive film, with Hammett, Chandler, West, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Odets, all American classics, thrown into the creative pot. However, Franz Kafka has to be summoned up, even at second hand. Joel predictably, but probably truthfully, deflected the latter influence on the movie.

"It surprises me that some critics have mentioned Kafka, because I haven't read him since I was at university where I devoured works like *Metamorphosis*. Some people have evoked *The Castle* and *The Penal Colony*, which I've never read." Ethan concurred. "As some journalists have suggested that we were influenced by *The Castle*, I'm keen to read it."

Perhaps this Kafkaesque element was filtered through another influence on the film—Roman Polanski. "There is no doubt we have been influenced by Polanski's films. *Barton Fink* doesn't belong to any genre, but it's in the line of Polanski," admitted the Coens. Like the figure of K in Kafka's novels, the victim in most of Polanski's films uncomprehendingly believes himself to be partly responsible for his or her fate. *Repulsion* (1965), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *Chinatown* (1974) create an atmosphere of evil, gradually turning the realistic settings of the cities of London, New York, and Los Angeles into horrifying death-traps. There are similarities to *Chinatown* in *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing*, and *The Big Lebowski*, all of which reconstruct a film noir plot. Polanski himself played the tormented K character in *The Tenant* (1976), perhaps one of the most Kafkaesque films ever made. *Barton Fink* was called by one critic "*The Tenant* and *Cul-de-sac* meets *Repulsion*."

Providentially, Polanski headed the jury at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival at which *Barton Fink* carried off the Golden Palm, the director's prize, and best actor award (John Turturro), an unprecedented achievement. However admired the movie was, several critics felt that making it a triple winner was going a bit too far, especially as it was in competition with Jacques Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse* and Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronique*. Also in competition, all of which had some connection with the Coens, were Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (also with Turturro), David Mamet's *Homicide* (with William H. Macy, later to appear in *Fargo*) about a cop questioning his Jewish identity, and

Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* (starring Frances McDormand). "We didn't know that it would be shown at Cannes or that Polanski would be on the jury. We don't want to give the impression that we were licking his ass," the Coens insisted.

Barton Fink went to Cannes fresh from the laboratory. It was an unfinished "answer print" (a first print to which changes are made) without the final color gradings. In 1979, Francis Coppola had decided to risk entering *Apocalypse Now* in competition at the Cannes Festival as "a work in progress." The risk paid off, and it shared the Golden Palm with *The Tin Drum*.

"What's your name?" K asked as they were proceeding. "Block, a commercial traveler," said the little man turning round to introduce himself, but K would not suffer him to remain standing. "Is that your real name?" went on K. "Of course," came the answer, "why should you doubt it?" "I thought you might have some reason for concealing your name," said K. He was feeling at ease now, at ease as one is when speaking to an inferior of some foreign country.

The Trial (Franz Kafka)

50 *Second Sighting*

I'm one of the many barnacles sticking to the bottom of the Good Ship Cannes in May 1991. The Coens are giggling through another of a long line of interviews on the terrace of the Carlton Hotel. I'm having a kir at the next table. I've been nursing it for twenty minutes. I'm pretending not to notice or listen to the conversation. Needless to say, I'm not staying at the Carlton but at a dump off the rue d'Antibes. A woman comes up to the Coens and tells them that Krzysztof Kieslowski is at another table and asks them if they would like to meet their rival for the Palme d'Or. "Who's Kieslowski?" one of the brothers asks. I choke on my kir and nearly fall off my chair. "Come on," I think. "Your film is in competition with one of Kieslowski's films and you've never heard of him!" That's the difference between American and European cinema. It's far more likely that someone like Kieslowski would have heard of the Coens than vice versa, discounting any qualitative comparisons. Ethan mentions that the only film he has had a chance to see has been Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's *Delicatessen*, one of the few codirected movies, and found it "wonderfully wacky."

In Hollywood, the screenplay is written by a salaried writer under the supervision of a producer, that is to

say, by an employee without power or decision over the uses of his own craft, without ownership of it, and, however extravagantly paid, almost without honor for it . . . As a result there is no such thing as an art of the screenplay, and there never will be as long as the system lasts, for it is the essence of this system that it seeks to exploit a talent without permitting it the right to be a talent. It cannot be done; you can only destroy the talent, which is exactly what happens—when there is any to destroy.

Raymond Chandler (*Atlantic Monthly*, November 1945)

VIII

CAPRACOEN

“In a weird kind of way Hudsucker is almost an exception to the other movies we have made. It was almost calculated to prove what people thought about our previous movies . . . Hudsucker truly is a comment on the genres it draws from.”

51 *Hi, Yo, Silver!*

IMMEDIATELY AFTER MAKING *BLOOD SIMPLE* in 1984, the still unknown Coen brothers went to Los Angeles and shared a house with Sam Raimi, where they wrote *The Hudsucker Proxy*. Sitting down together, the three of them took two to three months to complete the screenplay. In a 1985 interview, the brothers spoke of a forthcoming project that “takes place in the late fifties in a skyscraper and is about big business. The characters talk fast and wear sharp clothes.” Almost a decade later, *The Hudsucker Proxy* was dusted off, revised, and ready for production. As far as most of the critics were concerned it should have been left in the proverbial bottom drawer. Why did it take so long to make?

“The script was written with Raimi before most of the technology that we used existed,” Joel explained. “We don’t really think of how we’re going to do it in a technical sense when we’re writing. We were lucky that we couldn’t get the money to do it at the time because the sequences would have been a lot cruder if we had shot it then eight or nine years before. There are certain movies that just won’t die. And *Hudsucker* was one of them. *Blood Simple* was another which took us forever to get a distributor.”

Having completed their four-picture contractual obligation toward Circle Films, the Coens began to look elsewhere for financial support. They found it in the London-based Working Title and in Hollywood producer Joel Silver. Although *Barton Fink* met with meager commercial success, the critical praise was enough to convince Silver that the Coens should be given the chance to work

with an even bigger budget for their next film.

The Coens haven't connected with the right piece of commercial material yet [Silver explained]. But one day they will, and they'll hit it out of the park. I've been a fan of theirs for many years. I thought that their style and aesthetic are so articulate and so impressive. Their agent is a close friend of mine and he always knew about my feelings. When they came up with this problem of putting *Hudsucker* together, because it's such a big budget movie, he said, "Well, Joel, here's your chance." I read the script and I thought it was the most accessible of their movies. The key to this, and I want to make this clear, this movie is very funny. I really thought that it could potentially be a big hit movie. I happen to like big hit movies. I always try very hard to make them happen.

On the set of *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the hirsute Silver's expensive gear made a striking contrast with the Coens' casual wear. At the time, the brothers commented: "Joel just really sold himself to us. He said, 'I want you to do your movie and I want to help you to make it, do whatever you want.' And we kept wondering if there was a catch, as you would, and so far there hasn't been a catch." The Coens' autonomy remained, though the budget soared to twenty-five million dollars.

Joel Silver and the Coens seemed to make strange bedfellows. Silver was stereotyped as the Hollywood Philistine Producer, and he bears more than a passing similarity in his shape and manner to the mogul-producer in *Barton Fink*. On the surface, Joel Silver, a contemporary of Joel Coen's at New York University, did not seem the ideal producer for a Capraesque screwball comedy by two independently minded, idealistic filmmakers. Silver had risen rapidly in the movie business after graduating. He had made his name and fortune from brainless action movies: three *Lethal Weapons*, two *Die Hards*, *48 Hours*, and a couple of Arnold Schwarzenegger pictures, *Predator* and *Commando*. Perhaps Silver wanted a break from the kind of action movie with which he was associated. Once, on *Commando*, he was heard to say, "What's a bunch of Jewish guys doing trying to make this big Teutonic guy look good?"

"Joel Silver's got this reputation for being a Hollywood vulgarian, a producer of big, glass-shattering action movies. But his interests are much more wide-ranging than his press allows," insisted the Coens. "He was great. He's a very funny guy, a great raconteur and he knows what he's doing. If he's interested, we'll work with him again," Joel said after the *Hudsucker* experience. (To date, they have not worked together again, which could have something to do with the movie being one of Silver's rare box-office disasters, and the Coens' biggest commercial flop.) Perhaps there is no conscious connection between Joel Silver and a character mentioned *en passant* in Ethan's short story, "Have You Ever Been to Electric Ladyland?" "There's Nathan Silver, Head of Monsoon. I signed

one of his acts, the Hasta La Huega Sunshine Band, back in the eighties. Well, by then it was his only act. That was much the end of Monsoon, uh—Silver's fallen on hard times . . . He lives in the Marina now, Jesus . . . He's probably sitting in his little fucking condo in the Marina, brooding . . . and he's probably very fucking angry with me. Very fucking angry. But this is the business we're in."

Obviously, Joel Silver is a good sport. His temperamental outbursts were caricatured in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), in which he played himself, and for the introduction to the screenplay of *The Hudsucker Proxy* he allowed himself to be interviewed by one Dennis Jacobson, professor of cinema studies at the University of Iowa.

During the interview, Silver, in his rather blunt manner, was able to put the pretentious Coen brothers in their place and encapsulate much of what they're about. "They would *kvetch* about—say, when I suggested they use Paul Newman. 'No, he's too big, he's iconic—he represents a larger—' a whole line of bullshit . . . Like it's a sin to use a movie star. God forbid someone should actually be enticed into the theater to see one of their movies." He went on to complain that Ethan insisted on playing the leading role, actually doing a screen test. "It was goddamned embarrassing," said Silver. "I suggested Tim Robbins . . . Ethan sulked and things were never right between him and Tim. He never made peace with it. They'd be shooting a scene and you'd see Ethan off in the corner, mouthing the lines as Tim spoke. It was pathetic . . . On the set they just sort of retreat into their storyboards. Don't talk to the actors . . . Joel looks through the camera, looks at the storyboards, walks in and shoves Paul Newman a couple of steps to the left. Just shoves. This is Butch Cassidy here! This man is iconic! You don't shove!"

JACK LIPNICK: I'm taking an interest. Not to interfere, mind you—hardly seems necessary in your case. A writer—a storyteller—of your stature. Givvita me in bold strokes, Bart. Gimme the broad outlines. I'm sitting in the audience, the lights go down, Capitol logo comes up . . . you're on!

Barton Fink

52 *You Know . . . for Kids!*

The Hudsucker Proxy begins (and ends) on New Year's Eve 1958/1959, when Joel was four years old and Ethan fifteen months. Yet, the film is imbued with the atmosphere of certain Hollywood films of the 1930s, in both the screwball comedy/fantasy screenplay and the art deco sets, while the buildings are from the

twenties, the clothes from the thirties and forties, and the furnishings from the fifties. This could only have a disorienting effect, purposeful as it was, and the only reason for this dislocation seems to be the need to include the invention of the hula hoop.

“Ostensibly we state that the movie is set in New York in the 1950s, but it is not historical—everything is cheated,” the Coens stated. “This is a mythical 1950s. We wanted everything to be unspecific, like a fable. A lot revolves around the hula hoop and the Frisbee, both of which did come out in the ’50s, but we also play with the invention of the flexible plastic drinking straw, and we have no idea when that came.”

Six designers and two hundred assistants worked on the sets some three months prior to shooting. *The Hudsucker Proxy* was shot in Chicago as well as in North Carolina because Dino De Laurentiis had built a big soundstage complex there. The film takes place inside Hudsucker Industries, a gigantic office building and factory that has much in common with the soulless, monolithic organization in *Brazil* (1985), which its director Terry Gilliam called “Walter Mitty meets Franz Kafka,” a description that could be applied to *The Hudsucker Proxy*, another design-led movie.

Production designer Dennis Gassner, who won an Oscar for his forties art direction on Warren Beatty’s *Bugsy* in 1991, explained his aims. “It is a matter of an emotional state and an illogical state that have to be in sync. My job is to create with those two attitudes in mind, so that the audience feels comfortable with all those different feelings.” Something of the grab-bag nature of the conception came out in Gassner’s further statements.

“We wanted everything to be big. We wanted Mussburger’s office to be like Mussolini’s [’30s?]. The table in the conference room is based on a photo from the 1950s [sic]. We transformed a really long room with a ninety-meter-long corridor into the mailroom, which looks like it could have been designed by Albert Speer [’40s?].” Even more confusing is the “executive toy” that Mussburger has in his office—you know, for adults!—“a perpetual motion gizmo of the swinging ball bearings going click-click-click”—that was introduced in the 1960s. One of the better jokes in the film is that they obediently stop clicking when Mussburger shouts “Wait a minute!” when confronted with Norville’s circle on a page.

“The whole circle motif was built into the design of the movie,” remarked the Coens. “The tension between vertical lines and circles, you have these tall buildings and these circles everywhere that echoed the plot. It starts at the end

and circles back to the beginning. The hula hoop just seemed perfect.” (This might also have been a subconscious valedictory homage to Circle Films, who financed their first four movies.) The motif even extends to the halo that the Angel Hudsucker wears when he descends from heaven at the end. “How’d ya like this thing? They’re all wearin’ ‘em upstairs. It’s a fad.”

“We had to come up with something that this guy was going to invent that on the face of it was ridiculous. Something that would seem, by any sort of rational measure, to be doomed to failure, but something on the other hand the audience already knew was going to be a phenomenal success.”

The hula hoop, “you know, for kids,” can also be used as an emblem of the movie. A rather useless commodity that serves no moral purpose other than to amuse, despite much of its satire on big business methods. As Georg Seessien has noted: “The hula hoop is an invention that is both inspired and idiotic, the most simple thing in the world, but also something that could only function in a tremendously complicated society.”

Allowing Norville to invent the hula hoop, at first called the Extruded Plastic Dingus, is probably the most original and inspired notion in the film. The whole long hula hoop sequence takes the movie beyond its rigidly referential dimension. It begins with the manufacture of the colored hoops, with interjected scenes of the admen trying to come up with a name for it, and the accountants costing it. Finally, piles of the hoops reach the shops, where they lie unsold while a montage shows the prices being reduced from \$1.79 to “free with any purchase.”

Then the film takes on the tone of the classic French children’s film, *The Red Balloon* (1956), which tells of how, on his way to school one morning, a little boy comes across a bright red balloon hanging on a lamppost. The balloon takes a fancy to the child and attaches itself to him. In *The Hudsucker Proxy*, a red hula hoop follows a little boy down the street, rolls up to him, circles round him before falling down. The boy picks it up, steps inside it and starts hula hooping. Other kids see this and rush to the shop, and it becomes a sensation nationwide.

“Arthur Bridges, the kid, was a real artist,” Ethan enthused. “We had a lot of kids come in and audition with the company hula hoop we provided, but Arthur brought his own! He had a lot of charisma, but I never actually heard him say a word on the set.”

In order to make the hoop roll by itself, it had water in it to make it more stable, and there was also a ramp release contraption for its movement. It was done by the special effects co-coordinator Peter Chesney, who also did the earlier

scene where the newspaper follows Tim Robbins. The newspaper was on a wire, while another wire pulled it into Robbins, with air movers agitating it to give it a natural windy action.

During the end credits, we learn that it was not Norville Barnes or the Coen brothers who invented the hula hoop or the Frisbee. It was a company called Wham-O—“A true American success story,” as the title has it.

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER: As Old Man 1958 hobbles towards his finish, “Barnes” is the name on every American lip—Norville Barnes, young president of Hudsucker Industries, a boy bred in the heartland, but now the toast of New York, Barnes is the brainy inventor of America’s latest craze, the hula hoop. Reaping untold profits for his company, the hula hoop is winning a place in the hearts—and hips!—of all American youngsters—Whoa-ho! Did I say youngsters?! Here’s Mom, taking a break from her household chores . . .

The Hudsucker Proxy

53 Mr. Barnes Goes to Town

The Hudsucker Proxy is a distillation of Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Meet John Doe* (1941), and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), with elements of Howard Hawks’s *His Girl Friday* (1940), and Preston Sturges’s *Christmas in July* (1940), a satire on big business, advertising, and the success ethic. In the latter, a young impecunious clerk (Dick Powell) is tricked into believing that he has won twenty-five thousand dollars in a coffee company’s slogan competition with his terrible slogan, “If you can’t sleep, it isn’t the coffee, it’s the bunk.” The unemployed Norville Barnes is tricked into believing that he is elected President of Hudsucker Industries, when he is merely a stooge to inspire panic in the stockholders.

Norville hovers between being a Capra hero and a Sturges one. Sturges, unlike Capra, never suggested that guileless virtue may defeat entrenched corruption. In his films, the victory is more likely to go to silliness and gullibility. Capra’s hick heroes or “wise fools” such as Longfellow Deeds and Jefferson Smith (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1939) cling on to their idealism. Capra’s comedies from the mid-1930s glorify the “little man” fighting for what’s right and decent and losing the battle until the hectic rush to achieve the happy ending. However, Coens’ heroes such as Norville, Hi, Barton Fink, Jerry Lundgaard, and the Dude, who are thrown into a situation that forces them to confront violence and corruption, usually act from egotistical motives and are drawn into the system and become tainted themselves.

Norville as played by Tim Robbins is a simple sap, with elements of Gary Cooper's "Cinderella Man" in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, and Henry Fonda in Sturges's *The Lady Eve*, made suckers by strong "career" women—Jean Arthur in the former and Barbara Stanwyck in the latter. Norville arrives from Muncie, Indiana, to look for a job in New York, and accidentally succeeds in business without really trying. Country boy Mr. Deeds comes to town to collect his inheritance and is made to seem ridiculous by a hard-bitten woman journalist. Norville is exposed as a fool by journalist Amy Archer (Archer-Arthur?) played by Jennifer Jason Leigh.

The scenes in the newspaper office are a pastiche of every similar one in Hollywood movies of the 1930s, particularly *His Girl Friday*—fast-talking editor clashing with top reporter, though they know they need each other. "There's a lot of the *His Girl Friday* kind of pace. It was something we were consciously trying to do."

However, the Coens denied having watched any of these films specifically before embarking on *The Hudsucker Proxy*, although they knew them well. "We don't tend to do a specific screening with the purpose of making an upcoming movie, except for really narrow technical reasons. But never for genre reasons. Spielberg used to show *It's a Wonderful Life* to an entire cast and crew and say, 'I want to make a film this good.' We don't have any inspirational film we play for everybody."

AMY ARCHER: Why won't they let us interview him? Genius my eye—why won't they tell us a single solitary thing about him? And just take a look at the mug on this guy—the jutting eyebrows, the simian forehead, the idiotic grin. Why, he has a face only a mother could love—on payday! The only story here is how this guy made a monkey out of you, Al.

The Hudsucker Proxy BABE (JEAN ARTHUR): That guy's either the dumbest, the stupidest and most imbecilic idiot in the world or he's the grandest thing alive. I can't make him out . . . I'm crucifying him. Who says we're right? Here's a guy that's wholesome and fresh and looks to us like a freak.

Mr. Deeds Goes To Town

54 *Icoens*

It was a change of pace for Tim Robbins to play a *naïf*, as he had just come from portraying two smiling, cynical bastards, the cold executive in Robert Altman's *The Player* and the manipulative politician in his own film, *Bob Roberts*. Norville has a similar nerdish name to that of Norval Jones, played by Eddie Bracken, the epitome of nerdishness, in Sturges's *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944). It is

also the sort of name Jerry Lewis used to adopt in his movies. He was always a Seymour, Virgil, Wilbur, Homer, or Harvey.

There is a Jerry Lewis-like moment when Norville tries to put out the fire in the wastebasket with the water cooler in the office of his boss, Sidney J. Mussburger. “This came out of rehearsing the scenes with Tim before we started shooting. We had a clear idea of what the sets were going to be like, and the distance he had to cover, what the action was in terms of the fire. The specifics of how he moved and what he was doing with the water jug came out of rehearsal. Tim is also a great improviser, so if you give him a prop or situation he goes off on his own.”

Like Robbins, Jennifer Jason Leigh had recently been in an Altman movie, *Short Cuts*, in which she played a housewife who supplements the family income by working as a phone-sex performer, while sitting in her living-room changing diapers. According to Joel Silver in his interview with Professor Jacobson, “Joel and Ethan’s dream cast was Ethan as Norville, Jeanne Moreau as the girl . . . He had some line of shit of how it had to be a powerful woman . . . an iconic strong feminine—you wouldn’t believe the line of shit on this guy. He said he wanted the equivalent of Rosalind Russell. I said fuck, get *Rosalind Russell*—she’s younger than Jeanne Moreau!”

Here, in the Rosalind Russell role, Jason Leigh’s voice is a curious blend of Jean Arthur’s emotionally-charged croak, which gave a new meaning to the word wisecrack, and Katharine Hepburn’s celebrated quaver that she herself described as “a cross between Donald Duck and a Stradivarius.” Unfortunately, Jason Leigh’s portrayal comes off as an irritating impersonation rather than a performance, reflecting the film as a whole—a smart imitation rather than the genuine article. “Jennifer just came in with that voice when we first started, and we liked it so there it was. It wasn’t a big point of discussion,” Joel remarked.

Paul Newman, who was first choice for Sidney J. Mussburger, has a gruff voice, and is cast against type as a Machiavellian business tycoon. Newman was the first really big Hollywood star in the Coens’ movies. None of the other actors they had used up to then or were to use in the two following films were big stars. It was only with the entry of George Clooney in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and Brad Pitt in *To The White Sea* that one was aware of creeping star-itis.

“They obviously have a very perverted vision. Perverted, yes, I think it’s a good word,” said Newman, referring to the Coens. “They don’t tell a story directly, they move like crabs and it’s just refreshing to find something so original and eccentric.” His biggest adjustment was learning their language. “Well, they don’t

use Stanislavsky language. They don't speak in the word of the Active verb. They are not interested in the psychology. They are more interested in the pacing —‘faster, faster.’ But they have very good eyes. They may not express it in a way I'm accustomed to, but that's all right. In this case it's up to the actor to accommodate their style rather than them to accommodate my style.”

Newman, who had been serious for so long, told the Coens that he had not enjoyed himself more in any movie since *Slapshot*. The only thing he was concerned about was showing his legs. In one scene where he is being fitted by the tailor, he is standing there in his boxer shorts and he thought he had knobby knees. There is a wonderfully eccentric moment when Mussburger is dangling upside down out of the 44th floor window (“not counting the mezzanine”) like Harold Lloyd while Norville holds him up by his trouser legs. Mussburger suddenly has a flashback in which the Italian tailor offers to put a double stitch in his trousers for strength, which Mussburger declines. But the tailor puts one in anyway, and his life is saved.

55 *Technophilia*

Like Capra's *Meet John Doe*, which begins atop a skyscraper where Gary Cooper is contemplating suicide, *The Hudsucker Proxy* opens with Norville about to throw himself from the 44th floor. When Sam Raimi and the brothers started the script, they began with the idea of Norville jumping off a building. “But then you're at the end of the script and you have to figure out how to save him. That stumped us for a while. And we had to resort to the ridiculous extreme of stopping time.”

Norville jumps off the building at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, but Moses, the mystical clock-keeper, stops the huge clock that dominates Hudsucker Industries, under which reads the legend, “The Future Is Now,” thus freezing him in midair. However, the evil Aloysius (Harry Bugin) starts the clock again, until something jams it. “We had the problem of stopping the clock but didn't know how. It was the co-producer [Graham Place] who said, ‘What about dentures?’ The only problem was whether the actor playing the part of Aloysius wore dentures, because we didn't suppose he would let us extract his teeth for the scene. But he had absolutely no teeth and said, ‘I'll be happy to take them out for you boys.’ It was a happy coincidence. Teeth are always funny. When in doubt use dentures.”

The most memorable image in the film is the suicidal jump from the skyscraper by Waring Hudsucker, played by Charles Durning. “We cast Durning on the idea that a fat person falling forty floors is a lot funnier than a thin person falling forty floors,” Joel explained. “Charles actually used to be a dancer, and all that stuff he does at the beginning where he gets up and digs his heel and shakes the tension out of his body was all Charles. He choreographed all his movements.”

Hudsucker’s fall, and later Norville’s, was achieved by using the blue screen process. Characters are shot against a blue backing, and these images and those of a separately shot background are scanned into a computer. In this case, the actor was shot flying by wire in white light against a blue background that was removed later—blue is used because the “bleeding” of color on to the rest of the picture is less troublesome. Then a scale model of the skyscraper was filmed and the two brought together.

“Essentially the falling sequence was done on a long miniature of the building that was lying on the floor of the studio and we would shoot plates of tracking down the length of the building and we composited that on a computer with shots of the actors who were suspended from wires with huge air guns hitting them.”

The Hudsucker Proxy certainly had more technical problems than any of their other movies. “It was a learning process for us and the making of the movie was an introduction to a whole new world. We’ve always been interested in problem solving, whether it’s visual effects or other kinds of effects.”

The Coens have admitted to being technophiles, but they insist that their technophilia is all in the service of telling a story. “What is interesting about making movies are the new technological problems that each one poses, though we have no technical training. We did not learn about all this stuff—the compositing and the effects work—for the sake of learning about it.”

On *The Hudsucker Proxy*, they had the first unit working, plus the miniature unit, plus the blue screen unit shooting the actor in front of the blue screen, plus Sam Raimi’s second unit overlapping, and sometimes all shooting at the same time. Roger Deakins, the cinematographer, had to oversee all four different units, making sure they would work.

The opening shot when the camera pans through Manhattan in the snow combined matte-painting, live action, and miniatures. The “techni” Coens explained:

The first shots you see in the movie are all of the models clustered together . . . The camera was on a crane that moved through the miniatures. The biggest

problem was how to figure out how to do the snow. Since we were doing it in real time, on miniatures, we essentially needed miniature snow that fell at the right speed. We ended up using little mini-fibers . . . and after a lot of experimentation we got it to fall at a slow rate that looked like snow. The last shot in this sequence is actually a combination. We got off the miniatures and we shot Tim coming out on to a full-scale set . . . We snowed him live, so we had to get out of this previous snow and seamlessly get to real snow . . . We sort of papered over the difference with a little computer-generated snow to smooth the seam between the two. The two snows are different in that they fall at different rates . . .

56 *Parodies Lost*

The Hudsucker Proxy was the Coens' most expensive film and their only box-office disaster. "In a weird kind of way, *Hudsucker* is almost an exception to the other movies we have made. It was almost calculated to prove what people thought about our previous movies . . . *Hudsucker* truly is a comment on the genres it draws from. It is very self-conscious, which is not the case with, say, *Miller's Crossing*. It shows you how hard it is to second-guess these things. If we'd had to predict in the abstract which would be the more successful, *Fargo* or *Hudsucker*, we would have certainly bet on *Hudsucker*. *Fargo* seemed like a very obscure regional exercise. In fact, *Hudsucker* made less than any other film we've released, and *Fargo* made the most. It's just very, very hard to predict, but you have to try, because you have to make some sort of estimation to justify the money you're going to spend."

No matter how brilliant *The Hudsucker Proxy* is technically and conceptually, the movie cannot help but suffer from being a too self-conscious pastiche. The Coens have tried to butter their toast on both sides, and ended up with neither. Those who know their 1930s and 1940s screwball and/or fantasy comedies consider that Howard Hawks, Frank Capra, and Preston Sturges, to whom palpable allusions are made, did it better. Those for whom the references mean nothing lose an essential component in the appreciation of the film. The Coens, therefore, lost their audience.

57 *Third Sighting*

Joel and Frances, with their newly adopted baby Pedro, and Ethan have arrived

at the Edinburgh Festival in August 1995. The brothers have come to be interviewed on stage by Mark Cousins, the director of the festival. They made sure that they flew in (standard class) some days before the interview, so they could do a bit of touring in Scotland. They rented a car with a kiddie seat, and off they went.

They're now back in Edinburgh, and Joel and Ethan are waiting in the bar of the huge MGM cinema drinking a few Becks beers with Mark Cousins, who is dressed like Norville Barnes in a 1940s suit, dickey, suspenders, and bow tie. They are amused, flattered, and impressed by this gesture, although they seldom go overboard emotionally. I knock back a beer and listen to Joel telling Mark that he and Frances love Scotland so much that they are seriously considering buying a house there.

The staff of the cinema had arranged to close off the small bar to all but invited guests. However, a few young Coenheads have managed to find their way into the bar and are welcomed in by the brothers, who answer their questions politely. A little while later, on stage, they are pretty relaxed, but talk more easily about the technical aspects of making *The Hudsucker Proxy* than about plot development, social or political themes, and character motivation.

We're now around a long table at the restaurant in the ultramodern Point Hotel. Frances and Pedro have joined us. There is a noisy family atmosphere. Frances asks Mark Cousins who the woman sitting on the other side is. He tells her it is Suso Cecchi D'Amico, the celebrated Italian screenwriter, who wrote a number of Luchino Visconti's films, as well as having contributed to Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, one of Joel's favorite movies. Frances leans over to Joel and indicates D'Amico. Joel is delighted and an animated conversation takes place between Joel and D'Amico above my head, physically speaking. I am busy speaking to Leslie Caron, who is sitting beside me, and whom I had met previously in Paris while researching my Jean Renoir biography. On my other side is Dianne Ladd, who asks me my star sign, and declares her belief in astrology. I never get to say very much to the Coens. It is a pity that I don't ask Dianne Ladd what my future holds, because if I knew that I was going to write this biography a few years later, I might have forced myself upon the brothers a little more.

IX

YAH! YAH!

*“If a movie like *Fargo* succeeds, then clearly nothing makes much sense, and so, you know, you might as well make whatever kind of movie you want and hope for the best.”*

58 *True Lies*

“FAILURE SHOULD NEVER LEAD TO despair,” says Charles Durning as Waring Hudsucker. This could have been a message to the Coens after *The Hudsucker Proxy*’s negative critical and commercial reception. There seemed a lesson to be learned. They had aimed at making a big, expensive Hollywood movie of sorts, as they had with *Miller’s Crossing*, and it bombed.

According to William Preston Robertson, “Joel and Ethan were contemplating, with considerable ill ease, just what the point of things was—you know: moviemaking wise. The broad artistic license the movie industry had granted them for so many years in the hope that such patience might someday be rewarded with a box-office hit in addition to a merely critical one was, the Coen brothers believed, swiftly narrowing. The clock was ticking. The heat was on.” The answer seemed to be to return to the world of low-budget movies with *Fargo* (seven million dollars) and to their Minnesotan roots.

“It was nice doing *Fargo* after *Hudsucker*. *Hudsucker* was quite a big picture. *Fargo* was a small picture so we could be more flexible. A smaller crew and a much more intimate production are advantages in many ways. It was fun for all of us and a relief in a way,” commented the Coens.

Fargo opens with the following text: “This is a true story. The events depicted in

this film took place in Minnesota in 1987. At the request of the survivors the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred.”

Could it be that the Coens, whose genre films echo other genre films, and are full of cross-references and self-reflection, should now be offering a faithfully reconstructed true story? After the failure of the fantastical *The Hudsucker Proxy*, they seemed to be going in the opposite direction in desperation. Who were they kidding? There cannot be a spectator who, by the end of *Fargo*, believed that it “has been told exactly as it occurred.” The Coens later admitted: “The film is based on a real event, but the details of the story and the characters are pure invention. What didn’t interest us was to make a documentary film so we didn’t have to do any research on the nature of the murder. By informing the public that it was based on fact, we prepared them not to see the film as an ordinary thriller. But there was a kidnapping of a wife in Minnesota in 1987. We’re not big on research. We just didn’t care at a certain point. We found the story compelling, and beyond that, we were not interested in rendering the details as they were.” At the end of his tangential introduction to the screenplay of *Fargo*, Ethan gives the game away. “It aims to be both homey and exotic, and *pretends* to be true.”

59 You Betcha!

There were two or three things that attracted us to the subject. It took place in a region with which we were very familiar. Also it involved a kidnapping, which we like to shoot. There was also the possibility of shooting a crime film with characters away from stereotypes of the genre. It would have a specific background and not a fictional one. Paradoxically, what is closest to home can seem exotic. We can’t read about the South Seas without comparing it to Minneapolis, and can’t describe Minneapolis, even to ourselves, without it seeming like the South Seas. That specific Minnesota atmosphere was where the juice was for us. *Fargo* evokes the abstract landscape of our childhood—a bleak, windswept tundra, resembling Siberia except for its Ford dealerships, and Hardee’s restaurants.

One forgets that within the stereotype of the Midwest there are pockets of different cultures and idiosyncratic accents. When we were growing up we weren’t conscious of the Scandinavian heritage that marked our region. Our parents still live in the region, and we return often, so we didn’t have to do research into the manner of speaking, the expressions, the cadences. After all, this culture formed us. We felt as though we had been divorced a little from this environment where we were brought up.

Time magazine wrote that the Coens’ attitude toward the Minnesotan characters was condescending. “I’m sure—and I know Joel and Ethan well—that they were not making fun of the people,” Frances McDormand declared. “And many of the actors are from that area—the kidnapped wife is from Fargo itself, for example—

so the regional mannerisms were very familiar to them.”

“It’s very easy to offend people. There’s always going to be someone who feels affronted for regional, ethnic, or whatever sorts of reasons. In Minnesota the public was split in its reaction to the film,” remarked the Coens. “The locals who liked it saw in it something specific that could not have been made by someone who does not or has not lived there. But there were others who were deeply insulted. It’s hard to make something without somebody misunderstanding it. People who are not from that region think we’re somehow exaggerating the behavior or the accents, but most of the actors in the movie are Minnesotans, and they’re using their own accents. [Frances McDormand, William H. Macy, and Harve Presnell had dialogue coaches to teach them the accent of the region.]”

60 *Margie*

“When you write a character for someone, it’s not because the actor resembles the character. It’s like you have a suit of clothes and you feel a certain actor’s going to fit them. In fact, if someone we’ve written a part for can’t do the movie, we’d just as soon not make it.” (They did break this rule on *Miller’s Crossing*, after having to replace Trey Wilson with Albert Finney.) Joel certainly had to pacify his wife by writing a part for her. “Fran’s the only one of that group who consistently says, ‘Are you writing for me?’, ‘When are you going to write me another part?’ I don’t get that from John Turturro, you know, I don’t get that from him at home.”

“I love their movies,” Frances stated. “But on the other hand I had to have my own career, not only because it makes for better stories when you come home at night, but also just pride-wise. It was important, especially when I was younger, that people couldn’t say that I got a role because Joel was my boyfriend. Now it doesn’t matter. If people want to say I slept with him for thirteen years to get the part in *Fargo*, let them!”

The Coens have always written strong parts for strong women: prison officer “Ed” (*Raising Arizona*), Verna Bernbaum (*Miller’s Crossing*), Audrey Taylor (*Barton Fink*), Amy Archer (*The Hudsucker Proxy*), Penny McGill (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), and the two roles created by McDormand, Abby (*Blood Simple*) and Marge Gunderson (*Fargo*), twelve years apart. In contrast, Ethan’s short stories have very few women in them. They tend to concentrate on an almost exclusively masculine world. In *Marge*, the brothers had written possibly

their best female part, and the warmest. It does help when the director is in love with the star, as one can witness in other examples such as the Marlene Dietrich–Josef Von Sternberg, Vincente Minnelli–Judy Garland, Jean-Luc Godard–Anna Karina, Woody Allen–Diane Keaton/Mia Farrow collaborations.

Since making her film debut in *Blood Simple*, McDormand had gone from strength to strength on stage and on big and small screens. She gained a Tony nomination for her Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* on Broadway, appeared regularly on TV in *Hill Street Blues*, played the fearful wife of a Klan-minded sheriff in Alan Parker’s *Mississippi Burning*, for which she was Oscar-nominated, and she was in Ken Loach’s *Hidden Agenda*. She had played a German Jew in *Paradise Road* and an Irish nanny in *Talk of Angels*, rivaling Meryl Streep in her range of accents.

But with *Fargo*, despite around twenty films to her credit—or debit, as the case may be—McDormand emerged into real stardom. Before the Oscar enabled this metamorphosis to take place, she was only recognized from role to role.

“After *Blood Simple*, everybody thought I was from Texas. After *Mississippi Burning*, everybody thought I was from Mississippi and uneducated. After *Fargo*, everybody’s going to think I’m from Minnesota, pregnant, and have blonde hair. I don’t think you can ever completely transform yourself on film, but if you do your job well, you can make people believe that you’re the character you’re trying to be. I’m a character actress, plain and simple. Who can worry about a career? Movie stars have careers—actors work, and then they don’t work, and then they work again.”

Fargo was the brothers’ first significant collaboration with McDormand since *Blood Simple*, and there were a few awkward moments in the first week of shooting. “I assumed I knew what Joel was going to say before he finished his sentence. Which isn’t unlike our relationship the rest of the time. On *Blood Simple*, when Joel said cut after a take, the way he and Ethan laughed either meant it was good or it wasn’t. It was the same on *Fargo*, except for one scene—the last meeting between Marge and Jerry when I went crazy and didn’t know what to do. I had to find my way through it myself.”

Joel and Frances did, however, stay in adjoining hotel rooms during the shoot. “I know what he’s like when he’s making a movie. He’s a slob. And I’m kind of neat. And especially if you only have one room. I didn’t want him coming in, leaving his dirty clothes everywhere. So we made my room the living room, where we could invite people over, and his room was the bedroom and laundry room.”

The Coens wrote the part for McDormand, not only because Joel was being nagged by her, but because “one of her strengths as an actor is that she has a lack of vanity when she’s playing a character. She’s not looking for what makes her look good, but what’s right for the character. Frances read the script and suggested she should throw up because she’s got morning sickness.”

“I looked like a huge turd out there in the snow, waddling around. Joel said, ‘You know, the character does not have to be as unattractive as you’re making her.’ But I love the way I look as Marge.” However, would even this simple-minded police force allow a woman in such advanced pregnancy to do such dangerous work? “You betcha!” according to McDormand. Apparently, it is not a rarity. “In St. Paul, I met Officer Nancy, who was seven months pregnant and still working. She was on the vice squad doing search and seizure. She was going to go into the office and do a desk job in the middle of her eighth month, but until then, she was still out there doing it.” One has to take McDormand’s word for it, but without that knowledge, it seems merely one of the Coens’ perverse needs to find something quirky to add to the character.

Not since *Raising Arizona* had the Coens depicted a marriage, happy or otherwise. Neither Tom Reagan, Barton Fink, nor Norville Barnes ends up with the girl, as is the Hollywood custom. In *Fargo*, the marriage between Marge and the non-demonstrative, well-named Norm, dull and habitual as it may be, rings true. It also has the first genuinely happy ending, as distinct from the postmodern resolutions of *Raising Arizona* and *The Hudsucker Proxy*, with only a hint of condescension. “I’m so proud of you, Norm. Heck, we’re doin’ pretty good, Norm.” “I love you, Margie.” “I love you, Norm.” “Two more months.” “Two more months.”

MARGE (ON A PUBLIC PHONE): Yah, this is Marge Gunderson from up Brainerd, we spoke—Yah. Well, actually I’m in town here. I had to do a few things in the Twin Cities, so I thought I’d check in with ya . . . Oh, yah? Well, maybe I’ll go visit him if I have the . . . No, I can find that . . . Well, thanks a bunch. Say, do you happen to know a good place for lunch in the downtown area? . . . Yah, the Radisson . . . Oh yah? Is it reasonable?

61 *Family Values*

Besides Frances McDormand, the Coen “family” were gathered together again for *Fargo*. Principally Roger Deakins, the cinematographer, and their regular composer Carter Burwell, who came up with the central theme, which he based on a popular Scandinavian melody. Unfortunately, Richard Hornung, their costume designer since *Raising Arizona*, was dying of AIDS, but he recommended Mary Zophres, his one-time assistant, to take over, and she has been with the Coens ever since. Also on the team was Tricia Cooke, the assistant editor, now married to Ethan, who had divorced Hilary.

Steve Buscemi, among the brilliant cast, had appeared in only small roles previously for the Coens: in one scene as the talkative and nervous Mink in *Miller’s Crossing*, and as the hotel clerk (“My name is Chet”) in *Barton Fink*. As Carl Showalter in *Fargo*, a role written specifically for him, Buscemi expertly switches from the menacing to the comic, echoing the tone of the film itself.

Among the new members of the “family” was William H. Macy as the nerdish husband Jerry, whose sudden solitary fits of anger are miniature comic gems. Macy made his name in David Mamet’s theater company and in Mamet’s films, while Harve Presnell, as Macy’s despotic father-in-law, made his reputation in musicals. “He actually did a ‘dancin’ in the snow’ musical number, but we cut it out for length,” joked Joel.

The actress Kristin Rudr  d, as the kidnapped wife, actually came from the area, and is the most mistreated of all the characters. Although she is the fulcrum around which the plot revolves, nobody (including the Coens) really gives a damn what happens to her, not even her father, who is willing to risk her life to save the ransom money. Once she is kidnapped, the actress was replaced by a double with a hood on her head.

Among the final rolling credits, there is one that aroused the curiosity of those that bother to stay and read them. There is no name beside the credit for Victim in the Field, but a sign that looks like the logo for the Minneapolis musician formerly known as Prince, turned on its side with a smiley face drawn on it. When asked, the brothers refused to reveal who played the man seen at the window of a car wearing a red cap and jacket who witnesses the shooting of the

state trooper and is then shot while running away. It was, in fact, the storyboard artist formerly known as J. Todd Anderson. "It's top secret if I tell you," Anderson whispered to a reporter. "I'll have to kill you. Besides I want to work with those guys again."

CARL: Look at that. Twin Cities. IDS Building, the big glass one.

Tallest skyscraper in the Midwest. After the Sears, uh, Chicago. You never been to Minneapolis?

GRIMSRUD: No.

CARL: "No." First thing you've said in the last four hours. That's a, that's a fountain of conversation, man. That's a geyser. I mean, whoa, daddy, stand back, man. Shit, I'm sitting here driving, man, doin' all the driving, whole fucking way from Brainerd, tryin' to, you know, tryin' to chat, keep our spirits up, fight the boredom of the road, and you can't say one fucking thing just in the way of conversation.

62 *Whiteout*

Fargo has certain resemblances to *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona*. The three films were made on a modest scale, they deal with crime and kidnapping, and are very specific in their geographic location. But *Blood Simple* was influenced by horror movies and the novels of James M. Cain, and *Raising Arizona* had cartoons and slapstick comedy as models.

“We approached *Fargo* from a different stylistic viewpoint. In a very dry manner. We also wanted the camera to report the story as an observer. We didn’t want any diversions and digressions. Each incident was at the service of the intrigue. Except the interpolated scene between Frances and her old [Japanese] friend from school. We even permitted the heroine to enter halfway through the film. [Actually, a third of the way through.] It was also a way to signify to the audience that it wasn’t a typical genre movie.” This is the converse of *Psycho*, where the heroine (Janet Leigh) exits a third of the way through.

Another curiosity is that the principal action takes place in Brainerd, which is in Minnesota, and not in Fargo, which is in North Dakota. Fargo is the town where Jerry Lundgaard (William H. Macy) first meets the two hoods (Steve Buscemi, Peter Stormare) to arrange the kidnapping of his wife but is not where the main events take place. “We liked the sound of the name. There is no other significance. There is a western connotation with Wells Fargo, but it wasn’t voluntary, and it’s a pity that some people thought it was. We just felt Brainerd was not cool enough.”

The trouble is that Minnesota wasn’t cool enough. The plan was to shoot entirely in and around Minneapolis. The shoot began in a record high-temperature winter in Minnesota. They worked for a while with artificial snow, but when the snow didn’t come they had to chase the migratory snowfall into North Dakota for the large exteriors. “We went to Minneapolis in the winter hoping for snow. As a rule, the winter is ridiculously cold and snowy. But predictably, since we were going there to shoot a movie and looking for snow, it turned out to be warm. The second warmest winter in a hundred years. And very dry. We ended up shooting about two weeks in North Dakota.”

“There we found what we were looking for. A cloudy sky without direct

sunlight, no visible horizon, and a neutral and diffuse light. It was a dramatic and oppressive landscape. There were no mountains and no forests. It was flat and desolate. That's what we wanted to appear on screen."

"First of all, we were trying to reflect the bleak aspect of living in that area in the wintertime—what the light and this sort of landscape does to one psychologically. It was very important to us to shoot on non-sunny days. We talked early on with Roger Deakins about shooting landscapes where you couldn't really see the horizon line—so that the snow-covered ground would be the same color as the sky—on these sort of slight gray or whiteout days that you get in Minnesota. We scheduled the show so that we could be able to avoid blue skies as much as possible."

"They wanted the look of the exteriors to be quite bland," explained Deakins. "Difficult to do something that's bland but not boring. They wanted it very real, very middle America. I think the Coens would probably make a blank white wall interesting."

"The whole idea of the car emerging ghostlike out of the snow—the whiteness and weirdness—was important to us. We talked with Roger about these landscapes where you couldn't really see where the horizon was, where the ground melted into the sky. We put everything else aside and didn't shoot until we got that feeling. It was nerve-racking."

"On *Fargo* they talked about making it like a documentary," said Deakins, who came from documentary films. "The camera as an observer. In the end, even the first shot was a fifty to sixty-foot dolly track. But it was much more observational. We used longer lenses. We shot the night scenes black rather than illuminating them with Musco lights. The day would be all white." The Coens told the production designer, Rick Heinrichs, to find the most soul-deadening, flattened locations. "He'd find some dumpy café, and we'd say, no, it's too good . . . Less color, less design, less kitsch. Now that can be hard. We wanted no design. Absolutely nothing."

However, the art department was allowed to break the monotony by designing and building the statue of Paul Bunyan, the giant hero from American mythology, wielding his axe. It was his mighty footprints that are said to have created Minnesota's eleven thousand lakes. On the plinth is the legend: "Welcome to Brainerd, Home of Paul Bunyan." The joke is that Heinrichs and his team have given Bunyan madly staring eyes so that he looks like an axe murderer. In fact, he resembles the kidnapper Grimsrud, who buries an axe in

his partner's neck and then chops him up at the end.

63 Roger's Grandmother

"We don't look through the viewfinder that much. We believe in our cameraman. When you work regularly with someone you have more and more confidence in them. There is a sort of telepathic communication between you."

Early on, the Coens had discussions with Roger Deakins to establish the visual style of the film. "We always involve Roger very early. After we finish the script we sit down with him and talk in general terms about how we were thinking about it from a visual point of view. Then, in specific terms, we do a draft of the storyboards with Roger, then refine those ideas scene by scene. Frequently storyboards can be tossed out of the window when we get on set and the three of us see something we'd prefer to do, given the location or whatever. But they're there as a guide, a point of departure for us to start talking about the movie with Roger."

On set, Deakins and the Coens will work out the dynamics of a given scene, with Joel and Ethan frequently switching roles. "Either of them will be talking about the shot, lenses, or whatever," Deakins explained. "They just swap around duties. I think having a relationship on a couple of films before this made it easier to do a project on a small budget and get more out of it. Once you've got a pattern of working, you know how to cut corners, and what each other's wants are. We don't have as much discussion on the set anymore about shots. We basically block the scene in the morning. And go through the shots. It's quite a quiet set."

With its limited budget, all of the film, save for two small bathroom sets, was shot on location, using available exterior light through windows when they could. "I was very much working off natural sources," Deakins explained. "A lot of the film was shot in bars and clubs. If there wasn't daylight we couldn't do the shots. Most of the interiors, which were mainly small bedrooms, houses, and offices as opposed to big spaces, were lit by window-light during the day. The impulse here was to de-dramatize things rather than dramatize them."

The Coens elected to shoot the scene of the drop, when Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell) comes to pay the kidnappers, on a snow-covered exterior parking garage. "We chose that location because there was a smokestack belching away on the roof of a nearby building, and we wanted to use that as a

background for part of the scene. The special effects people had to snow that entire area because there was no snow.”

“I worked with a lot more colors on *Fargo* than I have on either of the Coens’ other films,” said Deakins, a paradoxical statement—when one thinks of *Fargo*, one thinks white. “Photographically, I wouldn’t say that I’ve been more bold on *Fargo*, but I did play around a bit more. It’s actually one of my favorite projects, though I don’t think anything shouts out, ‘Wow, this is great photography!’ If you’ve got a huge amount of money and great big sets, it’s actually not hard to make it look good. It’s often more of a challenge to try to give a film a coherent style from start to finish, one that remains interesting and feels real.” In fact, those members of the Academy Awards did say “Wow, this is great photography!” by nominating Deakins’s work on *Fargo* for an Oscar.

Working with Deakins has rewarded the Coens with a kindred collaborator and a close friend. “We’re lucky we found Roger. He understands what we are after, and frequently comes up with stuff on the spot that reflects what we want to do in the scene.”

But Deakins, like his predecessor Barry Sonnenfeld, has had a long-standing debate with the Coens about their affinity for wide-angle lenses. “We’ve gotten better actually partly because of Roger’s influence. He has been quietly bringing us round to longer lenses. It’s a joke between the three of us. We’re now up to 32mm and 35mm lenses!”

Deakins retorts: “On *Hudsucker* I’d put on a 28mm and they’d say, ‘Shouldn’t this be an 18mm?’” But after three films, Deakins’s cajoling seems to have taken root. “On *Fargo* we shot longer lenses than the Coens have ever shot before. Our main lens was probably a 40mm or a 32mm, whereas normally it would be 25mm.”

“I think it’s still a prejudice with us, wanting to go wider more often,” the Coens remarked. “It has to do with wanting to enhance the camera moves. For instance in *Hudsucker*, a lot of the effects stuff, the falling shots, were quite wide in the interest of making the moves and the falling more dynamic. In *Fargo* we moved the camera far less and used a lot more over-the-shoulders.

“Whenever we fret about some kind of detail in the frame, or start looking too closely at something, Roger simply says, ‘Well that could be my Gran in the shot and she’s been dead for twenty years. Don’t worry about it.’ Actually, there’s a lot of discussion about Roger’s grandmother on the set. It’s an important part of his work and it shouldn’t be overlooked.”

6 *Chip off the Old Block*

On the surface, *Fargo* is perhaps the Coens' most conventional film and therefore their most popular. It is unflashy—there are no flash-ins, flashbacks, or flashforwards. There are no dream sequences. Unlike *Blood Simple*, Miller's *Crossing*, and *Burn After Reading*, its plot is lucid. It avoids the broad strokes and humor of *Raising Arizona*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *Intolerable Cruelty* and is less allusive than *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, and *A Serious Man*. Though one can find a plethora of cross-references and postmodern ironies in their other films, critics have found it difficult to use the dreaded word about it. The Coens are always kvetching about the way critics find influences from other movies or novels (i.e. those of Kafka) that they have not seen or read or even heard of.

However, in order to continue the critical convention, one could suggest that *Fargo* does evoke, at a pinch, whether intentional or coincidental, François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* (1962), which has a kidnapping, a snowbound hideout, a couple of semi-comic gangsters, and a death in the snow. It also contains a visual joke of which the Coens would approve. When the sleazy nightclub owner exclaims to another character, "If I'm lying, may my mother drop dead!" Truffaut cuts to a shot of an old woman dropping to the floor. The Coens used a similar flash-in in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, as Paul Newman remembers his tailor while dangling outside the skyscraper window. *Shoot the Piano Player* also happened to be based on a pulp American noir novel, *Down There* by David Goodis, of which the Coens were certainly aware.

Yet *Fargo* has the Coens' fingerprints all over it. Like the other movies, it manages to move seamlessly back and forth between black humor, violent crime drama, and genial comedy, while telling a good yarn. The semistylized dialogue, so important to the films, is here given another dimension by the "yah-yah" rhythms of the local dialect. And it is superbly photographed, with the white acting as a blank canvas on which are painted memorable images such as the stunning high overhead shot of Macy walking to his car through the snow.

The only jarring note is the unnecessary pandering to the horror crowd—a remnant of the *Evil Dead* days—when Buscemi is being fed into the mechanical wood-chipper, although we only see some of his leg sticking out of it. To illustrate how props in films can take on talismanic properties, the wood-chipper, owned by Milo Durben, a Delano farmer who acted as dolly grip on the film, had its own float in the 1996 Delano Fourth of July parade and was in the

window of Dayton's store in downtown Minneapolis as part of a movie display. Milo and his wife have continued to use the machine to chip wood on their farm, presumably now cleansed of bits of Buscemi.

65 *Pedro Coen*

Joel and Frances live in an Upper West Side apartment, while Ethan and Tricia live in Kips Bay, on New York's East Side. The brothers' office is in an apartment building on the Upper West Side. High on a shelf looms a replica of the statue of Paul Bunyan, who represents tall stories, of which they are masters.

Just before filming began on *Fargo*, Frances and Joel, who had been married for twelve years, adopted a Paraguayan baby boy, Pedro. Ethan and Tricia's son Buster was born during the filming in January 1996. The personal changes in the brothers' lives might have caused their mellowing toward marriage and parenthood in *Fargo*.

Having a child changed the two families' schedules somewhat. It was more difficult for Joel, Frances, and Pedro to stay together because of McDormand's acting commitments. "Joel only leaves to go away to work once every two years," Frances explained. "I'm the one who goes off every few months. I've been planning to be a mother most of my adult life, so this is the way it happened. I'm not planning to have any other children. I started too late. I can barely keep up with Pedro now. But I don't know what I'll be doing in five years."

Frances loves children and spends much of her spare time as a volunteer with the 52nd Street Project based in the Hell's Kitchen district of Manhattan. "I've been involved with it for twelve years. It's basically recreational for kids from seven to fourteen and takes place in the world of the theater. We do playwriting classes with the kids and in the summer we take ten of them away for the week to work on plays. The adult volunteers come in and help kids who are having trouble in school." She also claimed that "One of the best things that happened to me—and I mean this most sincerely—was doing this *Sesame Street* video, *Big Bird Gets Lost*, which helps kids if they get lost."

After completing *Fargo*, the family went to Australia, and Joel and Pedro spent time on the beaches of Port Douglas, in Queensland, while Frances was making *Paradise Road* nearby. "Oh, it was fantastic," said Joel. "Four weeks in Port Douglas. I just hung out on the beach with our little boy. Great beaches. We went up to Cooktown and all that." The relaxation was necessary for all the tiring publicity that was to come.

66 Roderick Jaynes

Fargo was up for seven Oscars at the 1997 ceremony: Best Director (Joel Coen), Best Actress (Frances McDormand), Best Supporting Actor (William H. Macy), Best Screenplay (Ethan and Joel Coen), Best Cinematography (Roger Deakins), and Best Editing (Roderick Jaynes).

Roderick Jaynes, you will recall, was the mysterious and reclusive Englishman who emerged from his home in Sussex into the world to edit *Blood Simple*, *Barton Fink*, and *Fargo*, and to write the introductions to the published screenplays of *Barton Fink* and *Miller's Crossing*. Besides the Coens' movies, he was said to have edited a British comedy called *The Mad Weekend*, starring Alastair Sim and Basil Radford, *Beyond Mombasa*, and *Operation Fort Petticoat*. (There is no record of a film with this exact title. Jaynes was probably confusing *Guns of Fort Petticoat* and *Operation Petticoat*.) Jaynes, a member of BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts), won a British Academy Award for *Barton Fink*, and enrolled the Coens in the academy.

"I'm not sure why the lads called me on their fourth picture, *Barton Fink*; our last conversation had ended with sharp words on both sides." However, Jaynes accepted, but found that the footage he had been given had "the Borstal sensibility of the boys" earlier efforts—entire scenes covered without a proper camera angle, tattiness of setting and wardrobe, and actors once again encouraged to bellow and banshee. He was taken off the picture, although, masochistically, the Coens decided to ask him to edit *Fargo*. Because of it, Roderick Jaynes had gained an Academy Award nomination. His main rival for the award was Walter Murch for *The English Patient*. The question was, would Jaynes turn up at the ceremony? The Coens insisted that he would be there. They told the press that Jaynes was very excited about the prospect of winning and would make a "thank you" speech if he did.

Unfortunately, on the big night, Jaynes didn't show. When asked where Jaynes was, the Coens replied, "Oh, he's back at home in Haywards Heath watching cricket on TV."

However, Jaynes was soon to get a terrible shock. He would discover, on the eve of the Oscars, that he didn't exist. The Coens never told him. *Daily Variety* had been informed by a mole that the Coens had invented Jaynes when they were working on *Blood Simple*, over a decade earlier, because they thought there were enough Coens on the credits already. Nobody had bothered to question Jaynes's existence before the nomination came up. Who cares about editors?

“When we got an editing nomination, we were going to have Albert Finney in disguise, as a friend of Jaynes’s, to accept the award on his behalf, but the Academy wouldn’t let us do that, because of Marlon Brando.” In 1973, Brando, who won the Best Actor award for *The Godfather*, used his non-appearance at the ceremony as a platform for airing a personal grievance. Spurning the award on his behalf was a native American girl called Sacheen Littlefeather, who came on stage to read a letter from Brando, to complain about his country’s treatment of her people. Proxy acceptances have been proscribed ever since.

Actually, Jaynes was not the first pseudonymous nominee. In 1957, during the Hollywood blacklist, Pierre Boulle accepted the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay for *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, based on his novel. However, the screenplay was written by blacklisted writers Michael Wilson and Carl Foreman.

67 Oscar Wildies

For the Best Director Oscar, Joel (who had won the Best Director award at Cannes the year before) was up against Anthony Minghella (*The English Patient*), Milos Forman (*The People vs. Larry Flynt*), Mike Leigh (*Secrets and Lies*), and Scott Hicks (*Shine*). If Oscars were won on artistic and auteuristic merit, then Mike Leigh would have been Joel’s only serious rival. But the Oscars being the Oscars, Minghella, the least interesting director of the least interesting film, won.

Another anomaly was the nomination of William H. Macy as Best Supporting Actor, though he played one of the leading roles in the movie, almost as long as McDormand’s. (Macy lost to Cuba Gooding, Jr., in *Jerry Maguire*.) The Academy sometimes finds it difficult to overcome the notion that certain players are supporting actors whatever the length of their roles.

Deakins’s cinematography was felt to be less worthy than John Seale’s on *The English Patient*, and Roderick Jaynes was pipped at the post by Walter Murch. The Academy played it safe by giving Murch his second Oscar. (He won Best Sound Editing for *Apocalypse Now*.) *The English Patient*, a film that will soon pass into oblivion, won nine Oscars.

Justice, however, was done with the Best Screenplay award going to the Coen brothers over *Jerry Maguire*, *Lone Star*, *Secrets and Lies*, and *Shine* and the Best Actress award to Frances McDormand. Certainly her performance was superior to those of Diane Keaton in *Marvin’s Room*, Kristen Scott-Thomas in *The English Patient*, and an irritating Emily Watson in *Breaking the Waves*. Only

Brenda Blethyn's portrayal in *Secrets and Lies* could be said to have carried equal weight to McDormand's Marge.

"What am I doing here?" Frances asked in her acceptance speech. "Especially considering the extraordinary group of women with whom I was nominated. We five women were fortunate to have the choice, not just the opportunity, but the choice to play such rich, complex female characters, and I congratulate the casting directors for making casting decisions on qualifications and not just market value." She went on to thank her brother-in-law for "making me an actress," and her husband for "making me a woman."

Following the show, which ran for three hours and thirty-seven minutes, making it the longest awards show in American television history, Frances was widely photographed between a stunned Joel and Ethan. "It was weird," said Ethan. "Everyone was beaming at you; it was like a nightmare and was very disconcerting in a way. Jodie Foster kept smiling at me." "I won't be able to afford her anymore," Joel quipped, looking at his wife. The next day, the two Oscars were in a box ready to be taken back to New York, where they would stand on a little trophy shelf in the Coens' office. "Now I've got more to dust in the office," Frances commented. "Hollywood is a cultureless environment. The awards season is their social season, so it goes on for two months. The amount of time and money spent is incredible."

No doubt some cynicism may have balanced the euphoria the Coen family felt on Oscar Night. Perhaps Ethan and Joel's guardian angel Raymond Chandler was whispering in their ears on the night.

If you can go past those awful idiot faces on the bleachers outside the theater without a sense of the collapse of the human intelligence; if you can stand the hailstorm of flashbulbs popping at the poor patient actors, who, like kings and queens, have never the right to look bored; if you can glance out over the gathered assemblage of what is supposed to be the elite of Hollywood and say to yourself without a sinking feeling, "In these hands lies the destinies of the only original art the modern world has conceived"; . . . if you can stand the fake sentimentality and the platitudes of the officials and the mincing elocution of the glamour queens; if you can do all these things with grace and pleasure, and not have a wild and forsaken horror at the thought that most of these people actually take this shoddy performance seriously; and if you can then go out into the night to see half the police force of Los Angeles gathered to protect the golden ones from the mob in the free seats . . . if you can do all these things and still feel next morning that the picture business is worth the attention of one single, intelligent, artistic mind, then in the picture business you certainly belong, because this sort of vulgarity is part of its inevitable price.
(Atlantic Monthly, 1950)

A year later, Frances recalled: "Waiting for the opening of the envelope on Oscars night last year was kind of numbing. But we were all riding on this euphoria, not just because of *Fargo* being recognized in so many categories, but

because so many independent features which we had seen and liked were in there, too . . . More importantly, what's surprising and gratifying about the acknowledgment is we have established ourselves, as Joel and Ethan have, outside the community. We don't live here [in LA], we don't work here unless we're doing work on location. We're not members of the community in the social sense. So the value of that kind of choice was being acknowledged. Also, it was never our goal—Joel and Ethan never set out to make a characteristically Academy Award-nominated movie. That's just not what they're interested in, nor what they're good at. Neither am I. I've never, ever been a part of the public-relations machine, other than promoting the work I've done. That whole thing was kind of odd, kind of a weird aspect of a movie that none of us even expected an audience to see. Isn't it astonishing? *That's* the best part. It cemented an audience for their films that I think is only going to escalate."

The Oscar figurine—described by screenwriter Frances Marion as “a perfect symbol of the picture business; a powerful athletic body clutching a gleaming sword with half of his head, that part which held the brains, completely sliced off”—is emblematic in Hollywood of success. The Coens had truly arrived. They had largely made their names as *Wunderkinder*, brash youths who took from old movies to make something new. But they were no longer kids. They might be iconoclasts but, with Oscars, six films to their joint credit, and a firm place in the movie industry, they had become established iconoclasts.

X

COOL DUDES

*“It’s the world of drug takers. The noise of bowling is also a drug for the Dude.
In the minds of most people, the psychedelic culture is associated with
Southern California.”*

68 *Coens the Barbarians*

STRANGELY, THERE ARE MORE ELEMENTS that are actually true in *The Big Lebowski* than in *Fargo*, which was allegedly based on real events but, “in truth contains mostly made-up stuff.” *The Big Lebowski*, though influenced strongly by Raymond Chandler, is based on real people and events.

The film seems to have been sparked off by a visit to a friend, Pete Exline, a rather bitter Vietnam vet. Whenever the subject of Vietnam came up, he would say things like, “Well, we were winning when I left.” In order to cheer him up, the brothers complimented Pete on his apartment, which was actually “a kind of a dump.” He was really proud of this “ratty-ass little rug” he had in the living room and told them how it “tied the room together.” This expression was put into the mouth of aging hippie Jeff “The Dude” Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), after his threadbare rug has been peed on by one of two heavies, an action that ignites the plot.

Pete also regaled the Coens with the misadventures of his friend Walter, a fellow vet who had knocked around the movie business. Walter’s car was stolen by teenage joyriders. When it was found, it was discovered that one of the thieves had inadvertently left behind his school homework that bore his address. So Pete and Walter tracked the kid down and confronted him. This incident was integrated into the screenplay of *The Big Lebowski*.

One would think that the seemingly gentle Coens would have little in common with Peter Exline or the director John Milius, whose macho interests include surfing, the martial arts, hunting, guns, and motorcycles, many of which

he has put into his bombastic films. The self-styled “Zen anarchist,” who was denied entry to the U.S. Marines on grounds of health, found compensation by making will-to-power allegorical movies like *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). Yet, Coens the Barbarians are (un)healthily attracted to the representation of bloody violence as in *Blood Simple* and *Miller’s Crossing*—during the making of which they became fascinated by the Thompson gun.

“We met John Milius when we were in LA making *Barton Fink*. He’s a really funny guy, a really good storyteller. He was never actually in the military, although he wears a lot of military paraphernalia. He’s a gun enthusiast and survivalist type. Whenever we saw him he’d invite us out to his house to look at his guns although we never took him up on it.” Elements of Peter Exline and John Milius came together to constitute the character of Walter Sobchak (John Goodman), the Dude’s Vietnam vet buddy.

The character of Dude, “quite possibly the laziest man in Los Angeles County,” was based on a guy named Jeff Dowd, whom the Coens met on one of their first trips to Los Angeles in the 1970s. Dowd called himself the Pope of Dope and was actually known as the Dude. He was a member of the Seattle Seven during the Vietnam years—he used to program the Seattle Film Festival—and did time in jail for conspiracy to destroy federal property. Later he moved to California and hung around film people. (Today he’s a respectable producer’s rep.) In order to research his role, Jeff Bridges met this ex-Dude. “I took stuff from him for the Dude, and also from some of my own friends like that. But to be honest, it’s mostly just me,” Bridges remarked.

“The physical thing is one of the first things you do to figure out a character,” said Bridges, who put on weight for the part. “The Dude is not the kind of guy to be doing a lot of sit-ups, and he gets most of his nutrition from Kahlua, vodka, and milk, so he doesn’t mind looking the way he does with a pot belly. He eats pretty much whenever and whatever he wants. And I drew on myself a lot from back in the sixties and seventies. I lived in a little place like that and did drugs, although I think I was a little more creative than the Dude. But then maybe the Dude went through a creative period and just grew out of it. During my Dude period, I painted a lot and made music.”

The role of the Dude is related to Bone (also played by Bridges), the complacent beach-bum buddy of a bitter, mutilated Vietnam vet in *Cutter’s Way*, Ivan Passer’s updated film noir, sixteen years previously. The Coens liked the character of the Dude because “We’re pretty lazy. We’re slow. That’s why we tend to make a movie once every two years. The Dude has so little ambition that

he's not a failure. There is a laid-back subculture in LA that draws on the surfing lifestyle. It's partly the weather that makes that kind of stoner culture possible." The Dude was one of the first pothead heroes that movies had seen in years.

One critic called *The Big Lebowski* "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." Ethan described the movie, with some element of seriousness, as "a Cheech and Chong movie with bowling." Tommy Chong and Cheech Marin were crude, irreverent pothead comedians of the 1970s. "You go to our movies for four reasons: to laugh, cry, get scared, get a hard-on. If you can do all four at the same time, hey, it's the ultimate pizza combo, man."

69 *Bowling Alley Cats*

Pete Exline belonged to an amateur softball league, but the Coens thought the sport visually uninteresting so they changed it to bowling, which had the retro connotation they were looking for. "It's a very social sport where you can sit around and drink and smoke while engaging in inane conversation. It's not an active sport, which goes against the health and fitness thing of Southern California. Ten-pin bowlers have the same physique as dart players," they explained. "It's also a decidedly male sport, which is right because *The Big Lebowski* is kind of a weird buddy movie."

Bowling is not a sport to feature greatly in movies, but it does have an image as the game for the "average Joe." Homer Simpson goes bowling and, in *The Honeymooners*, the classic blue-collar sitcom of the 1950s, Ralph Kramden, played by roly-poly comedian Jackie Gleason (who bore some resemblance to John Goodman), was a bowling fanatic. The sport features in two celebrated 1940s films noir: Fred MacMurray goes bowling after realizing that he is being drawn into a murder plot in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, and a bowling center is the locus of Jean Negulesco's *Road House*. In a memorable moment from Howard Hughes's *Scarface* (1932), Boris Karloff is shot while bowling, his death symbolized by a wobbling then falling bowling pin.

However, the Coens insisted that the noir element in the script didn't really seem to dictate anything stylistically in the movie. So, while noir seems to be the flavor of the narrative, with all these characters trapped by their pasts, it is essentially a comedy, and does not have the look of a noir. "Consistent with the whole bowling thing, we wanted to keep the movie pretty bright and poppy.

Since the bowling alley is sort of a linchpin, visually speaking, we discussed it with Rick [Heinrichs—Production Designer] more than any other set—although it was a practical location, not a set. The exterior of the place was just one big, solid, unbroken wall. So we talked about what to do with that. Rick came up with the idea of just laying free-form neon stars on top of it and doing a similar free-form star thing on the interior.” This led to the star motif of the film.

“Both dream sequences involve star patterns and are about lines radiating to a point. In the first dream sequence, the Dude gets knocked out and you see stars and they all coalesce into the overhead nightscape of LA,” explained Heinrichs. “The second dream sequence is an astral environment with a backdrop of stars. The name of the bowling alley is the Hollywood Star Lanes. Stars were a fifties thing, as well as being appropriate to LA.” There was a rapport between the rich, saturated colors of Roger Deakins’s photography and that of Heinrichs’s designs of the bowling alley, which was lit by fluorescent lights.

On the day when they were supposed to shoot the bowling scenes, Goodman had torn some ligaments in his foot, was in a cast and on crutches. Ethan had minor surgery on an old knee problem and was walking with a cane. So both Ethan and Goodman were limping around, and they only had to reschedule one day. Goodman then used his limp in the movie after he falls out of a moving car.

The Big Lebowski was an eleven-week shoot with a lot of location shooting in and around LA. Therefore, the Coens took a house in Santa Monica. Tricia Cooke, Ethan’s wife, was employed as coeditor with Roderick Jaynes, who, despite the scandal of the Oscars, decided to prove his existence once more.

The locations were so varied, from the Dude’s Venice beach cottage to the Big Lebowski’s mansion to Jackie Treehorn’s glass and concrete Malibu pad, that obtaining a unified look to the film was a challenge. This was mainly up to the cinematographer, Roger Deakins, and the art department.

The Lebowski mansion was an empty house that was used mainly for filming. The Dude’s second visit to see his wealthy namesake is what the Coens call “a great-room scene.” “We like great-room scenes for some reason: guys sitting in front of fires with blankets over their knees. This is a tycoon. He’s in retreat.” As Rick Heinrichs recognized, “We needed it to have that grand feeling you get when you’re looking, for example, at General Sternwood’s place in *The Big Sleep*. . . You want a bit of a *Citizen Kane* feeling, to make a strong statement about this pitiful guy in a wheelchair with all his magnificent art work staring down at him.”

This room was too big, the ceiling was too high, the doors were too tall, and the white carpet that went from wall to wall looked like a fresh fall of snow at Lake Arrowhead.

The Big Sleep (Raymond Chandler)

70 *Dude and Co.*

The Big Lebowski was written about the same time as *Barton Fink*, but neither John Goodman, who was occupied on *Roseanne*, nor Jeff Bridges, committed to Walter Hill for *Wild Bill*, was available at the time. As the Coens try to make it a rule to work only with those actors for whom the roles were written, they decided to wait and embarked on *Fargo* instead.

Pauline Kael once wrote that Jeff Bridges “may be the most natural and least self-conscious screen actor that ever lived.” Excusable hyperbole, perhaps, as Bridges is easy, relaxed, effortless, always himself and yet, paradoxically, always convincing as the character he is playing. In a way, Frances McDormand’s Marge in *Fargo* paved the way for less artificial or stylized playing in the Coens’ movies.

“The only time we ever directed Jeff,” recalled Joel, “was when he would come over at the beginning of each scene and ask, ‘Do you think the Dude burned one on the way over?’ I’d reply ‘yes’ usually, so Jeff would go over in the corner and start rubbing his eyes to get them bloodshot. That was the extent of our direction.”

Neither did the Coens explain much to Julianne Moore, who played Maude Lebowski, the avant-garde artist.

They don’t really talk a lot, which I love, I don’t like to talk a lot when I’m working. It gets in the way. They do seem to communicate in some symbiotic way. I really loved it because you have this duality that becomes the vision on the set. You get a larger breadth of artistic vision. There’s always an eye there. Which I really enjoyed. So if you have any questions, you can go to either one of them. Yeah. Which I thought was extremely odd. I didn’t discover that until the first day on the set, when Ethan came over, and the line was “Jeffrey, tell me a little about yourself,” and Ethan said, “Lose the ‘little’” and he never told Joel, “I told Julie to do this,” which would take obviously an incredible amount of time. That’s when you realize that they just do that. But Joel will come over and say something, and they just balance it that way.

Maude, who swings on a rope spraying paint on a canvas while suspended naked in a harness, tells a bemused Dude, “My art has been commended as strongly vaginal.” “I had no idea what they were going to do,” Moore said. “I assumed I was going to be upright. I didn’t know I was going to be like Superman. That was terrifying. And I was pregnant, and it was three in the morning, and I was thirty

feet in the air, and they had to bring me up really fast. It was really strange, but it was worth it in the end.”

The character was largely based on Carol Schneeman, who worked naked from a swing, and Yoko Ono. It was in 1961 that Ono realized her *Kitchen Piece*. She smashed eggs, jello, and sumi ink against a canvas on the wall and smeared them across the canvas surface with her hands, then set the canvas on fire. “I think it is possible to see a chair as it is. But when you burn the chair, you suddenly realize that the chair in your mind did not burn or disappear . . .” commented Yoko Ono in a line that the Coens would have been happy to invent.

Bridges, though giving out the usual guff about working relationships on a picture, *i.e.* “It was so great to work with the Coens,” was sincere enough in what he had to say about them.

They’re so relaxed. And the way things are set up, it works well. They know what they want and how to get it without a lot of hysteria. It’s not like those big studio movies where everybody feels the tension of the money and the studio executives breathing down the neck of the director and producer. Here, the money-people are so happy to be working with them, it’s kind of the other way round. The Coens are laid-back and easy, and they like other people to be that way. They low-ball everything, so instead of stretching it, they do what they can do on a smaller budget and, frankly, they’re creative enough to do that. Not everybody can be that creative. They’re kind of unusual guys. They’ve got a great sense of humor, but they’re not out cracking jokes at the time. They’re almost like straight men.

John Goodman said his time in the bowling alley was his best experience on a film. “There’s something about those guys—they make me laugh. I’d say *The Big Lebowski* was the most fun I ever had on set—I laughed every day. I’d love just showing up for work.” Actors who work with them say their sets are completely harmonious and that their films rival those of Woody Allen in terms of the enjoyment factor. Only Nicolas Cage and Gabriel Byrne have struck a discordant note, and have not worked with the Coens since.

John Turturro had a broad cameo as Jesus Quintana, the “spick” bowler in a mauve outfit.

It was an early element in the script and we knew that we wanted John to play him [Joel said]. I had seen him about ten years ago in a play at the Public Theater called *Ma Puta Vita* in which he played a pederast. Well, maybe that’s taking it a little too far, saying he was a pederast, but he had a scene where there was this little boy on his lap and he was kind of bouncing him up and down and there was a kind of lewd section with weird overtones. I was very impressed by it. So we thought, let’s make Turturro a pederast. It’ll be something he can really run with. I guess you could say it’s just our attempt to bring John’s *Ma Puta Vita* character to a wider audience. We shot a lot of his stuff in extreme slow motion. The Quintana scene was fun to do. We hadn’t done a movie with Turturro in a long time. [Not since *Barton Fink* in 1991.]

Steve Buscemi, unfortunately, got the fuzzy end of the lollipop on this one as Donny, the nebbish bowling companion of Walter and the Dude. He can hardly get a sentence out without Walter saying, “Shut the fuck up, Donny!” In the end, Donny doesn’t have the satisfaction of being shot by the anarchists after bravely standing up to them, but dies of a heart attack. He then has the humiliation of his ashes being put into a coffee jar, and having them scattered, not in the Pacific Ocean, but blown back on to the Dude, a rather creaky black joke.

71 *California Dreaming*

“I know there is a real world and a dream world and I shan’t confuse them,” Judy Garland says in *The Pirate*. The Coens have not been so fastidious, and many of their dream sequences have bled into the main body of their films. Because *Fargo* was meant to be the most realistic of them, a dream sequence was cut from an early draft involving, as they insist, Marge and a Native American foetus. Their typically facetious explanation for dropping it was because “we couldn’t agree on the spelling of foetus.”

Miller’s Crossing has the recurrent hat dream, and *The Hudsucker Proxy*, which might have worked better as a musical, has a dream sequence of Tim Robbins doing a ballet with a Dream Dancer (Pamela Everett) to an aria from *Carmen*, her dress blown by a wind machine as in the Gene Kelly-Cyd Charisse duet in *Singin’ in the Rain*.

The Coens sometimes give the impression that inside them is a musical straining to get out. *The Big Lebowski*’s big dream sequence contains a hackneyed Busby Berkeley pastiche. Ever since the 1940s there have been imitators of Busby Berkeley’s kaleidoscopic numbers, none of whom have ever come near the master in any way. Ken Russell made a reasonable attempt to do a couple of Berkeley-type routines in *The Boy Friend*, Mel Brooks in *The Producers* had a witty overhead shot of jackbooted chorus girls forming the shape of a swastika, and there is a spectacular animated Berkeley number in Walt Disney’s *Beauty And The Beast* (1991). The Coens should have left it well alone. Firstly, because it is another reductionist view of Berkeley’s genius, and secondly, it is not the Dude’s fantasy but the Coens imposing their own images on the character. “We’ve always loved Busby Berkeley, but it was more us trying to imagine what a pothead who was slipped a Mickey Finn would dream about, what form it would take. That gave us freedom to do just about anything we wanted, so we came up with Busby Berkeley, Saddam Hussein and Kenny Rogers.”

Among the images the Dude sees is Maude Lebowski, with braided pigtails, dressed in an armored breastplate and horned Norse headgear, and carrying a trident, the philistine's first image of what operatic prima donnas look like. Whether it is the Dude's or the Coens' philistinism is unclear; as is whether it is merely a recognition of the cliché as seen unforgettably in the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, with Margaret Dumont singing an operatic song of victory, and Chuck Jones's cartoon *What's Opera, Doc?*, in which Bugs Bunny dons the Brünnhilde gear.

The Dude, on his back, is launched like a bowling ball down the lane straddled by a line of chorus girls, their legs turning it into a tunnel in imitation of the famous shot in the "Young and Healthy" number from *42nd Street* where the camera moves through a tunnel of female legs, ending with a close-up of a leering Dick Powell.

Jeff Bridges recalled the shooting of the sequence. "That day on the schedule was the dream sequence, and I thought it would be where I dance down the steps. That seemed cool, so I invited my wife and kids to come on set that day 'cause they like to see us making the movies and all, you know? But the Coens switched it and did the other imaginary sequence, and I thought oh God, what are my kids going to think when I turn over and I'm staring up these girls' dresses? So I didn't know it, but all the girls—the dancers got together and pulled this trick on me. As I float through there and turn and look at a dress, I see this big, well, tufts of hair coming out everywhere—and it's the same under the next girl's skirt. It turns out they'd put these big wigs under their leotards between their legs, hidden by their skirts, so only I would see them. Fortunately my wife had been told and she was waiting to see the look on my face, and now everybody was in on it. It was really funny, but I couldn't laugh. But that's why I had that weird smile on my face in the picture. But the expression on my twelve-year-old daughter's face was just as weird. She didn't know what to make of it."

You just had to be there!

72 *The Past Is Another Country*

The Big Lebowski is set in 1991, at the time of the Gulf War. In fact, it is rare for a Coen's picture to be set in the year it was made. The "period" settings, like the wide-angle lenses, and the various allusions and asides, help provide the distance between the film and the audience that the Coens seem to require.

While so many Hollywood movies try to wring the emotions and, as if holding

up cue cards, heavily signal to the audience when to laugh and cry, the Coens' cooler approach is refreshing. This cannot only be put down to their "Minnesotan reserve," but to a determined creative policy. While being poles apart in many ways, it may not be invidious to make a comparison between their stratagem and Bertolt Brecht's celebrated (and often misunderstood) theory behind the basic aims in his theater. The "alienation" (*Verfremdung*) theory was an attempt to alienate the subject matter of the drama by destroying the illusion, interrupting the course of the action, and lowering the tension, so that the audience could remain emotionally disengaged during the performance, in order to allow them to take an intelligent and objective view of what is before them.

Although they might repudiate this, it is very much what the Coens do in their films. Black humor often undercuts violence, preventing any danger of wallowing in it. Visual or verbal jokes deflate the drama. Unexpected POVs, such as a dog's (*Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*), unconventional narrators (*Blood Simple*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *No Country For Old Men*), and allusions to other films shift the audience's focus away from identifying too much with one character or another.

There is no compelling reason for *The Big Lebowski* being set seven years previously at the time of the Gulf War, unless it is to supply Vietnam vet Walter with a bellicose cause, and provide the opportunity for a Saddam Hussein gag. He pops up in one of the Dude's dubious dreams at a bowling alley, where he works at the bowling shoe hire counter. He hands over a special pair of shoes to His Dudeness.

Politics had been part of the period decor of many of the Coens' movies. In *Raising Arizona*, Hi rails against Ronald Reagan, and a picture of Barry Goldwater decorates the wall of the office of the parole board. When Gale and Evelle rob the "hayseed bank," they say that they got a tip that it was worth robbing from "Lawrence Spivey, one of Dick Nixon's undersecretaries of agriculture." (There is also a corrupt politician called Spivey in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*.) In *Miller's Crossing*, both the mayor and the police chief are puppets of gangsters, and the coming war and the Depression are significant backgrounds to *Barton Fink* and *O Brother*.

The Big Lebowski has moved into the George Bush era, and Walter apes the president's macho stand against Saddam. "We're talking about unchecked aggression here"; "This aggression will not stand"; "I'm talking about drawing a line in the sand, Dude. Across the line, you do not . . ."; "Let me point out,

pacifism is not—look at our current situation with that camel-fucker in Iraq—pacifism is not something to hide behind.”

All the characters in *The Big Lebowski* live in the recent past, as do the Coens to a certain degree. Walter defines his experience by Vietnam, and his marriage that ended five years before. The Dude, who is an aging hippie, accuses Walter of living in the past. “Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax—you’re goddamn right I live in the past!” Porn producer Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara), a Hugh Hefner type, has something of the 1970s about him. Maude Lebowski is a throwback to the Fluxus artists of New York in the 1960s. They are all defined by the music they listen to.

The Dude constantly listens to Creedence Clearwater Revival (he somewhat resembles the Fogerty brothers himself), his favorite band, and plays “Lookin’ Out My Back Door” in his car. Treehorn listens to 1960s mainstream jazz, and the millionaire Lebowski has Mozart’s Requiem on the turntable. Maude has Kraftwerk’s *Autobahn* (“Their music is sort of—ugh—techno pop”) among her vinyl collection, which includes Pink Floyd and Roy Orbison.

The nihilists, a bunch of European art rockers who have taken to kidnapping to pay the rent, are trapped in the 1980s. “There are these kind of fringe rock-n-roll guys in LA. You’ll see them in late-night diners on Sunset dressed in black leather with long stringy hair, and you can’t quite figure what they’re about,” commented Joel.

DUDE: You brought a fucking Pomeranian bowling?

WALTER: What do you mean “brought it bowling”? I didn’t rent it shoes. I’m not buying it a fucking beer. He’s not going to take your fucking turn, Dude.

DUDE: Hey, man, if my fucking ex-wife asked me to take care of her fucking dog while she and her boyfriend went to Honolulu, I’d tell her to go fuck herself.

The Big Lebowski

73 *The Big Goodbye*

Just as the plot of *Blood Simple* was filched from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and that of *Miller’s Crossing* from *Red Harvest*, so *The Big Lebowski* owes much to *The Big Sleep*, as reflected in the title.

“We wanted something that would generate a certain narrative feeling—like a modern Raymond Chandler story, and that’s why it had to be set in Los Angeles.

We live in New York and feel outsiders in LA. We wanted to have a narrative flow, a story that moves like a Chandler book through different parts of town and different social classes. That was the backdrop that interested us when we wrote the screenplay. There are lots of references to Chandler novels. More than one book in our minds. I think the story about the rich old guy in Pasadena who sparks off the entire plot, is typical Chandler. In *The Big Sleep* it's the two daughters who set everything in motion, here it's the fake kidnapping."

The Big Lebowski (David Huddleston), in his wheelchair, recalls the equally paralyzed General Sternwood, while his wife Bunny and daughter Maude are reminiscent of the two Sternwood daughters, Vivian and Carmen. Bunny's maiden name is Knutsen, whereas the name of Eddie Mars's wife in the Howard Hawks film is Knudsen. (In-joke: Bunny comes from Minnesota.) Jackie Treehorn resembles the suave owners of nightclubs in Chandler. The private eye (Jon Polito) called Da Fino, who tails the Dude in a redundant episode, is a variation of the snoop in *The High Window*.

The novels of Raymond Chandler deal with all social classes in Los Angeles. But, like the eponymous character in *The Big Lebowski*, there is always a dominant all-powerful figure who serves as a catalyst. He represents Money. He is also present in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*. He is the man who has contributed to the construction of the city. He symbolizes the old order, and, at the end, he discovers it's all a sham.

The Coens also acknowledge their debt to *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Robert Altman's updating of the Chandler novel with Elliot Gould as Philip Marlowe, played as a laid-back, shambling slob, out of touch with the LA of the seventies, just as the Dude is alienated from the LA of the nineties. It is not too surprising that *The Long Goodbye* is the Coens' favorite Altman movie, although in the pre-postmodernist era of the seventies, it seemed to reduce Chandler to an elaborate Hollywood party game.

The Cowboy Stranger narrator (Sam Elliott) helped them to create a certain distance. "We always like those devices—narration, voice-over. Also it's a [Philip] Marlowe thing, since all the Chandler novels are told in the first-person narration. But it would be too corny just to have the Dude narrating."

The grizzled, rough-necked Sam Elliott, with his distinctive gruff voice and lanky physique, who had played Virgil Earp in *Tombstone* a few years back, seems to have wandered on to the wrong set from a western, bringing with him the tumbleweeds. But this is exactly the kind of incongruity that the Coens delight in and manage to carry off. However, the word "dude" is a cowboy's

pejorative description for someone from the East or a big city, not used to the ways of the West. In Howard Hawks's magisterial western *Rio Bravo* (1958), the alcoholic character, played by Dean Martin (whom Peter Gallagher takes off in *The Hudsucker Proxy* singing "Memories Are Made of This"), is called the Dude.

At the happy ending, the folksy Cowboy addresses the audience directly to camera, summing up the story (and the film). "Whelp, that about does her, wraps her all up. Things seem to have worked out pretty good for the Dude 'n Walter, and it was a purt good story, dontcha think? Made me laugh to beat the band. Parts, anyway. Course—I didn't like seein' Donny go. But then I happen to know there's a little Lebowski on the way. I guess that's the way the whole durned human comedy keeps perpetuatin' itself, down through the generations, westward the wagons, across the sands a time—aw, look at me, I'm ramblin' again. Wal, uh hope you folks enjoyed yourselves . . . Catch you further on down the trail."

XI

ODD ODYSSEY

“One of our favorite books is Homer’s The Odyssey, and one of our favorite movies is Sullivan’s Travels. Can’t you see the connection?”

74 *Separately Together*

THE COENS HAD MANY SUBJECTS floating around for years that have not as yet, or never will, come to fruition. Some ideas take root ages before they surface in a screenplay. *The Hudsucker Proxy* was written before *Blood Simple*, *The Big Lebowski* before *Fargo*. In 1987, nine years before *Fargo*, the brothers had the following exchange:

JOEL: “Did you hear about the guy in Connecticut who put his wife in the wood chipper?”

ETHAN: “Heh, heh, heh.”

JOEL: “The cops said that one good rainfall would have washed her away, and they never would have found her.”

ETHAN: “That was a good one.”

JOEL: “That was a good one.”

At about the same time, they explained that being suburban kids their imaginations were fired by empty American landscapes like those in Texas and Arizona in their first two films. “A movie about Minnesota people running around in snowsuits killing each other wouldn’t be any fun.”

For a while in the late 1980s, they talked about a number of other films they would like to make, imagined or otherwise. “We’ve been working on a screenplay about a barber in Northern California in the 1940s who wants to go into the dry-cleaning business,” they told journalists, perhaps seriously. They also expressed a desire to remake Stanley Kramer’s *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* “It’s a dream project we’ve talked about a lot. I think we could bring a new twist to that.” What possible “new twist” could they bring to the plot about an ostensibly liberal middle-class WASP couple coming to terms with their

daughter's wish to marry a black man? Perhaps they were considering introducing a kidnapping into it.

There was also another unlikely project about a Kim Philby-like figure, an idealistic British spy, who ends up in Moscow during the Cold War era. "It's so miserable it would have to be a comedy," the Coens remarked. More in the realm of the possible was a completed screenplay based on Elmore Leonard's novel *La Brava*, also involving a kidnapping. It would have been the first film adapted directly from someone else's work, before *To The White Sea* became a reality. Based on James Dickey's final novel, set during the Second World War after the bombing of Tokyo, the latter is about a B-29 tailgunner (Brad Pitt) shot down while flying over Japan, who is forced to embark on an epic journey across Asia to return home. The film would have virtually no dialogue.

Of the movie genres, most of which they have tackled, including the musical and the western, science fiction has no attraction for them. "We're not really sci-fi fans. We've never really thought of doing one of those. Something about space suits. It's not up our street."

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After *The Big Lebowski*, there was an unprecedented rupture. Ethan showed his independence by cowriting (with J. Todd Anderson) the screenplay of a quirky comedy called *The Naked Man*. It was the first feature directed by Anderson, the Coens' faithful storyboarder. Michael Rappaport portrays a guy who, as a nerdy child, had been bullied in the school playground. Thus he learns wrestling. As an adult, he becomes a chiropractor by day and a masked wrestler by night. When a pharmaceutical kingpin moves into his town to cause some real trouble, and his parents are murdered, he walks around town in his leotard, beating up and killing anyone who gets in his way to avenge their murder.

The film flopped justifiably, and Ethan did not stray into films alone again. However, he wrote a well-received book of short stories, *Gates of Eden*, which appeared in 1998. The collection surprised many people, mainly because, while established novelists and short-story writers have moved into films, moves in the other direction are very rare.

The dialogue-dominated stories, some of them short plays, fall roughly into two categories: those that revolve around a murder or a violent act, usually perpetrated in a bizarre manner, and those that have an autobiographical basis. The latter stories deal with a bittersweet Jewish childhood in Minneapolis, while

the former are closer to the Coens' screenplays. However, only the gruesome final scene of *Blood Simple* can compete in gruesomeness with the playlet called *Johnnie Ga-Botz*. A character called Johnnie asks Monk on the phone to kill someone for him, but "first I want you to cut off his dick . . . and then I want you to stick it up his ass . . . Then you say, 'Johnnie Ga-Botz wants to know how you like it' . . . He says, ya know, I don't like it, you shoot him inna fuckin' head."

There then follows a discussion as to the practicalities of the scheme, revolving around the problem of his victim either having passed out or died from the amputation, and not being able to receive the fatal message from Johnny. The conversation spirals on in a more and more convoluted manner, ending with an everyday chat between Johnnie's wife and a friend. An example of how Ethan is able to take extreme situations and treat them in a matter-of-fact manner, or transfer the humdrum into the fantastic.

In January 2008, *Almost an Evening*, three short plays by Ethan, were successfully staged off-Broadway. Ethan doing his own thing creatively helped the public to appreciate that the Coen brothers were not, in fact, joined at the hip. They now had different families and different sets of friends. "We spend all day together in the office," they commented. "So we don't exactly need to go out for a beer."

In May 1998, while the brothers were still writing their new film, Joel and Pedro, Ethan, Trish, and Buster packed themselves off to Dublin to stay in John Boorman's house while Frances was performing as Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Gate Theatre. Just over a year before, after she won her Oscar, Gate director Michael Colgan met Frances in New York and asked her to come over to Ireland to play Blanche, a role he felt she was particularly suited for. This was McDormand's second *Streetcar* on stage. In 1988, she played Stella, earning a Tony nomination for her performance in the Broadway production that featured Blythe Danner as Blanche and Aidan Quinn as Stanley.

"I'm really interested in the idea of Blanche as this woman whose only tools to get through life are feminine wiles," she said. "How limiting those tools end up being and how in the end, just as Stanley pushes her to the edge, she ends up destroying herself. Just technically, I have to deal with the fact that I'm not a moth, I'm not a butterfly, and that physically I'm not easy to lift and swing around the stage. So I think that this Blanche is going to be more of a survivor."

An intelligent actress like Frances McDormand, despite her Oscar-winning

performance in *Fargo*, needs the stage to show what she can really do, and she brought an unusual range and strength to Blanche DuBois, who came across as more of a victim of her own doing than of others. “There are always roles waiting in the theater for actresses—huge chunks of bloody red meat to get hold of, whereas in film there’s mostly just cocktail peanuts.”

Frances, therefore, was not waiting for another “chunk of bloody red meat” from Joel and Ethan. “The parts they write are all character roles with quirks to them. But they’re enthusiastic theater-goers and they have respect for the mystique of acting.” However, whenever she is mentioned, “Oscar-winner” always appears in parentheses after her name, so she specifically chose not to use it in the program notes for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. “My name’s long enough,” she explained.

BLANCHE: I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft—soft people have got to court the favor of hard ones, Stella. Have got to be seductive—put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and glow—make a little—temporary magic just in order to pay for—one night’s shelter!

A Streetcar Named Desire (Tennessee Williams)

75 *Ants in Their Pants of 2000*

“‘O Brother, Where Art Thou?’ is going to be the greatest tragedy ever made. The world will weep, humanity will sob,” says the movie director John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) in Preston Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels*. He tries to tell Veronica Lake that in a suffering world a director ought not to be making “Ants in Their Pants of 1941.” But she insists, “There’s nothing like a deep-dish movie for driving you out into the open.” The Coens, in agreement, have taken the portentous title from the 1941 movie, and made it into a comedy.

In *Sullivan’s Travels*, Sullivan is falsely accused of murder and finds himself in a chain gang in the South. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) and his two simple-minded companions, Pete (John Turturro) and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson), have already escaped from the chain gang at the beginning of the picture and continue to be one step ahead of the law throughout.

The key scene in *Sullivan’s Travels*, when the prisoners file into an old Baptist church to see a Mickey Mouse cartoon and Sullivan discovers that his destiny is to make people laugh, is almost replicated in *O Brother* but for a less significant purpose. Everett and Delmar are in a movie theater, when a line of chained men,

with much clanking of chains, file in and take up a row. Among them is Pete, who has been recaptured. He contacts his mates to warn them of an ambush the police have ready for them, thanks to Pete's spilling some beans to them about where they were heading.

Another reminder of *Sullivan's Travels* is the scene where a little boy of about eight years old helps the three cons escape the sheriff by picking them up in a car. He has wood blocks strapped to his feet so that he can reach the accelerator, brake, and clutch and sits on a Sears Roebuck catalogue to see over the dashboard. In the Sturges film, Sullivan, pretending to be a hobo and trying to escape his Hollywood minders following him in a trailer, is picked up by a thirteen-year-old boy driving a coupe convertible, which speeds away until it crashes into a haystack.

There are also elements from other Preston Sturges movies, particularly in the portrayal of the scalawag politicians. In *The Great McGinty* (1940), the hero is a tramp who becomes governor by initially ingratiating himself with the boss of a local political machine by voting forty times, at two dollars a time. Even more contiguous is *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944) with its political shenanigans in which Raymond Walburn, as the bombastic rascally incumbent mayor, and his dim-witted son, vie with Woodrow Truesmith (Eddie Bracken), the false hero, in the mayoral race. In *O Brother*, there are a number of Sturgesian politicians, such as Pappy O'Daniel, the governor, with his dim-witted son whom Pappy keeps hitting with his hat, and his opponent Homer Stokes, who turns out to be a member of the Klan.

Apart from the Sturges film, *O Brother* contrives to encapsulate every cons-on-the-run picture one has ever seen, especially Mervyn LeRoy's chilling *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), Southern period crime dramas such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1969), with its progenitors and successors, and hayseed sagas. The characters are a cross-section of mythical Deep South types: conniving politicians, a black blues singer, Ku Klux Klansmen, a radio DJ, a country prophet, Baptists, and a local-yokel posse complete with shotguns and hound dogs. But, yet again, the Coens' alchemy has worked.

EVERETT: How ya doin', boy? Name's Everett, and these two soggy sonsabitches are Pete and Delmar. Keep your fingers away from Pete's mouth—he ain't had nothin' to eat for the last thirteen years but prison food, gopher, and a little greasy horse.

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

76 Geeks Meet Greeks

But soft, what's this? The first title that appears in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* reads:

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story
Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending,
A wanderer, harried for years on end . . .

These are the opening lines of the *Odyssey* by Homer, upon which the Coens based the film. Or so they announce on the screenplay. It must have seemed their ultimate “postmodernist” joke. “Based upon the *Odyssey*” is putting it rather strongly, to say the least. Anyone other than the Coens might have put “suggested by Homer’s *Odyssey*” or “from an idea by Homer.”

But the two works do have enough in common to almost merit the attribution. The ancient Greek epic poem, the second work of western literature after the *Iliad*, is an exciting story—not written down to be read but to be recited to listening audiences, like the difference between a screenplay and a finished film. In fact, the *Odyssey* incorporates a lengthy flashback—during which Ulysses recounts his adventures while trying to return to his homeland of Ithaca and his wife Penelope. The Coens eschew Homer’s flashback technique for a straightforward narrative that recounts the adventures of Ulysses Everett McGill while trying to return to his home town of Versailles (pronounced Vur-Sallies), Mississippi, and his wife, Penny. Both works are picaresque, if that is not too anachronistic a term for the *Odyssey* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

At the moment of Ulysses’s return in disguise as a beggar, Penelope announces her intention to marry one of her suitors. When Everett returns, disguised as a bearded “old-timey” country and western singer, Penny is preparing to marry Vernon T. Waldrip (the Eddie Bracken role), a political agent. However, both heroes manage to prevent the marriage in the nick of time.

There are other parallels. Ulysses consults the blind prophet Tiresius, who tells him his fate; Everett and his two pals meet a blind black seer on a flatcar, who tells them, “You must travel a long and difficult road—a road fraught with peril, uh-huh, and pregnant with adventure. You shall see things wonderful to tell. You shall see a cow on the roof of a cottonhouse . . .” Like some of the miracles Homer’s Ulysses witnesses, the Coens’ Ulysses sees the cow at the end, but it is only taking refuge on a roof because of the flooding of the Tennessee Valley.

In addition, Pete is seduced by three women (“sigh-reens”) washing clothes in

the river, singing in unearthly voices. He then disappears, although Delmar believes he has been turned into a toad, because they find one hiding in his abandoned clothes. In the *Odyssey*, every traveler must beware of the Sirens, “who bewitch everybody who approaches them. There is no homecoming for the man who draws near them unawares and hears the Sirens’ voices.”

On the road, the three cons meet Big Dan Teague (John Goodman), a bible salesman, who wears an eye-patch. Big Dan robs them of the money they had gained from robbing a bank with “Baby Face” Nelson. He later appears in a Ku Klux Klan hood with only one eye-hole. He is, of course, a reflection of the dreaded Cyclops, the one-eyed giant, who eats a number of Ulysses’s men. Governor Menelaus “Pass the Biscuits, Pappy” O’Daniel might like to compare himself with Menelaus, “son of Atreus, favorite of the gods, leader of his people.”

“I read the *Odyssey* after I read the screenplay, and it was amazing to discover the connections between the two,” said George Clooney.

The Coens first approached thirty-eight-year-old George Clooney with the *O Brother* script while he was in Phoenix working on *Three Kings*. “I was nearing the end of a very tough five-month shoot, really ready to go home, and Joel and Ethan flew into Phoenix and handed me the script,” recalled Clooney. “They told me they’d written it with me in mind and asked me if I’d do it. I said yes without even reading the first page. They both started laughing and asked me if I wanted to read it before agreeing, but I told them that wouldn’t be necessary. I get about five scripts a week, and that’s after a large screening process by two agents and the studio. And out of those, I rarely get even one really good one.”

Clooney, who had only just ended his five-year run on NBC’s hit show, *ER*, in order to concentrate on his film career, was amazed that the Coens had thought of him.

When you first get here, you think they’re both going to direct at the same time. Then you discover that they don’t direct you a lot. They’ll come over and say, “Yeah, um, let’s do it again. Yeh, you know . . . Yeh.” They play dumb a little, but they let you figure it out, because the writing’s so good. In the morning you get the storyboard so you know how it’ll look. The script didn’t change since I first read it four months before we started shooting. They’re open to trying things and you can suggest things and they say, “Okay, you can try that,” but they’ve already covered all the bases. I recently asked my aunt Rosemary [Rosemary Clooney] why she is a better singer now than ever, and she said it’s because she doesn’t have to show off anymore. The Coen brothers don’t have to show off.

Clooney got to lip-sync a version of the folk standard “Man of Constant Sorrow,” which he and his fellow cons record as the Soggy Bottom Boys, and it becomes a hit throughout the region. Other singers who appear in the movie are Emmylou

Harris and bluegrass acts Ralph Stanley, Alison Krauss and Union Station, the Cox Family, and blues musician Chris Thomas King.

The role of Ulysses McGill cleverly plays upon Clooney's rather vainly handsome persona, while having him unshaven and dressed in hobo's clothes for most of the film. Even while on the run, he uses Dapper Dan pomade on his hair, for which he will not accept substitutes. "It didn't look like a one-horse town, but try getting a decent hair jelly," he complains. Everett also likes the sound of his own voice, speaking in an inflated one. It is not surprising, with his gift of the gab, to find that his crime was practicing law without a license.

In a way, he is the Moe to John Turturro and Tim Nelson's Larry and Curly, especially in the moments when they black up, or put on false beards and pretend to be the Soggy Bottom Boys, one of the episodes that is definitely not in Homer.

Filming of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* took place throughout Mississippi—from the Delta to Vicksburg, but mainly around Jackson—and was followed by studio work in Los Angeles. It was completed in October 1999.

When the Coens first talked to Roger Deakins about the movie, they explained how they wanted it to look "brown and dirty and golden like a period picture book of the Depression." But when Deakins was told that the film was being shot in Mississippi, he said that it was "one of the greenest parts of the States." So, to get the look the brothers were after, the whole movie was digitized in order to take the green out of it. "We gave it an ochre feel," said Deakins. "I kept having to say to them, 'Just imagine it'll be all yellow.'"

The production designer Dennis Gassner also attempted to give it the desaturated look of an old photograph of the period. "Because it's loosely based on the *Odyssey*, we discussed classicism in the South as being a definitive aspect," Gassner remarked. "A kind of metaphor, an illusion of antiquity. Classic images of the South taken to the extreme."

77 *Mississippi Burning*

The state of Mississippi, home of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Tennessee (sic!) Williams, Richard Wright, and Bessie Smith. The Coen brothers are preparing the opening shot of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. It is of a chain gang of black convicts, wearing faded striped uniforms, swinging picks in unison against rocks at the side of a road in the middle of the flat delta countryside. They

chant “Po’ Lazarus” as they work under the broiling noon sun.

A few miles from the location, scores of black extras are clustered in a tent in their striped uniforms and leg irons. Some are drinking Cokes, while others are sitting patiently as a make-up woman, a blonde girl in shorts, passes among them, smearing them with “sweat” and “dirt.” A few of them walk over to look at the storyboard titled “Po’ Lazarus Boys,” which has photos of all the convicts on cards. Then a signal is given for all the extras to get up and file out on to a bus that is to take them to the location. There is a great similarity between them and real convicts.

The men arrive at the location. It is on a levee on the Delta in about 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The sun is beating down. There is no need for a make-up person to add sweat to their bodies. The production managers have to try to keep two hundred people from dehydrating. There are little canopies around to protect many of the crew from the sun. Ethan and Joel are wearing straw hats and sunglasses. Joel is wearing a gray T-shirt and shorts. Sweat is staining their shirts. They look along the line of extras like prison warders. There is a man with a gun on a horse patrolling the chain gang. Joel briefly explains to the convicts what they’re going to do. The woman assistant director shouts, “Playback!” and the singing of “Po’ Lazarus” fills the air, as the extras swing their picks, mouthing the words. Joel watches impassively. Roger Deakins, in a black fedora, dollies along beside them on a special track built for the camera.

The assistant director shouts “Cut!” The extras are handed water bottles to slake their thirst. Then the water bottles are taken away from them, and they line up again to break rocks. Ethan grins to himself and strokes his ginger beard. He speaks rarely. The playback of the song as well as the sound of rocks being hammered starts up again. The picks swing in rhythm. There is no faking. They are really breaking rocks in the heat. Before the next take, Joel tells them, “The rhythm really has to be on.” “Okay, chain gang, one more time,” shouts the assistant director. Nobody believes the “one more time.” Suddenly, she notices that they are missing a convict. “There’s a hole in the line. We have an escapee,” she laughs. “Go without him for this take,” says Joel.

Everybody in the crew, including Joel and Ethan, is drinking a lot of water out of plastic cups. While a crane shot is being prepared, Joel sits down in the shade on his director’s chair, which is beside Ethan’s, both of which are marked with their names and the title of the movie. Ethan takes over the direction for a while or, at least, he is indicating to some of the extras where to move.

After another take, the assistant director shouts to the “prisoners,” “You can

sit down if you want. We'll bring you water." Ethan, Joel, and Roger Deakins watch the rushes on the monitor and laugh a lot. Joel, with his glasses, hat off and hair flowing, looks like a mad professor.

78 *Star Gazing*

The locations are spread out. The cockeyed caravan moves on. There are wheat fields on either side of the road on the way to the next location. Sunflowers stare up at the blue sky. The team arrives at the next location, a burnt-out forest area. A few trees have been brought in. The scene, about ten minutes into the film, takes place outside a lone farmhouse. Everett (George Clooney), Pete (John Turturro), and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson), chained together, are advancing on the farmhouse, which belongs to Pete's cousin, Wash Hogwallop. "If your cousin still runs this-here horse farm and has a forge and some shoein' impedimenta to restore our liberty of movement . . ." says Everett, before a rifle shot rings out. On the porch is a grimy-faced boy, about eight years old, in tattered overalls, holding a gun almost as big as he is. "Hold it rah chair!" he shouts. "You men from the bank? . . . Daddy told me I'm to shoot whosoever from the bank!" The trio convinces the boy, who turns out to be Wash Hogwallop's son, that they're not from the bank.

The team is gathered outside the farmhouse. They've been up since dawn appeared fresh and rosy-fingered. Ethan is wearing the same shirt as yesterday, or rather, it has the same pattern. Besides that, he has a neat haircut and trimmed beard. Joel's beard and hair are unkempt, but he has changed into a clean, white shirt. Clooney, wearing a brown cap, is extremely tanned, has a five o'clock shadow, a pencil mustache, and gray streaks in his hair. Turturro is shaven headed. Nelson, as slim, but a little shorter, has more hair.

They are sitting around talking and laughing with the Coens, waiting for the shot to be set up. They are called for the scene. Scene 12, take 1. The three cons walk toward the shack. Everett is explaining to the other two about the prophesy of the blind seer who told them: "You seek a great fortune, though it will not be the fortune you seek." Everett expounds: "Though the blind are reputed to possess sensitivities compensatin' for their lack of sight, even to the point of developing paranormal psychic powers. Now clearly, seein' the future would fall neatly into that ka-taggery . . ." But Clooney misses a line and apologizes. Joel pats his star on the back reassuringly. Clooney then goes over his lines again in a

huddle with Turturro and Nelson before the next take, while the make-up girl makes repairs. Ethan tells Clooney that he must talk like someone who really enjoys talking. "Yeh, yeh—got you," says Clooney. On take 2, Clooney dries after a few lines. "Sorry," he says. Turturro and Nelson nod sympathetically. They don't have such convoluted dialogue. Ethan is pacing up and down.

The three actors gather their chains together in order to advance on the farmhouse once more. They get through their dialogue without a hitch until the shot rings out and hits a bottle on a branch of a tree. After the fourth take, which seems to have met with Joel's satisfaction, Turturro asks for another one. Anyway, Deakins wasn't sure whether the bottle was in shot.

Joel is yawning. "Let's actually do a rehearsal in time. Play the scene with the boy. See how it feels." He has a word with the little shaven-haired boy in overalls. The kid's portly parents are sitting on a log, nervously watching their son. They are keeping cool by holding up small battery-driven fans to their faces. They're from Little Rock. The boy grins from ear to ear. He has a broad Arkansas accent. Joel shows him how to hold the gun to make it seem heavier. "Give it more weight. Not too much." Joel knows about guns.

After one rehearsal, in which everyone is word perfect, the boy gets begrimed by the make-up person for the first take. The boy is great. His parents are relieved.

A group of locals have gathered on a grassy knoll, many of them with cameras, to watch and ogle the short scene (part of a montage sequence) where the three cons come out of Templetons General Merchant and Gas Station, on the corner of a little crossroads town, just as a man in a boater hat emerges from his car and enters the store. Everett waits for the man to disappear into the store, signals to the others, and they pile into the man's car and drive off. There's a man sitting sleeping in a rocking chair on the porch, an archetypal image of the South.

Perhaps there would have been less interest if George Clooney had not been in it. Poor George has shaken as many hands as a campaigning politician since he arrived in this neck of the woods. He signs hundreds of autographs and poses with people for photographs. Obviously the star mystique has not diminished since the studio publicity machines stopped creating calculated images in the 1950s.

"I understand the interest," says Clooney. "I grew up in a small town in Kentucky where they shot a series called *Centennial*, and I followed Raymond Burr around everywhere he went. I know what it's like to see someone in person

who you've watched on television or seen in the movies, and I don't get upset when people approach me, because I did the same thing."

Now Clooney is at another location for another scene—one set in the boxcar of a freight train. While waiting for the call, Clooney is entertaining the onlookers by throwing a baseball to some members of the crew. "Gee, George Clooney playing ball!" He is wearing a black T-shirt and gray shorts. Now he is retiring to his trailer to escape the glare of the Mississippi sun. The small crowd of onlookers, who don't seem to mind the repetitious process of filmmaking and the waiting in the sun, stay put. Their patience is rewarded. Clooney emerges smiling from his trailer in his wide-striped prison garb. He is joined by John Turturro and Tim Blake Nelson, who are similarly attired. They are then chained together. Clooney is the first to climb into the boxcar, pulling his two companions after him. He is faced with six silent hobos. Clooney then speaks the first lines of the film, "Say, uh, any a you boys smithies?"

Odysseus's tale was finished. Held in the spell of his words they all remained still and silent throughout the shadowy hall, till at last Alcinous turned to his guest and said: "Odysseus, now that you have set foot on the bronze floor of my house I feel assured that you will reach your home without any further wanderings from your course, though you have suffered much."

The Odyssey (Homer)

79 *O Brothers, Where Art Thou?*

The circus has left town. Tumbling tumbleweeds are once again rolling down the quiet streets of Jackson, Mississippi. In some of the houses, there are photographs of citizens taken with their arms around George Clooney, the most recognizable person among the film people. The team has moved on to Los Angeles to shoot some interiors. Then Roderick Jaynes and Tricia Cooke will be holed up intimately in the dark editing room for days on end. Carter Burwell will compose music while watching the flickering images on the screen. Finally, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* will be "in the can" and ready to be exploited. After a short break with their families, the Coen brothers will come together again and face the rounds of publicity, answering a range of questions, most of them meaningless and banal. And they will go through the motions with good humor and courtesy, though they are still not comfortable with the ritualistic exposure to the press. *O Brother* is only their eighth movie in sixteen years. As a result,

every new Coen release is an event among thinking filmgoers. Then the critics will descend on it, and the public will have a chance to judge it for themselves. It will be shown around the world before turning up on the shelves of video stores, on television, on DVDs, and streaming online.

XII JAMES M. COEN

“This movie is heavily influenced by Cain’s work. It’s his kind of story.”

80 *Down the Drainerino*

IN 1996, DAVID PEOPLES WROTE a draft of a script based on James Dickey’s novel *To The White Sea*. Peoples, with his wife Janet, had written *Blade Runner*, *Unforgiven*, and *Twelve Monkeys*, the latter starring Brad Pitt. In this new script Pitt was cast in the role of a lone pilot, shot down over Tokyo, who has to make his way north through enemy territory. To go undetected and to survive (to eat and find shelter), he must kill, which he does with proficient brutality.

The Coens read the Peoples’ version, and they retained the spectacular opening, its structure, and its end. In addition, they kept most of the dialogue verbatim from the novel. So, if the project had not been aborted, *To The White Sea* would have been the first Coen brothers film to come directly from another source, as distinct from obliquely. It would not be the last.

The film was all set to shoot in October 2000, a number of distributors were in place, yet Jeremy Thomas, the producer, could not come up with the fifty-five million dollars required, even with the names of Brad Pitt and the Coen brothers in tow. So, after a few disagreements between the directors and the producer, the plug was pulled.

“It was really a budget thing at the end of the day,” Joel explained. “Namely, the film required more money than the studio was willing to put forth. It wasn’t anybody’s fault, it was just that a certain amount of money was available to make the movie, and a certain amount was necessary to actually make it properly, and it came to a point where we had to either radically reconceive how we were going to shoot the movie or move on to something else. As a result, that one went down the old drainerino.”

We can only imagine, from the screenplay, and no storyboard, what *To The White Sea* might have been like. On the surface, it seems that the Coens might have been miscast. There is almost no dialogue, no humor, and not much room for referential byplay, their greatest strengths. The book, a meditation on war,

death, and survival, is written as an unbroken interior monologue, but the Coens took the decision not to have a voice-over narration, hoping to tell the story in purely visual terms. Therefore, it would essentially have been a silent film because the hero, Muldrow, never speaks to anyone, and before anyone can speak to him, he kills them. The problem may have arisen that because we would be unable to hear Muldrow's thoughts, he might have seemed nothing more than a violent cipher. All this is in the novel, but mitigated by the hero's own thoughts and reasoning. Although the script follows the novel slavishly, the Coens have added one scene—Muldrow has to kill one of his dogs to avoid getting frostbite—and they have omitted many of the less gory bits. Nevertheless, heads are blown off with bullets or cut off with swords; throats are slit. This might have turned out to be the Coens' first action drama rather than a poetic drama, veering far more toward *Rambo* than *Fargo*.

81 *Small Town, Hollywood*

The screenplay of what was variously called *The Barber Movie*, *Untitled Barber Project*, and *Untitled Barber Movie*, which the Coens had been working on sporadically for a number of years, was finally completed in Dublin in 1998, while Frances was relying "on the kindness of strangers" in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *The Barber Project* actually dated back to 1994 when the Coens were shooting *The Hudsucker Proxy*. While filming the scene in the barbershop, the Coens saw a prop poster of "1940s haircuts" and began developing a story about the barber who cut the hair in the poster. Slowly, it grew into a film noir, paraphernalia included.

The Barber Picture was all ready to go in 1999 but the best laid plans went agley when George Clooney suddenly became free to shoot *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Now that the brothers had taken the step of using big box-office stars like Clooney, they were beginning to be dictated to by the rules of Hollywood.

It therefore took over two years before *The Man Who Wasn't There* (the same title as a 1983 picture that bombed) started principal photography on June 26, 2000, on location at the Lincoln Heights Jail in Los Angeles, which doubled for the one in Santa Rosa where the story is set.

Alfred Hitchcock shot much of *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) in Santa Rosa, a small California town about fifty miles north of San Francisco. In his film, the "Merry Widow" murderer, Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten), descended on the town, bringing with him his cynical big-city ways. In fact, Billy Bob Thornton

(who played the Coens' Cainsian antihero Ed Crane) prepared himself for the role by watching Cotten in the Hitchcock film, and picked up some of his impassivity.

Perhaps it was not coincidental either that Raymond Chandler (who co-wrote Hitchcock's *Strangers On A Train* in 1951) made Santa Rosa the hometown of his fictional private eye Philip Marlowe. In *The Long Goodbye* (1953) Marlowe calls himself "a native son, born in Santa Rosa." So, given the antecedents, it was natural, if not predictable, that *The Man Who Wasn't There*, echoing the title of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, another Hitchcock film, would be set there.

The Hollywood steakhouse Musso and Frank's became the Santa Rosa diner where the taciturn antihero Ed Crane meets the slickly loquacious defense attorney Freddy Riedenschneider. Not much needed to be done to the decor of the restaurant, as its wood-paneled walls and plush banquettes already evoked the 1940s in which the film noir unfolds. Also shot in Los Angeles, in mid-Wilshire Boulevard, was the Santa Rosa hotel, referred to as the Fleabag hotel.

The exteriors of the Crane house were filmed in a neighborhood known as Bungalow Heaven in Pasadena. The modest type of all-American houses, called Craftsman bungalows, were built in southern California in the early part of the twentieth century. According to production designer Dennis Gassner, working on his fourth Coen movie, "The Craftsman bungalow was pretty much standard in the middle-class California community of the period. We chose one of the houses with a slightly lower roof line than the others in the vicinity because it gave us a slight suppression of space in keeping with the barber's economic situation. The sense that the space inside the house was a little pinched served to underline the characters' emotional state as well—that was another reason we chose it."

But they found more of the small-town atmosphere they were looking for in the city of Orange, Orange County, where several exteriors were shot. Physical preparations for the one long day of filming there took more than two weeks. Traffic lanes in the main road had to be repainted with different stripes; street signs had to be replaced, repainted, or re-lettered; storefront signs had to be installed; and storefront windows had to be filled with period merchandise to enable Orange to pass for Santa Rosa in 1949.

82 *The Actors' Cut*

As the actors Billy Bob Thornton and Michael Badalucco (playing Crane's

brother-in-law and owner of the barber shop) spend much of the film cutting hair, it was essential that they did so convincingly. “I trained with a real barber,” Badalucco explained. “He taught me how to cut and style. He let me try it out and give a few haircuts—and he was there to straighten out what I did.” Thornton also trained at a real barbershop, Dirty Dan’s Clip Joint, and practiced his newly learned technique on some of Dirty Dan’s customers.

Ethan recalls, “It was very entertaining watching Billy Bob and Michael give haircuts during the takes. The sad thing is that Billy Bob actually thinks he’s good at it. He’s like one of those guys who trains to be a boxer for a boxing movie and then thinks he can beat people up. It was quite funny seeing extras tense up in the chair as Billy Bob got ready to work on them. I must say, we saw some pretty gruesome haircuts.”

“Me, I don’t talk much. I just cut the hair,” says Billy Bob as Ed Crane, the embodiment of Ivan Turgenev’s *Superfluous Man*, and an illustration of Thoreau’s phrase that most people lead lives of “quiet desperation.” In the tradition of Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), the film is narrated by a dead man, though at the end we find out that his story has been written for a lurid men’s magazine. “They’re paying five cents a word, so you’ll pardon me if sometimes I’ve told you more than you wanted to know . . .”

The Coens are aware of the irony of a taciturn character being a loquacious and omniscient narrator, and of the oxymoronic monosyllabic barber being a “silent partner” in the barber shop with his gabby brother-in-law. Later, Ed Crane again becomes a silent partner in “a new business called dry-cleaning” with the oily Creighton Tolliver (another hammy eye-rolling performance from Jon Polito). Tolliver needs \$10,000 to open a chain of dry-cleaning establishments. Although Tolliver is as obviously phony as the toupee he wears, Ed unhesitatingly offers to raise the money for him. He does this by blackmailing the married Big Dave (the *Sopranos*’ James Gandolfini), who is having an affair with Ed’s wife (Frances McDormand). But the plan unravels and Ed ends up killing Big Dave, a murder that immediately raises the suspicions of his wife.

Crane is curiously inconsistent. While even the most gullible small-town hick would probably not have fallen for Tolliver’s scam, Crane is conscious of what he sees as a homosexual come-on made by the “pansy” Tolliver, who is stretched out on his hotel bed. “Was that a pass?” he asks Tolliver. “You’re way out of line.” Yet this oh-so-subtle “pass” is imperceptible to even the most sophisticated spectator. In addition, Billy Bob Thornton, in contrast to his performance as a simpleton in *Sling Blade* (1996), seems to convey, by his looks and gestures “A

Man Who Was All There,” an outsider, certainly, but an astute observer of others, not someone who would resort to blackmail.

“Billy Bob is just soulful,” says Ethan Coen. “If we had been making this movie in 1949, when it’s set, Montgomery Clift would have been the guy to do it. He has that same quality, to be passive without disappearing.” If that were the case, the Coens would have been extraordinarily prescient because, in 1949, Clift had made only three films and was gradually developing his screen persona. “I used Montgomery Clift as a model for the way Ed moves and looks,” Thornton insisted. “All that quiet desperation. You can’t take your eyes off him.”

Actually, the Coens seemed to be asking for a performance that combined the blank naivete of Peter Sellers’s Chauncey Gardiner in *Being There* with that of a hubristic figure like Montgomery Clift’s George Eastman in *A Place In The Sun* (1951).

Frances McDormand, who hadn’t worked with her husband and brother-in-law for five years (since *Fargo*), was cast as Doris, Ed’s adulterous wife. “I tend to get more specific direction from Ethan now,” she confessed. “Because of my intimate relationship with Joel, it’s easier for me to get direction from Ethan.” Doris has all the attributes of the noir femme fatale. She is sensual; she is independent; she has a good job; she’s married to a dull husband; and she’s carrying on an affair with her boss. But, unlike the femme fatale archetype Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), Doris, despite McDormand’s sterling efforts, disappears from the screen far too quickly to leave a strong impression.

As Hollywood in the 1940s generally divided women into “the Mother” and “the Whore,” the former is doubtlessly represented by Big Dave’s wife, Ann Nirdlinger (Katherine Borowitz), who is almost as non-communicative as Ed. Her only moment comes when she visits Ed, but instead of raising the noir stakes by telling Ed that she knows he killed her husband, she tells him that she believes Big Dave has been abducted by aliens. This is later taken up by Ed, who seems to half believe it himself.

In the sub-plot, echoing *Lolita*, Crane becomes more and more obsessed by Birdy Abundas (Scarlett Johansson), a teenage girl who plays the piano reasonably well. He is particularly moved by her playing of the slow movement of Beethoven’s Pathetique Sonata (No. 8 in C minor, Op. 13), which becomes a non-diegetic musical motif. But, despite these plangent tones, the Coens continually undercut Ed’s tragedy by making him look ridiculous. He is slightly mocked for thinking that Birdy is a great pianist as he knows nothing about

classical music:

ED: That was pretty . . . Did you make that up?

BIRDY: Oh, no. That was written by Mr. Ludwig van Beethoven.

ED: That was quite something.

BIRDY: He wrote some beautiful piano sonatas.

ED: That was something.

Ed then takes her to a music teacher with the fanciful name of Jacques Carcanogues (Adam Alexi-Malle) with its echo of “carcinogenic.” He is one of those absurd, stereotypical, affected Frenchmen—he has a goatee and a knotted foulard, pops pills, and smokes with a long cigarette holder—who reappears slightly altered in *Intolerable Cruelty* in the person of the effete Baron. When Ed asks how Birdy did at the audition, Carcanogues, making “a Gallic moue” according to the script, replies: “Ze girl? . . . She seems like a very nice girl. She plays, monsieur, like a very nice girl. Ztinks. Very nice girl. However, ztinks.”

After the meeting, Birdy, in a completely uncharacteristic and arbitrary gesture that turns her into a *fille fatale* and that reveals that this film could not have been made in Hollywood in the 1940s, tries to give Ed a blow job while he’s driving. This leads to a fatal accident and the beginning of the end for Ed. He is charged with the murder of Birdy and executed for the killing he didn’t do rather than for the one of which he was acquitted—a direct steal from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

And indeed, what does it matter? Isn’t it all the same whatever I write? In sight of death the last earthly cares vanish. I feel I have grown calm; I am becoming simpler, clearer. Too late I’ve gained sense! . . . It’s a strange thing! I have grown calm—certainly, and at the same time . . . I’m full of dread. Yes, I’m full of dread. Half hanging over the silent, yawning abyss, I shudder, turn away, with greedy intentness gaze at everything about me. Every object is doubly precious to me. I cannot gaze enough at my poor, cheerless room, saying farewell to each spot on my walls. Take your fill for the last time, my eyes. Life is retreating; slowly and smoothly she is flying away from me, as the shore flies from the eyes of one at sea.

Diary of a Superfluous Man (Ivan Turgenev) But now, all the disconnected things seem to hook up. That’s the funny thing about going away, knowing the date you’re gonna die. Well, it’s like pulling away from the

maze. While you’re in the maze you go through willy-nilly, turning where you think you have to turn, banging into dead ends, one thing after another. But get some distance on it, and all those twists and turns, why, they’re the shape of your life. It’s hard to explain. But seeing it whole gives you some peace . . . I don’t know what waits for me, beyond the earth and sky. But I’m not afraid to go . . . Maybe the things I don’t understand will be clearer there, like when a fog blows away . . .

The Man Who Wasn’t There

If proof were needed that the Coens were Cainsians *avant la lettre*, then *The Man Who Wasn't There* was it. Right from their very first film, *Blood Simple*, they marked out the territory they meant to explore, putting the works of James M. Cain at its centre. Branching out from that was their love of the 1940s Hollywood film noir.

As in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, there are two murders in *The Man Who Wasn't There* leading to two trials in which a smart-aleck defense attorney cynically parades his contempt for truth. The Coen version is Freddy Riedenschneider who, told the truth that would prove his client's innocence, prefers, instead, to cook up a defense based on the German physicist Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, or, as Riedenschneider puts it: "Reasonable doubt. I'm sayin' sometimes, the more you look, the less you really know. It's a fact. A proved fact. In a way, it's the only fact there is. This heinie even wrote it out in numbers." ("The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa." Heisenberg, 1927.) Riedenschneider: "They got this guy, in Germany. Fritz something-or-other. Or is it? Maybe it's Werner . . ." The Coens could not have been unconscious of the nod toward the film noir work of Fritz Lang, which is underlined by cinematographer Roger Deakins's high-contrast Langian light. (One recalls the bullets piercing a door, creating intense shafts of light in a darkened room in *Blood Simple*, a visual quote from Lang's *Ministry of Fear*.) The film's central idea, that one impulsive action can set in motion a web of consequences that ultimately ensnares the hero, was a constant theme of Lang's, as it was dear to Cain.

"This movie is heavily influenced by Cain's work. It's his kind of story," Joel explained. Ethan chipped in: "The hero is Ed Crane [rhymes with Cain], who is the kind of guy you'd call a schlub. But when you think about it Cain's stories nearly always had as their heroes schlubs—losers, guys who were involved in rather dreary and banal existences—as the protagonist. Cain was interested in people's workaday lives and what they did for a living: he wrote about guys who worked as insurance salesmen, or in banks, or building bridges. We took that as a cue."

In case this wasn't clear to audiences, there are a number of wink-wink nudge-nudge elements. For example, two of the characters' names—Ann Nirdlinger and Diedrickson, the County Examiner—reflect, respectively, those of Phyllis Nirdlinger in Cain's novel *Double Indemnity* and Phyllis Dietrichson as played by Barbara Stanwyck in Billy Wilder's 1944 film version scripted by Raymond

Chandler. Further noir references are a hotel called the Hobert Arms, which is also the name of the apartment building where Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) lives in *The Big Sleep* (1946). The name of the lawyer, Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub, a near anagram of schlub), who defends both the Cranes, is a homage to the character Erwin Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe), the criminal mastermind, who has just been released from prison in John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950).

Another direct reference is to the classic noir *Out of the Past* (1947), directed by Jacques Tourneur, only the second of two screenplays (co)written by James M. Cain. The homage comes in a scene when one character offers another a cigarette and the other responds by holding up the smoke he is already enjoying. A more easily identifiable homage (to the drowning of Shelley Winters in *The Night of the Hunter*) is the shot of Tolliver, the "pansy" (an epithet that is used five times), floating underwater—having been drowned by Big Dave, with his eyes wide open and his hairpiece attached at only one corner, the rest of it waving free.

Tossed into the referential brew are science fiction movies that evoked the mindset of 1950s suburbia. "You know, the flying saucers and the pod people," according to Joel. "We were interested in the whole idea of post-war anxiety, you know, atom-bombing anxiety and the existential dread you see in '50s movies."

This emerges when, after the murder of her husband, Ann Nirdlinger claims to have seen flying saucers, which then become a belated and half-hearted visual motif—a hubcap turns into a flying saucer in a dream, echoing the use of the hula hoop in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, another Coens' film set in the 1950s.

It was raining that night, so I didn't go out. I lit a fire and sat there, trying to figure out where I was at. I knew where I was at, of course. I was standing right on the deep end, looking over the edge, and I kept telling myself to get out of there, and get quick, and never come back. But that was what I kept telling myself. What I was doing was peeping over that edge, and all the time I was trying to pull away from it, there was something in me that kept edging a little closer, trying to get a better look. So he's in it 'til the bitter end, but the biggest problem, bigger even than Keyes, is that he and Phyllis will have to trust one another completely. They can't afford to question each other's loyalty or motives at all, because: That's all it takes, one drop of fear, to curdle love into hate.

Double Indemnity (James M. Cain)

84 Black and White Blues

When they shot *Blood Simple*, the brothers had asked Barry Sonnenfeld to create

a black and white feel while using the obligatory color. Just as Jean Renoir spent most of his career waiting to be able to use color—he wanted to film *Rules of the Game* in Technicolor in 1939, but it was too expensive—the Coens had only earned the right to make a film in black and white at an advanced stage in their career. This time, they decided to ask Roger Deakins to shoot *The Man Who Wasn't There* in monochrome to evoke the world of film noir less circuitously than before.

“I love black and white,” Deakins commented. “It can be very expressive. For example, color can sometimes makes things too pretty. This way we don’t have the distraction of color, and we can shape the visuals to make them look the way we want them to appear. Shooting in black and white implies a better handling of the light sources and a different approach to lighting *per se* . . . We aimed for less contrast and used fewer but larger light sources . . . The light kind of wraps around everything and gives figures and objects a certain fullness of dimension. I thought about using more direct light. But I rejected the idea because we weren’t trying to make an old movie—we were shooting a new one. I wanted *The Man Who Wasn’t There* to reflect the era in which we’re working, so I used the newer technology. Black and white film stock hasn’t changed in forty years. In today’s color negative stock, the grain is finer than it’s ever been, so you’re able to achieve a great deal of beauty shooting on color negative and printing in black and white.”

For Joel, “Black and white is evocative in ways for a story like this that color photography isn’t. That it stands out these days as being unusual is unfortunate. I think it’s a shame that people don’t do more black and white movies. Or that it’s not a natural choice you can make depending upon the subject matter. Now almost everything is done in color. Black and white is a whole different kind of photography that nobody uses any more and when you do, there’s a chance you can get stigmatized for doing it. It’s seen as being ‘arty’ and it becomes an issue.”

But contrary to these remarks, because comparatively few mainstream films have been shot in black and white over the last forty or so years, Deakins’s “arty” photography does distract by drawing attention to itself. Deakins’s statement that “we weren’t trying to make an old movie—we were shooting a new one” can also be disputed. It seems that “making an old movie” was precisely what the Coens were trying to do or to make it (apart from the blow job) as they would have done had they been making movies in the 1940s.

Before his work on *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, Deakins sought inspiration from film noir classics, especially *This Gun for Hire* (1942) and *The Blue Dahlia*

(1946), the first adapted from the Graham Greene novel *A Gun for Sale*, and the latter being the only screenplay Raymond Chandler wrote directly for the screen. So the Coens again joined hands in an unbroken circle of dead writers. But in *Intolerable Cruelty*, their next film, this circle would be broken with disastrous results.

XIII

INTOLERABLE HOLLYWOOD BOWEL SYNDROME

“For us, it’s trying something a little bit different but I wouldn’t call it unique exactly.”

85 *Selling Out?*

It was the question on everyone’s lips, but until veteran critic Ronald Bergan rose to his feet, no one dared ask it. Had the Coen brothers, darlings of the art house, the American avant-garde types who made *Fargo* and *Barton Fink*, sold out?

When the man making the charge is their biographer, something was clearly up. The press conference at the Venice Film Festival for their film *Intolerable Cruelty* had just been treated to the George Clooney and Catherine Zeta-Jones celebrity gush-in, when Bergan silenced the room.

Both stars had been asked for tips on dental hygiene and whether they had ever experienced “true love.” To top it all, an Italian comedian working for prime minister Silvio Berlusconi’s main TV channel, who had previously stalked Clooney dressed as his pet pig Max, whipped on a white veil and proposed to the heartthrob.

The actor reluctantly played along with the shotgun cod marriage, complete with fake priest, giving his new bride a lingering kiss.

“I hate to raise the tone,” Bergan said, “but won’t this film alienate the brothers’ diehard fans?”

The Coens were not there to answer for themselves. They are remaking the Ealing warhorse *The Ladykillers*, in what many see as another bid to buy back box office credibility from the studios, who weren’t impressed by the figures for their last film, *The Man Who Wasn’t There*. It played well with festival juries, but not in Peoria, Illinois—and middle America is what matters to the moneymen.

But Clooney was indignant on their behalf. “Is that a question or an insult . . . I’ll take it as an insult,” he replied.

“If you mean that by having me they have gone commercial, I think you are mistaken. My last two films, *Solaris* and *Confession*, bombed. *Out of Sight* lost money, and *Three Kings* barely made its money back. I don’t know what a commercial film is any more.”

But despite his pleadings, the bird was out of its cage. In making *Intolerable Cruelty*, a slapstick—if wickedly enjoyable—comedy about an unscrupulous divorce lawyer and a man-eating divorcee, these auteurs had taken the studio shilling.

This was further proof to Bergan and the old guard of critics who cherish the art house flame, that having publicly stated it was favoring commercial films, Venice was now in thrall to Hollywood, just like Cannes.

Guardian, September 9, 2003

Although *The Man Who Wasn’t There* won the Best Director award at Cannes, it failed to make much of an impact at the box office. Yet, surely it could not have been commercial considerations alone that drove the once such independently minded and often audacious filmmakers to drive unswervingly into the mainstream with their next two movies? It may be significant that the Coens had made only seven films in thirteen years, from *Blood Simple* (1984) to *The Big Lebowski* (1997). But from 2000, they made four films in three years, from *O Brother* to *The Ladykillers*, by common consent their weakest period.

Unlike every previous Coen brothers movie, neither *Intolerable Cruelty* nor *The Ladykillers* was originally conceived by them. The former was initially written by forty-one-year-old Robert Ramsey and forty-year-old Matthew Stone, helped by veteran TV writer John Romano. The latter was a remake of Alexander McKendrick’s 1955 Ealing comedy starring Alec Guinness and written by William Rose. Had the Coens turned Barton Finks?

The provenance of both films should have been a warning sign, albeit for different reasons: the first because of the writers’ previous mediocre comedies—*Destiny Turns on the Radio* (1995), *Life* (1999), and *Big Trouble* (2002)—and *The Ladykillers* because the Coens would be tampering with one of the best loved (though far from the best) of British comedies.

86 *Playing Screwball*

The Coens plainly saw *Intolerable Cruelty* as a witty and caustic modern version

of screwball comedy, a genre that flourished in the 1930s, and died, for obvious reasons, when America entered the Second World War. Like most genres, it came out of particular social conditions, in this case the Depression, and against the background of the Production Code. It was pleasurable for audiences during the Depression to see the rich as “empty-headed nitwits,” as the derelict-turned-butler (William Powell) calls them in *My Man Godfrey* (1936).

Screwball comedies were a very skillful blend of sophistication and slapstick. When two people fell in love, they did not simply surrender to their feelings; they battled it out, often employing hideous tricks on each other, until finally, after running out of inventions, they simply fell into each other’s arms. The barbed dialogue was delivered in a rapid-fire way, often overlapping. The hero and heroine lived by their wits alone. In theory, all these ingredients might appear to be in the Coens’ pudding, but the proof was to be in the eating.

You can’t really blame the Coens for not having at their disposal anything approaching the talents of the great stars of screwball—Cary Grant, William Powell, Myrna Loy, Melvyn Douglas, Carole Lombard, Claudette Colbert, Katharine Hepburn, Jean Arthur, and Irene Dunne—all of whom had a timing and elegance that only long grooming and schooling in the idiom could have achieved. And these actors were surrounded by brilliant character actors—Edward Everett Horton, Eugene Pallette, Ralph Bellamy, Eric Blore, Una Merkel, Helen Broderick, Billie Burke, and so on.

Here, instead, the Coens had the misnamed Cedric the Entertainer as Gus Petch, a private eye whose catchphrase, “I’ll nail his ass,” is repeated ad nauseum. Following up on their “funny frog” piano teacher in *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, another effete European is introduced with the fanciful name of Heinz, Baron Krauss Von Espy (Jonathan Hadary), who brings his lap dog into the witness box with him (one of the film’s many unconvincing moments). There is also Paul Adelstein as Clooney’s sidekick Wrigley, who has one puerile trait—he cries at weddings—and an asthmatic hitman called Wheezy Joe (Irwin Keyes), the subject of the movie’s best gag (a gag that was repeated with only a slight variation in *The Ladykillers*).

One of the weddings is a completely arbitrary Scottish one, which seems only dragged in to get Clooney into a kilt, as if that were a joke in itself. The “big desk” scene, so effective in *Barton Fink* and *The Big Lebowski*, has been reduced, for no narrative reason, to a wheezing man (another asthmatic joke), Clooney’s boss, who is kept alive with multiple tubes. There is the obligatory (in this case half-

hearted) Coenian reference to film noir with a divorce-seeking couple by the name of Gutman, the name of the fat man in Dashiell Hammett's 1930 novel *The Maltese Falcon* and its three film versions.

No matter how irritating and crazy the characters were in the classic screwball comedies, they were, on the whole, likeable. But Miles and Marylin (note the switch from Marilyn) are unsympathetic people, as are all the other characters. Fair enough if this were to be a sharp satire on serial divorce and the shark-infested LA legal system, although the superficial lives of Lala Land's denizens is such an extremely well-worn target that the bull's-eye is no longer visible. But the film is not certain what tone to take. The 1960s kitsch credit titles and the central relationship suggest the sort of Doris Day-Rock Hudson romantic comedy the Coens professed to like while growing up. Thus, in an attempt to give Miles a heart, in one of the movie's most Hollywooden moments, he is converted to an ethical approach to his job in a speech he gives as president of N.O.M.A.N., the National Organization of Matrimonial Attorneys, Nationwide. Their slogan is "Let N.O.M.A.N. put asunder . . .", one of the many obvious jokes that allow one to hear the sound of crickets chirping in the audience. Many of the other verbal jokes are less than scintillating. Could Joel and Ethan have written or approved the following exchange?

WRIGLEY: Uh, I'll just have a, um, salad, please. Um, baby field greens.

WAITRESS: What did you call me?

WRIGLEY: Uh, no, I-I . . . I-I didn't call you anything.

WAITRESS: You want a salad?

WRIGLEY: Yeah. Do you . . . Do you have a, uh, green salad?

WAITRESS: What the fuck color would it be?

87 A “Glam” Thing

Intolerable Cruelty, the first of the Coens' star-driven Hollywood movies, was produced by Brian Grazer, responsible for such broad commercial comedy hits as *Parenthood*, *The Nutty Professor*, and *Liar Liar*. According to Grazer: "Joel and Ethan are the coolest, purest filmmakers in modern movies. Here you have a romantic comedy with these mainstream movie stars. And then you add the Coens' irreverence—and it's their irreverence injected into this romance that makes the whole journey very sexy and very unpredictable."

As Ethan acknowledged, “It’s more of a ‘glam’ thing than certainly we’ve ever done before. Like a lot of screwball comedies, it’s about rich people, so not just in terms of photography but in terms of set dressing, wardrobe, every aspect, it’s all very high-end.” Another difference was, as Joel pointed out, that “In almost every other movie we’ve ever done, we’ve had particular actors in mind when we wrote the parts. Since we didn’t write this originally as something we were going to do ourselves, that wasn’t the case here.”

But when George Clooney was cast, the character of the glib, self-loving LA divorce lawyer Miles Massey became a descendant of the smooth-talking conman Everett McGill in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* “Everett was all about hair,” observed Clooney. “Miles—he’s all about teeth. So he’s always getting his teeth cleaned and checking his teeth—which made me laugh a lot.” At least one person found the repetitious preening funny.

Catherine Zeta-Jones, in the usual production notes, said, “George brings a fantastic energy, a suave attitude that is completely irresistible. And more than anything, I think the chemistry between me and George worked from the beginning.” Yet because the two characters, Massey and Marylin Rexroth, about-to-be ex-wife of Massey’s client Rex Rexroth (Edward Herrmann)—cue joke “Down Rex”—are written and played on one note of cold self-absorption, there can be little interaction that would create chemistry.

Except for George Clooney and Billy Bob Thornton, who has an extended cameo, none of the cast had worked with the Coens before, but most of the production team was familiar including Roger Deakins (Director of Photography), Mary Zophres (Costume Designer), Carter Burwell (Music) and, of course, Roderick Jaynes (Editor), although the tolerance of the poor old bloke was beginning to wear thin. His press notes read: “Mr. Jaynes lives in Hove, Sussex, with his chow, Otto. He remains widely admired in the film industry for his impeccable grooming and is the world’s foremost collector of Margaret Thatcher nudes, many of them drawn from life.”

REX REXROTH: Have you sat before her before?

MILES MASSEY: No. No, the judge sits first. Then we sit.

REX REXROTH: Well, have you sat after her before?

WRIGLEY: Sat after her before? You mean, have we argued before her before?

MILES MASSEY: The judge sits in judgment. The counsel argues before the judge.

REX REXROTH: So, have you argued before her before?

WRIGLEY: Before her before, or before she sat before?

REX REXROTH: Before her before. I said, before her before.

WRIGLEY: No, you said before she sat before.

REX REXROTH: I did at first, but . . .
MILES MASSEY: Look, don't argue.
REX REXROTH: I'm not. I'm . . .
WRIGLEY: No, you don't argue. We argue.
MILES MASSEY: Counsel argues.
WRIGLEY: You appear.
MILES MASSEY: The judge sits.
WRIGLEY: Then you sit.
MILES MASSEY: Or you stand in contempt.
WRIGLEY: And then we argue.
MILES MASSEY: The counsel argues.
REX REXROTH: Which you've done before.
MILES MASSEY: Which we've done before.
REX REXROTH: Ah.
WRIGLEY: But not before her.

Intolerable Cruelty

LUCY (Irene Dunne): You're all confused, aren't you?

JERRY (Cary Grant): Aren't you?

LUCY: No.

JERRY: Well you should be, because you're wrong about things being different because they're not the same. Things are different except in a different way. You're still the same, only I've been a fool . . . but I'm not now.

LUCY: Oh.

JERRY: So long as I'm different don't you think that . . . well maybe things could be the same again . . . only a little different, huh?

The Awful Truth (1937)

If you had an aunt who would give you a million dollars if she liked you and you knew she wouldn't like you if she found a leopard in your apartment, what would you do?

Katharine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)

88 *From Ealing to Hollywood*

Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore

“The Raven” (Edgar Allan Poe)

There is little doubt that if Roderick Jaynes had existed he would have advised his employers against remaking *The Ladykillers*, a film he might very well have worked on. (It is clear that the Coens knew and admired *The Ladykillers* from way back because in their first feature, *Blood Simple*, they borrowed the line “Who looks stupid now?” uttered by one of the crooks before he accidentally shoots himself.) But whether the film remakers like it or not, and the Coens have

said they felt no loyalty to the original, it is inevitable that comparisons will always be made.

The last of the Ealing comedies, *The Ladykillers* still had, as late as 1955, ten years after World War II, much to say about the indomitable spirit of the British when faced with adversity. This was embodied in the central character of Mrs. Wilberforce, a little old lady (played with ineffable charm by seventy-seven-year-old Katie Johnson) who lives in an old Victorian house near St. Pancras station in London. She is known at the local police station as a woman given to fantasies so they never take her stories seriously. In fact, they only pretend to investigate her complaints.

One day, she takes in as a lodger a “professor” (played impeccably by Alec Guinness, giving an impersonation of the beloved British character actor Alastair Sim), who tells her that he will be using his rooms to rehearse chamber music with four fellow musicians. In fact they are plotting a large robbery and intend to use the house as their operation base. The oddly assorted ensemble consists of “One-Round,” a dumb heavyweight boxer (Danny Green), an ex-army officer (Cecil Parker), a teddy boy (Peter Sellers), and a ruthless foreign racketeer (Herbert Lom).

When Mrs. Wilberforce finds out what they have been up to, the group plot to kill her, but they end up eliminating each other instead. The old lady, finding herself in possession of a vast amount of money, goes along to the local police station to report it, but the policeman (Jack Warner, known to most viewers as television’s *Dixon of Dock Green*), who is used to her fantasies, sends her on her way. The film ends as she walks home, wondering what to do with the money, and absent-mindedly dropping a pound note to a pavement artist who has drawn Winston Churchill. The film celebrates the victory of gentility over criminality.

The plot of the remake follows the original to a certain degree, though it is relocated to small-town Mississippi (a return to the *O Brother* site), where the cons want to rob a riverboat casino. Although ostensibly set in contemporary USA, the film has a dated air, not only with the character of Tom Hanks, dressed like Mark Twain, quoting Poe and speaking in a highfalutin style, but due to the small-town setting and mores that could easily have existed in the Depression. (Hanks claimed never to have seen the original film and Alec Guinness’s superior performance. He even made the error, at the Cannes press conference, of saying “most people have forgotten this little black-and-white [sic] British movie.”) The only sign of updating is the stream of “fucks” and “motherfuckers” that flow from the mouth of Gawain MacSam (Marlon Wayans), the equivalent

of the Sellers role.

What invalidates much of the transmogrification is that instead of being sweet and frail—which makes the irony of Mrs. Wilberforce innocently triumphing over five thugs more acute—Mrs. Munson (played by sixty-six-year-old former Dallas schoolteacher Irma P. Hall in a way that sometimes recalls the black maid in Tom and Jerry cartoons) is hefty and seemingly invulnerable, and manages to slap Gawain around. Nor is she particularly known by the police as a fantasist, therefore the fact that they don't bother to investigate her claim about the robbery makes no sense.

Our suspension of disbelief is sorely tested by the notion that this no-nonsense Baptist black woman, disingenuous as she's made out to be, would have tolerated such a crew in her house, explosions apart, for more than one day. The Coens also play a cruel joke on the character by making her donate five dollars regularly to Bob Jones University in South Carolina, an institution that did not allow blacks to attend until recent years, and continues to forbid blacks and whites to date each other. (Incidentally, Irma Hall was involved in another “unmerciful disaster.” A short while after shooting was completed, in January 2004, she was injured in a car accident in Chicago and required extensive post-surgery rehabilitation.)

Another cause for cynicism is that the many, often irrelevant, interpolations of gospel music in *The Ladykillers*, either diegetic (as performed in the church) or non-diegetic (on the soundtrack) seem a blatant grab for an ancillary market, a follow-up to the soundtrack album of folk music from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which sold seven million copies and became one of the bestselling soundtracks ever.

The Coens' Ministry of Silly Names worked overtime on this one. Hanks is called Goldthwait Higginson Dorr III, PhD, which the old lady pronounces “fudd.” (“You mean like Elmer?” “Elmer, ma’am?” “Elmer . . . Elmer Fudd.”) There is also explosive expert Garth Pancake (a Vietnam vet), a character as flat as his name; his girlfriend Mountain Girl (from D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance?*), whom Hanks refers to as “Mountain Water” (a joke?), and Lump, a moronic football player. The fifth member of the quintet is known merely as The General, a monosyllabic South Vietnamese killer, who spends most of the film swallowing a lit cigarette whenever the smoke-hating old lady appears on the scene. His longest speech is when Hanks asks him for a piece of Buddhist wisdom on their dilemma. He replies, “Float like a leaf on the river of life—and kill the old lady.”

GAWAIN MACSAM: You brought your bitch to the Waffle Hut? Fuck you and the Swiss Miss!

WAITRESS: Have you all decided?

PROFESSOR G.H. DORR: Madam, we must have waffles! We must all have waffles forthwith! We must think, and we must all have waffles, and think each and every one of us to the best of his ability.

The Ladykillers

89 *Touchstone*

It is meat and drink to me to see a clown: by my troth, we that have good wits have much to answer for; we shall be flouting; we cannot hold.

As You Like It (Act V, Scene I)

A few years earlier, the brothers had written a draft of a script based on another (later) British film, the fey *Swingin' London* heist movie *Gambit* (1966), which starred Michael Caine and Shirley MacLaine. Ben Kingsley and Jennifer Aniston were mooted for the roles, and Burr Steers (director of the under-*Graduate* movie, *Igby Goes Down*) was to direct. After Steers had done a rewrite of the script, he left the project due to, in Hollywoodspeak, “creative differences.”

So the Coens turned back to *The Ladykillers*. Touchstone Pictures had been trying to get it made since 1995, when Max D. Adams (co-writer of *Excess Baggage*) was hired to work on an adaptation. Then, in 1998, Robert Harling (*Steel Magnolias*, *The First Wives Club*) worked on an adaptation. When the Coen brothers finally signed on in early 2002, however, they started over from scratch, not using any of the previous drafts.

They originally wrote the script as screenwriters-for-hire for their erstwhile collaborator Barry Sonnenfeld, once a brilliant cinematographer now known as a “hip A1 director.” He had been signed on to make it after *Men in Black II*. Perhaps this may explain the juvenile level at which the script was pitched.

To give some sense of this level one has only to consider the ailment that Garth Pancake (or “crepe”) has been lumbered with—IBS or Irritable Bowel Syndrome, which creates a desperate need, at such awkward moments as during a heist, for him literally to run to the nearest lavatory. When there is an explosion in the tunnel under the casino, Gawain asks someone, “Did you fart?” one of many such non-Wildean gems. Other stale gags include the cutting to a picture of the late Mr. Munson, with the expression on it changing in reaction to events on screen.

There is further laziness in the script not only in the almost exact replication of the best joke in *Intolerable Cruelty*, but in accepting that river barges would conveniently pass under the bridge just at the moment one needs to dispose of a body. (In the original film, the frequency of goods trains is much more acceptable.)

The group pretends to be rehearsing Renaissance music or, as the professor says, “Why, ma’am, we are practiced in the delicate music of the Cinquecento and the Ro-co-co,” but all their instruments are winds, and the first piece they pretend to play (they put a record on the phonograph) is the Minuetto from Luigi Boccherini’s String Quintet in E major Op. 11 No. 5, the same piece that Alec Guinness and his crew continued to practice in the first film. When Mrs. Munson invites her church lady friends around for tea to listen to the quintet perform, a dilemma is created. The professor squirms out of it by saying that they cannot possibly play as a quintet as the fifth member is absent. The ladies accept this and, instead, the professor entertains them with a recitation from Poe’s “To Helen.” But when the fifth member, Gawain, appears in the parlor, some further comic business seems in the offing to get them out of the scrape. However, nothing is made of the tight situation, which is expediently dropped. (The Poe connection continues when a raven flies up and perches on a gargoyle. When the bird flies away, it knocks the statue’s head off, killing Dorr.)

Unlike almost every Coen film prior to *Intolerable Cruelty*, *The Ladykillers* lacks any visual tour de force. One imaginative moment, though hardly very original, is a football game as seen, subjectively, from inside Lump’s helmet. Apparently, according to a stunt coordinator, “Roger Deakins went in there with a delicate—and very expensive—hand-held camera. We were worried about Roger. We had twenty-one huge, burly guys who are used to crashing into each other. After a few rehearsals you could see he was enjoying the heck out of it. It’s not football to its truest form, but it was so unique because the whole thing is done in the helmet.” Sadly, much of this remake of *The Ladykillers* could have been dreamed up by Lump inside his helmet. If *National Lampoon’s Lady Killers* had been released at the same time as it was scheduled to do, it might have been difficult not to confuse the two, although the plots were different.

The Ladykillers set a precedent in the Coens’ oeuvre because finally they shared both the producing and directing credits, something they could have done from the start of their joint career. Perhaps they will eventually credit themselves with the editing at the long overdue death of Roderick Jaynes. It was

hoped that they might also regain the inspiration that once set them apart from most of the hack directors who, with both eyes on the box-office, are fighting for recognition in the Hollywood morass.

XIV

BLOOD COMPLEX

*"This is the closest we'll come to an action movie.
The most violent movie we've ever made."*

90 *An American in Paris*

AFTER TWO MISFIRED LIGHT COMEDIES, and before the brothers switched to a dark piece of storytelling, *i.e.* *No Country For Old Men*, they were among twenty-two directors contributing to the omnibus movie *Paris Je T'Aime*. It consisted of eighteen five-minute shorts, each set in a different district of Paris, which, given the title, were ostensibly supposed to be a paean to the City of Light. Like most omnibus movies, it was a mixture of the good, the bad, and the ugly. The Coen's wry tale was definitely one of the good.

It takes place in the Tuileries metro station, though it could have been at any station. On one of the platforms sits a timid American tourist (Steve Buscemi), waiting impatiently for his train and reading a guidebook to Paris. He has a bagful of tourist trinkets. There are very few people around. A little boy, passing him, peppers the man with a peashooter. Then he notices a young couple (Axel Kiener and Julie Bataille) having a row on the platform opposite. Although the guidebook advises him to avoid eye contact in the Paris metro (a Coen invention), he finds himself staring at them. The boy, seeing this, begins to berate the man, whom he claims desires his girlfriend. The man, probably not understanding French but understanding the tense situation, can only make conciliatory facial expressions. He is relieved when a train arrives, hoping the couple will take it. But as the train leaves, the boy is still standing opposite while the girl (in a swift cut) is sitting beside him. In order to make her boyfriend jealous, she gives the man a long, lingering kiss. This prompts the boy to cross the train line and beat up the man, emptying the contents of his bag, including many postcards of the Mona Lisa, all over him. The young couple walk off arm in

arm, having made up.

According to Ethan, “We took some of the requirements given for the shorts, such as featuring Parisian landmarks and describing the city as being for lovers, and twisted them around, not thinking it would actually be approved.”

The menacing atmosphere of the nearly empty station is well caught by cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel, replacing Deakins temporarily, with an effective use of a zoom. But the strength of the short piece is in the melancholy, rubber-faced Buscemi’s wordless performance, giving him another chance in his fourth Coen movie to show off his bizarre skills.

One could argue that the short mocks the naïve American tourist, with his kitschy souvenirs and Mona Lisa cards, his eyes glued to a none-too-accurate guidebook. On the other hand, it is a somewhat xenophobic depiction of Parisians seen through the eyes of an American abroad. In fact, this was the only film by the Coens to be shot outside North America. After the characters in *Paris Je T’Aime*, Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) in *No Country For Old Men* became the next character in a Coen brothers movie to set foot outside of the United States when he crosses into Mexico. Actually, there are not too many foreigners in the Coens’ movies. Among the few are the murderous Greek husband in *Blood Simple*, the three German anarchists in *The Big Lebowski*, and a few (mostly dead) Mexicans in *No Country For Old Men*, as well as the psychopathic hit man (nationality unknown) in the same film.

91 Book vs. Movie

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

“Sailing to Byzantium” (W. B. Yeats)

No Country For Old Men could be seen as the completion of a “murder” trilogy after *Blood Simple* and *Fargo*, all three movies featuring a cold-blooded killer who does not seem quite human.

Although there is a dark underside to most of their films, notwithstanding the

genre, there is nothing covert in *No Country For Old Men*. Irredeemable actions are exposed to the light immediately. *Intolerable Cruelty* could have been a suitable title. As it was, *No Country For Old Men* was the title of the 2005 novel by author Cormac McCarthy, which the Coens adapted.

As another departure from their effective original screenplay policy, *No Country For Old Men* was the first straight adaptation of a novel by the Coens, leaving aside their unacknowledged inspiration by specific novels by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James L. Cain, and various pulp detective novels. There were also their palpable references to classic film noir and screwball comedy, not forgetting their forgettable Americanization of *The Ladykillers* and their updated loose version of Homer's *Odyssey* that runs as a seam through *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

After the producer Scott Rudin (known mainly for his work with Wes Anderson, almost the antithesis of the Coens) bought the film rights to McCarthy's novel, he approached the brothers to adapt it for the screen. But they were busy at the time (early 2000), vainly attempting to get *To The White Sea* off the ground. The screenplay for *To The White Sea*, faithful to the James Dickey novel, was the first indication that they were ready to transmute a novel into a film. But it took seven years and three more movies after *To The White Sea* was aborted before they got around to *No Country For Old Men*. Rudin, who had waited patiently, produced the movie. He also went on to produce *True Grit* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*.

There is always a difference between an original scripted film and an adaptation from a novel. Despite an acceptance that they are two different and separate art forms, the temptation to compare one to the other always exists. As Dudley Andrew has written, comparing Jean Renoir's *Day in the Country* to the Guy Maupassant story, "No matter how we judge the process or success of the film, its 'being' owes something of the tale that was its inspiration and potentially its measure."

However, it is fruitless to itemize the similarities and differences between the Coens' film and the McCarthy novel, as the majority of audiences might not have read the book. Suffice it to say that, without being a picturalization, the Coens' script was as faithful to their source material as possible, and *No Country For Old Men* is one of those rare films that satisfied most admirers of the literary source material.

Describing the writing process, Ethan remarked, "One of us types into the computer while the other holds the spine of the book open flat." Nevertheless,

some pruning was necessary, and many of the monologues in the book by the sheriff Ed Tom Bell (played by Tommy Lee Jones in the movie) were astutely changed into dialogues. In fact, there is a moment when the sheriff is asked, after one of his illustrative tales (monologue in the novel), “Why are you telling me that, Sheriff?” He replies, “I don’t know. My mind wanders.”

According to Kelly Macdonald, who plays Carla Jean, the wife of the fugitive Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin): “The ending of the book is different. She kind of falls apart. In the film she’s been through so much and she can’t lose any more. It’s just she’s got this quiet acceptance of it.”

The Coens liked the “pitiless quality” of the novel and identified with the way it played with genre conventions, as they had done in many of their works. “That was familiar, congenial to us; we’re naturally attracted to subverting genre,” remarked Joel. “We liked the fact that the bad guys never really follow through on formula expectations.” He also described the McCarthy novel as “unlike his other novels . . . it is much pulpier.”

Ethan was attracted by the book’s “unforgiving landscape and characters but is also about finding some kind of beauty without being sentimental.”

What did McCarthy think of the movie? According to Joel, “We were actually sitting in a screening room with him when he saw it . . . and I heard him chuckle a couple of times, so I took that as a seal of approval, I don’t know, maybe presumptuously.”

She kept on, kept on. Finally told me, said: I don’t like the way this country is headed. I want my granddaughter to be able to have an abortion. And I said well mam I don’t think you got any worries about the way the country is headed. The way I see it goin I don’t have much doubt but what she’ll be able to have an abortion. I’m goin to say that not only will she be able to have an abortion, she’ll be able to have you put to sleep. Which pretty much ended the conversation.

No Country For Old Men (Cormac McCarthy)

92 Deep in the Heart of Texas

The Miramax Films and Paramount coproduction was shot mostly in New Mexico, in and around Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Texas. The U.S.-Mexico border-crossing bridge was actually a freeway overpass in Las Vegas. By coincidence, filming in Texas took place not far from that of Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*, a similarly toned Best Picture nominee that lost out to *No Country For Old Men*.

In advance of shooting, cinematographer Roger Deakins saw that “the big challenge” of his ninth collaboration with the Coen brothers was “making it very realistic, to match the story . . . I’m imagining doing it very edgy and dark, and quite sparse. Not so stylized. Everything’s storyboarded before we start shooting. In *No Country For Old Men*, there’s maybe only a dozen shots that are not in the final film. It’s that order of planning. And we only shot 250,000 feet, whereas most productions of that size might shoot 700,000 or a million feet of film. It’s quite precise, the way Ethan and Joel approach everything. . . . We never use a zoom. The famous coin-tossing scene between Chigurh and the old gas station clerk is a good example; the camera tracks in so slowly that the audience isn’t even aware of the move.”

93 A Bad Haircut

In the novel, Anton Chigurh, a psychopathic hitman, is described as being in his thirties, with eyes as “blue as lapis . . . Like wet stones.” For the movie, the Coens created a character “who could have come from Mars.” His background and nationality are never mentioned, though he speaks with a light Spanish accent, due to the casting of Javier Bardem. When Cormac McCarthy visited the set, the actors inquired about Chigurh’s background and if there was any symbolic significance of his name. McCarthy simply replied cryptically, “I just thought it was a cool name.”

When the Coens approached Bardem about playing Chigurh, he replied “I don’t drive. I speak bad English. And I hate violence.” With their own inner logic, they replied, “That’s why we called you.” Without hesitation, Bardem took the role, principally because he wanted to work with the Coens.

Although Bardem was recognized on the arts cinema circuit, mainly in outrageous Spanish films directed by Bigas Luna and Pedro Almodovar, and for his extraordinary immobile performance as a quadriplegic in *The Sea Inside* (2004), which won the Oscar for the Best Foreign Film, he was not well known to the general public. Speaking in an incomprehensible English accent, Bardem had just completed the role of a sadistic priest during the Spanish inquisition in Milos Forman’s screwball tragedy *Goya’s Ghosts* (2006), one of the few real villains he had played.

The Coens obviously saw something in him that convinced them that he was right for the role. Their perspicacity paid off, as Bardem won the Best Supporting Oscar for the film, his accent having greatly improved.

Much of the impact of the character came from Chigurh's haircut, the most noted male haircut in cinema since the lack of one by Yul Brynner in *The King and I*. We first see it from the back as the handcuffed Chigurh is bundled into a police car. Then we see his face—both menacing and comical, reminiscent of a guest villain in the *Batman* TV series—framed by a shoulder-length Mod haircut of the sixties and a seventies-type haircut sported by journalist Carl Bernstein.

Apparently the Coens got the idea for the hairstyle from a 1979 photo (the year the picture is set) in a book owned by Tommy Lee Jones of a man sitting in the bar of a brothel with a very similar hairstyle and clothes to those worn by Chigurh in the film. The “strange and unsettling” hairdo was designed by Oscar-winning hairstylist Paul LeBlanc. When Bardem first saw what it looked like on him, he told the Coens that it would prevent him from “getting laid for three months.”

94 *There Will Be Blood*

Over the 122 bloody minutes of *No Country For Old Men*, Chigurh kills around a dozen people, approximately one every ten minutes. Ironically, two of the most significant murders take place off screen. Llewelyn Moss, the Vietnam vet who flees with two million dollars in drug money that he finds in a field in Texas, pursued relentlessly by Chigurh, is killed off-screen by Mexican gangsters. David Denby of *The New Yorker* in an otherwise positive review criticized the way the Coens “disposed” of Llewelyn Moss. “The Coens, however faithful to the book,” he wrote, “cannot be forgiven for disposing of Llewelyn so casually. After watching this foolhardy but physically gifted and decent guy escape so many traps, we have a great deal invested in him emotionally, and yet he’s eliminated, off-camera, by some unknown Mexicans. He doesn’t get the dignity of a death scene.”

Carla Jean’s death by the hitman is also not seen. We only know of her murder when Chigurh leaves the house, checking the soles of his boots for blood. This is a reminder of the earlier scene in a hotel room after Chigurh kills Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson), a cocky bounty hunter, when he places his feet up on the bed and coolly continues a telephone conversation as the blood spreads across the floor.

On the much-discussed violence in the film, Joel thought it “very important to the story . . . We couldn’t conceive it, sort of soft-pedaling that in the movie, and really doing a thing resembling the book . . . It’s about a character confronting a

very arbitrary, violent, brutal world, and you have to see that.” Moreover, the Coens thought, “That stuff is such fun to do. Javier would come in by the end of the movie, rub his hands together and say, ‘OK, who am I killing today?’ It’s fun to figure out how to choreograph it, how to shoot it, how to engage audiences watching it.”

As always, there is a thin line in the depiction of violence between glorifying it and condemning it. However, audiences used to a “wages of sin” payoff never get the satisfaction of seeing the bad guy get his comeuppance. Chigurh seems immortal as he trundles off, last seen after a car accident, with his bleeding arm in a makeshift sling made from a shirt he buys from a young boy.

95 *The Evil That Men Do*

No Country For Old Men brings to mind the brutal films of Sam Peckinpah, notably *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*. The Coens acknowledged similarities between their movie and those by Peckinpah. “Hard men in the southwest shooting each other—that’s definitely Sam Peckinpah’s thing. We were aware of those similarities, certainly,” said Ethan.

Like Peckinpah’s films, and unlike the Coens’ previous pictures, humor is in short supply in *No Country For Old Men*, unless one counts an underlying black humor in some the dialogue, and a certain quirkiness in the cast of redneck characters who pop up in an underpopulated and harsh rural Texas, the antithesis of a Norman Rockwell cozy view of America.

Of all the characters, Carla Jean, as Llewelyn Moss’s hapless wife, played with an impeccable Texas accent by Scottish actress Kelly Macdonald, is the only one who merits our sympathy and with whom some identification can be made. We instinctively warm to her mainly because we yearn to care about someone.

Nevertheless, it is the sheriff with whom the audience is invited to identify. Craggy-faced Tommy Lee Jones had made a living by playing pugnacious, oddball characters living beyond the borders of respectability. Here he is a laconic, world-weary observer of the cat-and-mouse game being played in which he feels “overmatched.” It is the sheriff, on the trail of Chigurh and Moss, and on the point of retirement, whose voice is heard at the beginning, indicating that it is his story he is narrating. He is the old man who realizes that this is no country in which to live. He laments the increasing violence in a region where he, like his father and grandfather before him, has risen to the office of sheriff, and bemoans the fact that “God has not entered my life.” Hard to warm to such a negative

character.

Despite the cold-hearted, “pulpy” nature of the film, the Coens cleverly manipulated the three principal male characters, who, though being linked in the fatalistic plot, are never seen in the same frame. The movie also manages to mix two American film genres, the film noir and the western, though it would be three years later that the Coens would tackle their first full-blooded western in *True Grit*.

96 Brothers Triumphans

No Country For Old Men was nominated for eight Academy Awards, winning four: Best Picture, Best Director(s), Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Supporting Actor (Javier Bardem). It was only the second time in Oscar history that two directors shared the award, following Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins for *West Side Story*, almost fifty years before. It was the Coens’ most triumphant Oscar night yet, after they had won two Academy Awards—Best Actress and Best Screenplay—for *Fargo*.

On receiving the statuette, Joel said, “Ethan and I have been making stories with movie cameras since we were kids . . . Honestly, what we do now doesn’t feel that much different from what we were doing then. We’re very thankful to all of you out there for continuing to let us play in our corner of the sandbox.”

Javier Bardem, who had almost equal screen time with his fellow actors but was nevertheless given a Supporting Actor award, became the first Spanish actor to win an Oscar. “Thank you to the Coens for being crazy enough to think I could do that and put one of the most horrible hair cuts in history on my head,” Bardem said in his acceptance speech. Then in Spanish, he dedicated the award to Spain and to his mother, the Spanish movie and television actress Pilar Bardem, who accompanied him to the ceremony. “Mama, this is for you. This is for your grandparents and your parents, Rafael and Matilde [also actors]; this is for the performers of Spain who like you have brought dignity and pride to our profession. This is for Spain and this is for all of you.”

“There’s this boy I sent to the electric chair on my testimony. He killed a fourteen-year-old girl. The newspapers described it as a crime of passion, but he told me there weren’t nothin’ passionate about it. Said he’d been fixin’ to kill someone for as long as he could remember. Said if I let him out of there, he’d kill somebody again. Said he was goin’ to hell.

“Reckoned he’d be there in about fifteen minutes.”

The opening narration by Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones)

XV

A COMEDY OF ERRORS

“It is our version of a Tony Scott/Jason Bourne kind of movie, without the explosions.”

97 *Renoir or Ceylan?*

WALKING ALMOST UNCHANGED FROM THE previous chapter, directly from the set of *No Country For Old Men*, is Josh Brolin, in cowboy hat and boots, mustache and sideburns. Here he finds himself incongruously at an art cinema showing two movies, Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game* and Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Climates*. While he puzzles about which movie to see, he asks the ticket clerk, a geekish-looking guy, which he recommends. The man tells him that they are both excellent. Brolin asks a few more questions. Do they have “them words up there to help follow the story along?” He is assured the movies are subtitled. “Is there any nudity?” “Partial.” “Is there any livestock in them?” Brolin is told that there are rabbits in the Renoir. Eventually, Brolin opts to see the Ceylan, probably because he was told that it was a love story.

After the movie, Brolin comes out looking a little puzzled, obviously wanting to speak to the ticket clerk about the movie. But he has gone off, being replaced by a woman. Brolin seems disappointed. “Tell him I enjoyed that picture. There’s a hellava lot of truth in it.”

This amusing sketch was the Coens’ contribution to *To Each His Own Cinema* (*Chacun son cinéma*), a collection of thirty-four short films, each three minutes in length, by thirty-six acclaimed directors, commissioned for the sixtieth anniversary of the Cannes Film Festival with the subtitle “a declaration of love to the big screen.” The title in English ignores the fact that Jane Campion was among the directors, albeit the only female.

The portrait of a relatively uneducated man confronted for the first time with two art films, one a French classic and the other a critically acclaimed

contemporary Turkish one, is a balancing act between patronizing and affectionate. Again confounding expectations, the directors show the cowboy having enjoyed the Ceylan film, instead of reacting like a philistine.

Perhaps the message being that art films are more accessible to general audiences than is thought, if only they were more widely available. However, there are two easy, unconvincing points scored. The cowboy has difficulty pronouncing the title *La Règle du Jeu*, when asking the ticket clerk what it was, although the English title is displayed in large letters on the theater's marquee. It also seems unlikely that he would not have known the word *subtitle*, instead of having to ask if the film had "them words up there to help follow the story along" for the sake of a joke.

The sketch was released a month before *No Country For Old Men* boosted the career of the relatively unknown Brolin, son of tough-guy TV star Jim Brolin (and stepson of Barbra Streisand). Previously, the Coens had written one of their playful, parodic, self-deprecating articles in *Esquire* magazine (September 24, 2007). "We had waltzed through eleven films before our own first misfire. Our movie version of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men* had Tommy Lee Jones in place—no mistake there—as a crusty West Texas sheriff on the trail of a bad man to be played by four-time-Goya-winning Spanish sex symbol Javier Bardem. And to round out the cast we hired—we thought—rugged everyman Jim Brolin as Llewelyn Moss, the aging Vietnam vet caught in the middle.

"Well, there were some red faces on the set the first day of shooting when Jim Brolin's son Josh showed up to play the part. Crossed wires, misunderstanding—who knows what kind of snafu—had resulted in our casting office offering the part to an actor who was patently thirty years too young. Talk about a boo-boo. In retrospect, this explained William Morris agent Michael Cooper's surprise on hearing we wanted his client for the coveted role. Too late now, though—the contracts were all signed. Well, that's show business. You roll with the punches. You make it work. How could Josh Brolin plausibly be a Vietnam vet? Simple: set the story in 1980 instead of the present day. A quick huddle with production designer Jess Gonchor and, bingo, we're a period picture. An offer goes out to Shia LaBeouf to replace Tommy Lee Jones as Brolin's (now young) counterpart. Shia passes, okay, we stick with Tommy Lee, and we make the best of a big age difference. You make it work. Turns out the Brolin kid is not bad. Still, Jim Brolin. It could have been great."

Proudly sitting on their Oscars after the acclaim that greeted the dark doings of *No Country For Old Men*, considered by many critics a “return to form,” the Coens decided to lighten up again with a comedy. In fact, wearing the two masks of comedy and tragedy at the same time, they had written parts of the screenplay of *Burn After Reading* while they were also writing their adaptation of *No Country For Old Men*, which may account for some of the “life is cheap” attitude of the latter rubbing off on the former.

Burn After Reading was the Coens’ first original solo feature-film screenplay since *The Man Who Wasn’t There*. The characters were written with George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Frances McDormand, John Malkovich, and Richard Jenkins in mind (Tilda Swinton was cast later), prompted by the Coens’ decision to include them in a “fun story.” There is little doubt that the Coens and their top-grade pet cast had fun making the movie. If one judges by the healthy box-office returns, much of that fun was shared by audiences.

Another plus was that most of the picture was shot around Brooklyn Heights, which permitted the Coens to stay in New York City to be with their families. Other scenes were filmed in New Jersey, Westchester County, New York, and Washington, D.C., particularly in the Georgetown neighborhood.

Apart from the two short movies, *Burn After Reading* was the first Coen brothers film not to use Roger Deakins as cinematographer since *Miller’s Crossing*. Emmanuel Lubezki, the forty-four-year-old Mexican-born cinematographer, who had already been Oscar-nominated four times, stepped in for one Coen picture, before Deakins returned for the next two.

The Coens’ decision not to use the eye-catching cinematography of Deakins for *Burn After Reading* was to try to create a different aesthetic from many of their previous films. What they wanted for *Burn After Reading* was the rather flat, functional photography of the seventies spy thriller.

Joel said they intended to create a spy movie because “we hadn’t done one before.” The Coens, celebrated for their genre-bending ways, had tackled screwball and black comedy, gangster movies and film noir, with only a slight nod to the musical in *The Big Lebowski*, science fiction in *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, and the western in *No Country For Old Men*.

Burn After Reading looks back to the light-hearted Cold War spy dramas of the sixties like *The Man From U*N*C*L*E* and blacker conspiracy movies of the seventies such as Alan J. Pakula’s *The Parallax View* and Sydney Pollack’s *Three Days of the Condor*. Less obvious was their citing of Otto Preminger’s Washington political drama *Advise and Consent* as an influence and Jerry

Goldsmith's percussive music for John Frankenheimer's nuclear-bomb-paranoid *Seven Days in May* (1964) as a starting point for Carter Burwell's score. Joel said they wanted the score to be "something big and bombastic, something important sounding but absolutely meaningless."

Yet *Burn After Reading* is closer to the broad spy spoofs of the eighties like *Top Secret* and *Spies Like Us*, sometimes edging dangerously close to Austin Powers. Perhaps the Billy Wilder of *One, Two, Three* might have been the best model. Despite some attempts at contemporary relevance, and except for the constant stream of "fucks" and the Clooney character's crude sex-machine chair—a woman sits on it and a dildo pops up into her vagina—it could have been made decades ago.

Joel explained that the sex chair was inspired by a contraption he once saw made by a movie grip and another displayed at the Museum of Sex in New York City. The Coens offered to take Clooney to the museum to show it to him. But "George said, 'That's all I need is to be seen coming out of the Museum of Sex with you guys.'"

99 A Bad Haircut 2

Following Bardem's risible mop in *No Country For Old Men* came Brad Pitt's faux hawk cut with streaky dyed blonde highlights. It is a comic touch that helps describe the character of Chad Feldheimer, the knuckle-headed, gum-chewing personal trainer at Hardbodies Fitness Center, dancing to tunes on his iPod, and sucking like a baby on a bottle of energy drink.

Constantly wearing a tight t-shirt, shorts, and sneakers, Chad is forced at one stage to wear an ugly, incongruous, over-sized suit, making him look like a young boy dressed in his father's clothes. Costume designer Mary Zophres, attempting to make everyone compete for a "worst-dressed" award, has Pitt's character winning hands down from top to bottom.

The hairstyles of the rest of the cast also leave much to be desired. McDormand as Linda Litzke, Pitt's ditzy coworker, being dumb, predictably has dyed blonde hair. Clooney as Harry Pfarrer, a sleazy, adulterous Treasury Department employee, has close-cropped grey hair and beard, while Malkovich, as Osborne Cox, a combustible former CIA analyst now writing his memoirs, has his head completely shaven. Swinton, underused as Malkovich's pediatrician wife who doesn't seem to like children and is carrying on with Clooney behind both their spouses' backs, has vermillion hair.

One can imagine—with the help of many comments about working with the Coens—that much self-indulgent laughter greeted the additions to the Dickensian ministry of funny names: Osborne Cox (cocks!), Chad Feldheimer (*feld* = field, *heimer* = “a person exhibiting severe ignorance and inability to comprehend simple ideas”); Linda Litzke (with its echo of Lubezki) and Harry Pfarrer (the “pee” is silent).

100 *Dumb and Dumber*

Burn After Reading was the third part of what the Coens call their “idiot trilogy” after *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Intolerable Cruelty*. There are smart films about smart people (*My Night with Maude*, *All About Eve*), smart films about dumb people (*Born Yesterday*, *Being There*), and dumb films about dumb people. *Burn After Reading* falls between the stools of the last two categories. Whatever the verdict, the movie has a smart cast smartly playing characters who, to quote Clooney in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, are all “just dumber than a bag of hammers.”

Frances McDormand, as Linda Litzke, working for the first time in seven years with her husband, had no qualms about playing a gym worker who recognizes that she will never have “a phony-baloney Hollywood body.” However, she is obsessed with reinventing herself through plastic surgery, an oblique reference to Linda Tripp, a key figure in the Monica Lewinski case from whom the Coens took the name, hairstyle, and surgical appetite. (Clooney has a one-night stand with a woman named Monica.) What she really needs is a tuck in her brain.

She and Pitt, whom the Coens compare to Laurel and Hardy, “where both characters are really idiots, but by common consent between the two of them, one of them has decided that the other one is smarter,” clumsily try to obtain money from Malkovich, whose computer disc of his memoirs of the CIA they have found. (Malkovich lost it when working out at the Hardbodies gym.) Chad/Pitt confronts Malkovich/Cox to blackmail him. Chad: “Osborne Cox? I thought you might be concerned about the security of your shit.” When Cox refuses, the couple foolishly take the disc to the Russian embassy, where the (stereotyped) Russians reject it and them.

Of the cast, Pitt as the clownish Chad was the only one functioning outside his comfort zone. He meets a spectacular end when, having stupidly broken into Malkovich’s house to try to obtain more “secret” material, he is discovered by Clooney, installed in the house as Swinton’s lover, who shoots him in a panic.

The last we see of Pitt is a beatific smile.

Pitt said of his role, “After reading the part, which they said was handwritten for myself, I was not sure if I should be flattered or insulted.” Pitt also said that when he was shown the script he told the Coens he did not know how to play the part because the character was such an idiot: “There was a pause, and then Joel goes . . . ‘You’ll be fine.’”

Clooney, in his third role for the Coens, continues to play the none-too-bright egotistical Lothario, whom fans take as straight-faced self-mocking portrayals. Here he is both addicted to sex and jogging. In fact, they are all more concerned with their bodies than brains.

According to Joel, after the last scene was shot, “George said: ‘OK, I’ve played my last idiot!’ So I guess he won’t be working with us again.” In contrast, Osborne Cox, Malkovich’s character, has more intelligence. He is a lazy drunk, but he went to Princeton, comes from a wealthy family and corrects Chad’s pronunciation of “rapport.” The role of Cox allowed Malkovich another chance to have choleric outbursts. He claims to have been fighting his whole life against “a league of morons.” Ironically, Cox had worked for the CIA—“all bureaucracy and no mission”—the middle name of which is “Intelligence.”

Swinton, as his wife, is referred to as “a cold stuck-up bitch,” and that is all she is required to portray. Richard Jenkins, in his third role for the Coens following his small-town, drunken lawyer in *The Man Who Wasn’t There* and a divorce lawyer in *Intolerable Cruelty*, effortlessly plays the weak but kindly manager of Hardbodies, uselessly smitten with McDormand.

On working with the Coens, Jenkins recalled that he had auditioned for *Raising Arizona*, *Miller’s Crossing*, and *Fargo*. So when he got a call to audition for *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, he said, “No, they’re not going to cast me anyway.” The Coens cast him nevertheless. Jenkins then told them, “So the only way to get a part in your movie is not to come in and audition?”

101 *I Spy*

“I don’t care a damn about men who are loyal to the people who pay them, to organizations. . . . I don’t think even my country means all that much. There are many countries in our blood, aren’t there, but only one person. Would the world be in the mess it is if we were loyal to love and not to countries?”

Our Man in Havana (Graham Greene)

Graham Greene used to divide his work between his serious Catholic novels and his thrillers, which he called “entertainments.” There is no such clear distinction between the Coen brothers’ movies, which all have the ambition to be entertainments. However, it is tempting to see films such as *Burn After Reading*, in contrast to *Barton Fink*, *Fargo*, and *The Big Lebowski*, as merely exercises in style, with little substance.

The Coens invite this conclusion by revealing so little confidence in their own convoluted plot involving the CIA that they make fun of it at the end, when an agent tries to explain the intricacies of the events to his superior, a scene that wouldn’t have been out of place in an episode from sixties TV’s *Get Smart*.

The movie opens with a view of the earth from a spy satellite, which gradually zooms in to focus on Washington, D.C., and the CIA building. The structure of the throwback conspiracy espionage thriller is such that each character behaves as if they are aware that they are in such a movie. McDormand and Pitt believe they have stumbled across state secrets on a worthless computer disc for which they could obtain a great deal of money from Malkovich. When rejected, with some fuzzy notion of Cold War movies, they contact the Russian embassy. Malkovich believes that there was a conspiracy in the CIA to demote him. “Fuck you guys! Whose ass didn’t I kiss? Let’s be honest! This is a crucifixion! This is political! Don’t tell me it’s not!” he says before leaving the building.

Clooney, who has been tailed by a man for several days, and thinking that he is someone connected with his having killed Pitt, turns on the man, wrestling him to the ground, only to learn that he is a private detective hired by his wife to gather evidence for a divorce.

As the film reaches its climax, the blacker parodic side, until then dominated by fatuous sex farce elements, takes over, with all the characters giving in to paranoia, seeing men in dark glasses, people on cell phones, and helicopters hovering above as personal threats.

Besides the “self-defense” killing of Pitt by Clooney, Jenkins is hacked to death by Malkovich, who mistakenly takes Jenkins for his wife’s lover, and Malkovich is shot by a CIA agent and ends in a coma. No Country For Middle-Aged Men.

CIA SUPERIOR: What did we learn, Palmer?

CIA OFFICER: I don’t know, sir.

CIA SUPERIOR: I don’t fuckin’ know either. I guess we learned not to do it again.

CIA OFFICER: Yes, sir.

CIA SUPERIOR: I’m fucked if I know what we did.

CIA OFFICER: Yes, sir, it’s, uh, hard to say.

CIA SUPERIOR: Jesus Fucking Christ.

The last lines of Burn After Reading

XVI

A GOOD JEW

“We thought it would be interesting to do something set in 1967 in that community, because that was such an interesting point in our own childhood.

And part of it came from thinking about the music of that period, the combination of Jewish liturgical music and cantorial music and Jefferson Airplane. Just a bunch of different things.”

102 *Lost in Transposition*

THERE SHOULD BE A LAW in the film industry against remakes of great films, or of even fairly good ones. With a few notable exceptions, the history of cinema is littered with disastrous remakes, including the Coens' *The Ladykillers*. In contrast, their *True Grit* could be placed among the exceptions, though there is some dispute as to whether it should be counted as a remake of a second-drawer western or as another, more faithful version of the Charles Portis novel. In 2014, Joel and Ethan were executive producers on *Fargo*, the successful spin-off miniseries that focused on a new crime story each week, while maintaining the same setting and tone of the original film.

A few years earlier, the Coens were the beneficiaries or victims of a remake of their 1984 debut feature. When Zhang Yimou approached the brothers about remaking *Blood Simple* as *A Woman, A Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009), transposing it from a bar in a town in rural Texas to a noodle shop in a small desert town in Gansu province in the feudal past, they were both flattered and intrigued. The Coens knew and admired Zhang's early masterpieces: *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and had shared a billing with him on *To Each His Own Cinema* (2007).

Both the Coens and Zhang, near contemporaries, owed an obvious debt to *The Postman Always Rings Twice* for *Blood Simple* and *Ju Dou*, similar dark tales of adultery and revenge. But instead of sticking close to the spirit of the Coens' neo-

noir, Zhang transformed the remake into a mix of Hong Kong style slapstick comedy and Chinese opera. A more direct source than *Blood Simple* for *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* was King Hu's *Dragongate Inn* (1967)—which was remade twice—a martial arts film set in a desert. In Roger Ebert's opinion, "This jokey doodle of a movie . . . bears about as much resemblance to *Blood Simple* as Jerry Lewis's *The Big Mouth* does to *No Country For Old Men*."

"I loved it," Joel said on a visit to Beijing to take part in the U.S.-China Forum on the Arts and Culture in November 2011. "Though I have to say, I think it may have been the single weirdest viewing experience of my life. Quite frankly I thought, 'Why did Zhang Yimou even ask us permission to do this?' It's so different. We told him that we were going to remake his *Raise the Red Lantern*."

At least the Coens' next film, *A Serious Man*, seemed remake-proof. Yet, who would have thought that *Blood Simple* would have been transformed into a broad Chinese comedy?

ZHANG: Your wife and Lin are having an affair.

WANG: How did you find out?

ZHANG: I found out accidentally.

WANG: I have a job for you. Kill them both.

ZHANG: I want money.

WANG: How much?

ZHANG: 10 Guan.

WANG: 6 Guan.

ZHANG 10 GUAN.

WANG: 8 Guan.

ZHANG: 10 Guan.

A Woman, A Gun and a Noodle Shop

MARTY: Got a job for you.

VISSE: Well, if the pay's right and it's legal I'll do it.

MARTY: It's not strictly legal.

VISSE: If the pay's right I'll do it.

MARTY: It's, uh . . . it's in reference to that gentleman and my wife. The more I think about it the more irritated I get.

VISSE: Gee, I'm sorry to hear that. Can you tell me what you want me to do or is it a secret?

MARTY: Listen, I'm not—this isn't a joke here.

VISSE: You want me to kill 'em.

Blood Simple

In parts fourteen and fifteen of Chapter 3 of this book, I dealt with the Coens' Jewish background, and the way they portrayed the few Jews in their movies. The only leading Jewish character was *Barton Fink* (played by John Turturro, of Italian ancestry), the ineffectual writer lost in Hollywood. Among the few other Jewish characters were Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner), the crass studio head in the same film, and Bernie Bernbaum (Turturro), the cowardly double-dealer in *Miller's Crossing*, both treated unsympathetically.

But it took the brothers twenty-five years from their first film to choose Jews as the sole protagonists of *A Serious Man*. The entire *dramatis personae* of the movie, excepting a few "goyishe" in brief roles, are Jewish. This had not happened in the USA since the Yiddish films of Edgar G. Ulmer of the late 1930s.

The prologue to *A Serious Man* is in Yiddish and tells a folk tale (invented by the Coens) set in a Polish shtetl in the early twentieth century. A man tells his wife that he was helped to put a wheel on his cart on his way home by Traitle Groshkover, whom he has invited in for a bowl of soup. She objects, saying Groshkover died three years earlier and that he must be a dybbuk, the wandering soul of a dead person who has taken up residence in the body of a living person. Groshkover arrives and laughs off the accusation, but she plunges an ice pick into his chest. He continues to talk for a short while but soon after begins to bleed. He exits into the snowy night before the couple can determine if he was a real man who would die from his wounds or would simply vanish. "We're cursed," says the husband. The prologue suggests that the couple's descendants would be cursed from generation to generation.

Without stressing any link, we jump to 1967 Minnesota where we are introduced to our cursed "hero," bespectacled Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), a fortyish university physics professor at a small Midwestern college. Like a modern Job, he is at the mercy of a series of disasters that befall him one after the other despite the fact that he has been a loving husband and father and is good at his job. As Larry says, "I haven't done anything wrong."

First he is told by his wife that she wants to divorce him to marry another man; he is offered a bribe by a Korean student to change his grades from fail to pass; he is told by the head of his department that he is being anonymously slandered to the tenure committee; his tough hunting 'n' shooting "goy" neighbor is encroaching onto his property; his unemployed loser brother is arrested; both his teenage children run up bills; his lawyer is charging him a small fortune . . . To find some answer as to why Hashem (God) has allowed such unfairness, he seeks the help of three rabbis.

This would be my consolation;
I would even exult in unrelenting pain;
for I have not denied the words of the Holy One.
Then should I yet have comfort; yea, I would harden myself in sorrow: let him not spare; for I have not concealed the words of the Holy One.

The Book of Job

104 *The Three Rabbis*

The first rabbi that Larry sees is a whippersnapper in his twenties who rambles on about life being like a parking lot. The second rabbi is older, but he offers a pointless tale about a dentist who discovers one day that one of his “goy” patients has “Help me” written in Hebrew on the inside of his lower incisors. Finally, Larry tries to get to see the oldest and wisest rabbi, but he can’t get to see him because the holy man is “busy thinking.”

“The rabbi was loosely based on a sage-like figure we’d seen as kids,” explained Ethan. “A Semitic Wizard of Oz. He never spoke, but he had great charisma.” However, Danny, Larry’s son, who has negotiated the ritual of his bar mitzvah while high on marijuana, is ushered into the sacred presence after the ceremony. But all the rabbi can do is quote the lyrics of “Somebody to Love,” the Jefferson Airplane song the boy had been listening to during Hebrew lessons on his transistor radio, which was confiscated by the teacher rabbi. “When the truth is found to be lies and all the joy within you dies [the rabbi actually says “when all the hope within you dies”]/ Is not a life without hope one without joy?” The rabbi also recites the names of members of Jefferson Airplane. Rock ’n’ Roll has been given the status of Talmudic wisdom.

The rabbis have offered no spiritual comfort, nor have they even attempted to explain why God allows evil. Larry pleads, “What is Hashem trying to tell me? Why does God make us feel the questions, if he’s not going to give us any answers?”

The absurdist and bleak conclusion is that if God exists, then he inflicts suffering indiscriminately on both the good and the bad . . . and the Coens, playing God, do exactly the same thing. “For us, the fun was inventing new ways to torment Larry,” said Ethan.

I am the junior rabbi. And it’s true; the point-of-view of somebody who’s older and perhaps had similar problems might be more valid. And you should see the senior rabbi as well, by all means. . . . But maybe—

can I share something with you? Because I too have had the feeling of losing track of Hashem, which is the problem here. I too have forgotten how to see Him in the world. And when that happens you think, well, if I can't see Him, He isn't there anymore, He's gone. But that's not the case. You just need to remember how to see Him. Am I right? I mean, the parking lot here. Not much to see. But if you imagine yourself a visitor, somebody who isn't familiar with these autos and such, somebody still with a capacity for wonder. Someone with a fresh perspective. That's what it is, Larry. Because with the right perspective you can see Hashem, you know, reaching into the world. He is in the world, not just in shul. It sounds to me like you're looking at the world, looking at your wife, through tired eyes.

105 *Bar Mitzvah Boys*

The caricatured portrayal of the three rabbis could be seen as the Coens' revenge after growing up "detesting Hebrew school and their boring rabbis."

A Serious Man, the Coens' most personal film, at least in substance, visits their own childhood in Minnesota in 1967, when Joel was coming up for his bar mitzvah, and Ethan was ten years old. "We had a fairly banal and uneventful childhood," remarked Joel. "It took us thirty years to stir any interest in making a film about it. Is this a personal film? It's personal in that we personally lived in a community like this one and in 1967, we were the age of the kids in the movie."

Ethan, who alluded to his childhood in the semi-autobiographical short story, "The Old Country" (1998), added: "I guess, there's always a thrill in going somewhere you haven't been in years." "You get a charge, a kick, like going home for the holidays. There was a certain element of finding your old bedroom, where not much has changed. We had a lot of fun with our set designer [Nancy Haigh], getting the details of the era just right."

Although Joel and Ethan grew up in an academic family and "escaped Zionist indoctrination," they were always curious about how it worked. "American Jews need to take this indoctrination apart to understand who we are as religious supporters of settler colonialism." In fact, they went to a Zionist summer camp, Camp Herzl, in Webster, Wisconsin, attended some years before by Bob Dylan.

A Serious Man draws on Jewish themes only because the Coens were brought up Jewish. "If we grew up Unitarian, would we be writing about Unitarian characters?" But they lacked the autobiographical impulse when they started out. "Even well into our thirties this wouldn't have interested us at all, really," Joel declared. In general, artists delve into their own lives for material at some time in their careers. In the world of film, Jean Renoir, François Truffaut, Ingmar Bergman, and Federico Fellini are outstanding examples. The Coens waited until "age and the perspective of three or four decades helped spur us on."

Nevertheless, despite the whole plot of *A Serious Man* being built around the perplexed Larry, who is rarely off screen, the film is seen through the eyes of a pubescent boy (Danny/Joel/Ethan). In fact, as the title credits roll, we enter the boy's brain through the transistor earphone while he is listening to "Somebody to Love." From his perspective, adults' behavior seems particularly absurd and anyone over forty in the film seems ancient and unattractive.

Yet, though an end credit assures audiences that "No Jews were harmed in the making of this motion picture," there were a handful of critics (and presumably viewers) who found the film offensive. David Denby in *The New Yorker* magazine wrote, "As a piece of moviemaking craft, *A Serious Man* is fascinating; in every other way, it's intolerable."

Ella Taylor in *The Village Voice* called *A Serious Man* "a work of Jewish self-loathing." She wrote: "It is crowded with fat Jews, aggressive Jews, passive-aggressive Jews, traitor Jews, loser Jews, shyster-Jews, emo-Jews, Jews who slurp their chicken soup, and—passing as sages—a clutch of yellow-teethed, know-nothing rabbis."

In the above statement, one could substitute "gentiles" for "Jews" in *Miller's Crossing*, "Italians" for "Jews" and "priests" for "rabbis" in Fellini's oeuvre, and "Roman Catholics" for "Jews" in Luis Buñuel's films. The subjective reviewers have obviously failed to understand that *A Serious Man* is in the Kafkaesque tradition of a man alienated from an unfeeling society and of self-deprecating Jewish jokes in addition to being a sharp satire on suburbia in the late sixties.

"Whenever you're specific with ethnicity or religion, people find reason to take offense," explained Joel. "Yeah, but there was less pushback from the Jewish community in general, whose sensibilities tend to be very easily offended," Ethan echoed. I would suggest that in its unflinching and mordantly funny examination of the existence or nonexistence of a deity among Jews, *A Serious Man* is the film in which Judaism came of age in the American cinema.

106 "No Jews Were Harmed . . ."

One of the most refreshing elements of *A Serious Man* was the use of relatively unknown actors replacing cast members of the Coen repertory company. No Clooney, McDormand, Goodman, Turturro, Buscemi, or Bridges. No stars, but Michael Stuhlbarg, Richard Kind (Uncle Arthur), Fred Melamed (Sy Ableman), Sari Lennick (Judith Gopnik), and Aaron Wolff (Danny Gopnik), the latter the Coens' surrogate, who was born in Minneapolis in 1994.

After many years in theater and television, forty-one-year-old Stuhlbarg was given his first big break in films by the Coens, who cast him in the lead as Larry Gopnik, the consummate *shlimazel*. (Definition: Yiddish slang. An inept person who suffers from unremitting bad luck.) Sy Abelman, the oleaginous man for whom Larry's wife unaccountably leaves him, is a *shlemiel*, the other archetype of Jewish humor. To illustrate: the shlemiel is the one who spills the soup, and the shlimazel is the one who has the soup spilled on him.

Stuhlbarg got the role after a chain of events. He got to know Frances McDormand when they did a play together at Lincoln Center. She then invited Joel to see him in David Mamet's adaptation of Harley Granville-Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance*, off-Broadway in 2006.

"I always hoped I would get a chance to work with the Coen brothers but never thought I would," recalled Stuhlbarg. "Then I got a call out of the blue to say 'come in and audition for the part of the husband in the Yiddish parable at the beginning of the movie.' . . . So I had to learn that whole scene in Yiddish." But they decided to cast an actor who spoke Yiddish fluently. Later the Coens called him again to audition for the parts of Larry and his hapless brother Arthur. Then about six weeks before they started shooting, the Coens decided that he would be better as Larry.

For Stuhlbarg it was important that Larry Gopnik wasn't "all geek" but showed a physical side, by climbing on a roof to adjust a TV antenna and leering at his voluptuous neighbor sunning herself naked in her yard. He also got to be stunt man for a day during a car accident. "I was actually in the car when it was hit. That was more scary than being on the roof because I was sort of stunt man for a day. The Coens said, 'Just get in the car. We're gonna do something. You'll be fine. Just keep your seatbelt on.'"

To obtain authenticity of time and place, a suitable location was found in Bloomington, Minnesota, where support was enlisted from the Jewish community, Hebrew schools, and synagogues, and by calling on congregations to act as extras such as in the bar mitzvah scene. Much of the look of the film was partly based on the Brad Zellar book *Suburban World: The Norling Photographs*, a collection of photographs of Bloomington in the fifties and sixties. The synagogue in the film was the B'nai Emet Synagogue in St. Louis Park, which the Coen brothers attended in their youth.

Location filming began on September 8, 2008, in Minnesota. Filming wrapped on November 6, 2008, after forty-four days, ahead of schedule and within budget. However, it was not surprising, given the singular nature of the subject matter,

that *A Serious Man* performed less well at the box office than every one of the Coens' other films except *The Hudsucker Proxy*.

Whatever is cosmic is comic. . . . Unless a thing is dignified, it cannot be undignified. Why is it funny that a man should sit down suddenly in the street? There is only one possible or intelligent reason: that man is the image of God. It is not funny that anything else should fall down; only that a man should fall down. No one sees anything funny in a tree falling down. No one sees a delicate absurdity in a stone falling down. No man stops in the road and roars with laughter at the sight of the snow coming down. The fall of thunderbolts is treated with some gravity. The fall of roofs and high buildings is taken seriously. It is only when a man tumbles down that we laugh. Why do we laugh? Because it is a grave religious matter: it is the Fall of Man. Only man can be absurd: for only man can be dignified

G. K. Chesterton, "Spiritualisms," in *Illustrated London News* (April 1906)

XVII

PARDNERS

“We didn’t think about it as a genre movie as much as a novel adaptation. In terms of a Western, it’s not traditional—not a Zane Grey story. Instead, we considered it almost as a youthful adventure or a coming-of-age story.”

107 *The Duke and the Dude*

IN 1969, SIXTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD JOHN WAYNE starred as maverick lawman Reuben “Rooster” Cogburn in *True Grit*, directed by the seventy-one-year-old Henry Hathaway, a veteran of westerns. It was the director’s sixth and last film with Wayne. The role won Wayne his only Best Actor Academy Award.

In 2010, sixty-one-year-old Jeff Bridges starred as maverick lawman Reuben “Rooster” Cogburn in *True Grit*, directed by fifty-six-year-old Joel Coen and fifty-three-year-old Ethan Coen, neither of whom had ever directed a western. It was the directors’ second film with Bridges. The role got Bridges nominated for a Best Actor Academy Award.

Comparisons may be odious, as the saying goes, but they are inevitable in this case. When the Coens decided to adapt the 1968 Charles Portis novel, they were aware that comparisons would be drawn between the two movies. In order to divert critics and audiences away from referring to the earlier film when judging the later one, the Coens insisted that their *True Grit* was not a remake.

Speaking in Berlin, where the film opened the festival, the Coens claimed to have dimly recalled having seen the Wayne picture when they were very young and made their version with “a blithe disregard” for it. They also resisted the temptation to watch it in preparation for their own. “We didn’t do our homework,” Ethan said. Joel added acidly that he thought that no John Wayne movie “would possibly reflect the very acid sensibility of the book.”

It is true that the Henry Hathaway version does not have the mythic beauty and resonance of the best westerns, but it is a workmanlike vehicle for the

powerful persona of the aging John Wayne.

The Coens continued to distance themselves from Wayne's performance. For Ethan, "John Wayne is more like Mount Rushmore than an actor for us. He was already an aging actor—not part of my movie-going life when we were growing up. We were the tail end of people for whom John Wayne meant something."

Joel commented, "People remember the Oscar, but not the performance. I'm not sure if John Wayne means much to kids in America now. I've a sixteen-year-old son, and I doubt if he knows who he is." Further lambasting of Wayne came from Josh Brolin, who plays the murderous Tom Chaney. "He was a great guy. I loved his political beliefs," he said sarcastically, referring to his conservative views and his support of the Vietnam War.

Matt Damon, as the dandyish Texas Ranger LaBoeuf (pronounced in the film as La Beef), didn't see the first film. "But, it's funny, when people came up to me and said what role I was going to play, I'd just say, 'The Glen Campbell role,' and they'd say, 'Are you going to sing?' I'd tell them 'No, I think we are doing something different.'"

According to Joel, Bridges wasn't worried by comparisons. "He was the one person who might have been put off by it. He just kinda didn't give a shit." Bridges felt that his performance was closer to his father, Lloyd Bridges, who appeared in many Hollywood westerns, though none with Wayne. "I love dressing up as a cowboy," he explained. "It reminds me of my childhood. My father was in so many of those films, and I'd remember him coming through the door in his boots and hat. He'd let me wear his things, and I'd call up my friends to come and play." Of course, Bridges Jr. was in a few westerns himself, including the notorious *Heaven's Gate*.

Apart from the fact that Wayne (complete with wig and girdle) wore his patch over his left eye and Bridges had it over his right one, there were substantial differences in their interpretations. Although both Wayne's and Bridges's Cogburns are cantankerous drunks, the former's own long-established persona of a tough but tender hero shines through. Bridges, on the other hand, much of his speech garbled, purposely displays little charm. Wayne milks more humor from the role. Bridges is too dour for laughs. One could imagine Clint Eastwood giving a similar performance to Bridges's, though never like Wayne's. Wayne dominates the first film—almost making it the movie's *raison d'être*, whereas Bridges is part of an ensemble. In fact, the central figure is shifted from Rooster Cogburn to Mattie Ross, the young girl (Coen discovery fourteen-year old Hailee Steinfeld) who hires him to avenge her father's murder.

Wayne is last seen jumping over a fence with his new horse to disprove Mattie's claim that he is too old and fat to jump a four-rail fence. "Well, come see a fat old man some time," he yells as he rides off into the valley below. In contrast, Bridges, after rescuing Mattie from a snake pit and rushing her to a hospital, is last seen sitting down exhausted and saying, "I've grown old."

MATTIE ROSS: Who's the best marshal they have?

SHERIFF: Bill Waters is the best tracker. The meanest one is Rooster Cogburn, a pitiless man, double tough, fear don't enter into his thinking. I'd have to say L. T. Quinn is the straightest, he brings his prisoners in alive.

MATTIE ROSS: Where would I find this Rooster?

SHERIFF: He'll be at the federal court this afternoon, he's bringing in a load of prisoners from the territories.

True Grit, 1969

MATTIE ROSS: Who's the best marshal?

SHERIFF: Hmm, I'd have to think on that. Bill Waters is the best tracker. He's part Comanche; it is a pure joy to watch him cut for sign. The meanest is Rooster Cogburn; a pitiless man, double tough. Fear don't enter into his thinking. He loves to pull cork. I'd have to say the fairest is L. T. Quinn; he always brings in his prisoners alive. Now, he might let one slip by every now and then, but . . .

MATTIE ROSS: Where would I find this Rooster?

True Grit, 2010

108 *Mattie*

As splendidly portrayed by Hailee Steinfeld (born December 11, 1996), the fourteen-year-old Mattie is a no-nonsense, straightforward, determined young woman with true grit, able to stand her ground against the toughest men. The only time she cries is when her faithful Mustang pony, Little Blackie, is put down by Cogburn after collapsing in exhaustion.

"Hailee was one of only a handful of the thousands of girls that were seen who could pull off the accent, and we think she's just wonderful in the role," commented Ethan. "We loved the language in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country*, which is really about the region, while in *True Grit* it's more about period: people did speak more formally and floridly. But I think that the great thing about the book is this compelling first-person narrative, from a girl so young, and we wanted to put the audience in her mind, so they'd see the story through her eyes."

For her audition, Steinfeld said, "I went in dressed in character, and showed what my vision of this character was. And I really think that's what it was, my

vision kind of clicked with theirs.” For her outfit, she and her mother went to a fabric store. “She got—I guess you could call it like a corduroy/burlap kind of material for the skirt, and she sewed it together. And I wore boots, and this ruffled up, 1800s-looking shirt from a thrift shop. That was it.

“Going into the shoot I was nervous. But the minute I met Jeff and the Coen brothers and all the other actors, realizing how easygoing they are and the fact that they’re there to do a job—and I’m there for the same reason—just made me feel at ease.”

One problem was the fact that Steinfeld was a minor. Because of child-labor laws, she could only work five hours a day—with breaks for schooling—and not past 10:00 p.m. This created a particular dilemma, since most of the scenes take place at night. Fortunately, her stunt double, Cassidy Vick-Hice, was such a remarkable physical match that she could be shot from a three-quarter angle from behind and it would look like Steinfeld.

In a key scene, Mattie is put over LaBoeuf’s knee and spanked with a stick. A father of four daughters, Matt Damon insisted that he has never raised a hand to a girl in real life, so he and the Coens were very careful to make sure that Steinfeld’s behind was protected with a big pad.

True Grit was nominated for ten Academy Awards, but won none. Among the nominees was Steinfeld, illogically as Best Supporting Actress, although she had the leading role. But it launched her on a fine career.

People do not give credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father’s blood but it did not seem so strange then, although it did not happen every day. I was just fourteen years of age when a coward known as Tom Chaney shot my father down in Fort Smith Arkansas and robbed him of his life and his horse and \$150 in cash money and two California gold pieces that he carried in his trouser band. Strange then, although I will say it didn’t happen every day.

Opening of *True Grit* (1968) by Charles Portis

109 *A Drunk, a Jackass, and a Villain*

“There was no else we thought about but Jeff for this role,” Ethan commented. “We’ve wanted to work with him again ever since *The Big Lebowski*.” As during the filming of the latter, “His questions are usually limited to how much the character has smoked or drank before a particular scene.”

“Rooster smoked and drank a lot, so that would affect your voice,” Bridges explained. “So I just let that go to town, and that’s the voice that popped out.”

Bridges, a fine horseman, did most of his own stunt work, including riding with reins in his teeth and four guns blazing. (Wayne, on the other hand, had a stunt double for the same scene, while he sat on a pickup truck for the close-ups.)

Gradually increasing the list of leading American male stars who have worked for them, the Coens got Matt Damon to play LaBoeuf. Damon declared that he drew inspiration for the role from Tommy Lee Jones, who had starred in *No Country For Old Men*.

“Tommy Lee is from near where my character is from, in Texas. And he is a really smart guy—I could just sit and listen to him talk,” said Damon. “LaBoeuf likes to hold court like Tommy Lee, but LaBeouf is a windbag—a total jackass . . . a true nincompoop in this movie.”

Not exactly. He can be quite sharp when the occasion arises, as when telling Rooster, who is continuing the quest with Mattie: “Congratulations, you’ve graduated from marauder to wet nurse.” Then, after he has won a shooting contest with Rooster, who offers some explanation, “I thought you were gonna say the sun was in your eyes. That is to say . . . your eye.”

(Although Damon, sporting sideburns and a neat moustache, never takes off his fringed, buckskin jacket, Buster Coen, Ethan’s fifteen-year-old son, is credited, as a joke, as “Mr. Damon’s abs double.”)

Josh Brolin, who plays the coward Tom Chaney, only appears toward the end of the movie, just in time to be shot twice by Mattie and then eventually finished off by Rooster. Nevertheless, he is in the searchers’ minds throughout and thus makes an impact when he does materialize. Brolin, who was no stranger to the Coens, having been in one and a bit of their films previously, was asked in an interview where he had to go “to find a violent simpleton in you.” “When I came, I talked to Joel and Ethan about it in the beginning and they said something about he’s sort of a dim bulb and I thought, ‘No, he’s more like a broken bulb. No filament at all.’ I like the idea of doing this duality of a guy who he’s talked about throughout the whole movie so when you see him, you expect a monster. . . . Then he starts talking and it’s a different kind of guy. The mythology of what’s been created from the movie is ripped from you, whatever pigeonhole that you’ve created in your mind of what a sociopath is. You realize he’s a true sociopath.”

LABOEUF: A little earlier I gave some thought to stealin’ a kiss from you, although you are very young . . . and you’re unattractive to boot. But now I’m of a mind to give you five or six good licks with my belt.

MATTIE ROSS: Well, one would be as unpleasant as the other.

True Grit, 2010

“Earlier tonight I gave some thought to stealing a kiss from you, though you are very young, and sick and unattractive to boot, but now I am of mind to give you five or six good licks with my belt.”

“One would be as unpleasant as the other. Put a hand on me and you will answer for it. You are from Texas and ignorant of our ways but the good people of Arkansas do not go easy on men who abuse women and children.”

True Grit (1968) by Charles Portis

110 *Figures in a Landscape*

Although the novel was set in Arkansas, the film was shot in parts of New Mexico and Texas. “You know what? That’s one thing that’s not faithful to the novel,” Ethan confessed. “The landscape is a total cheat.” For Joel, “the whole pictorial idea of the movie would have been much different in a place like Arkansas. The honest answer is it kind of becomes this mishmash of different considerations that go into where you’re shooting and how you want to treat the landscape.”

But there was no escaping the difficulties of the exterior shooting. “It was blizzarding snow from the moment we came to New Mexico through the day we left,” Joel recalled. “The problem is that it’ll snow two feet—and twelve hours later, the snow will be going. So if you’re shooting a scene that takes a number of days, there’s no way to establish continuity. We ended up just moving around a lot.”

“Neither of us rides,” admitted Joel, “and I don’t think we’d thought enough about the horses. They’re at the front of every scene, and that was tricky at times.” “And I tell you,” Ethan added, “that cowboy look—the hat and the bandana—that’s not a fashion statement. That clothing is purely practical. That’s why we wore it. We weren’t trying to have ‘the authentic experience’ ourselves.”

Bridges felt that the changing weather helped him get into character. “It was tough, but not so tough that it shut us down completely. It added a great deal of grittiness and reality to the whole thing.”

For Roger Deakins, the challenge was to create the West as seen by Mattie Ross. At first glance, Rooster is an indiscernible figure obscured by shadow, but a shaft of light streaming through the window reveals the unkempt, drunken marshal. “The hardest thing to do in cinematography is a night exterior,” Deakins explained, “and snow scenes.” There were plenty of both in *True Grit*. The cinematographer is especially proud of the opening sequence, a melancholy

tableau—a porch light, falling snow, the crumpled figure of Mattie’s murdered father—and the climax, when Rooster and Mattie ride Little Blackie through the snow at night.

111 *Way Out West*

In a year that saw the release of westerns such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Wild Bunch* (as well as the influential *Easy Rider* and *Midnight Cowboy*), the more traditional Hathaway movie could not have avoided seeming old-fashioned. But the Coens’ version, forty years later, is just as traditional, even old-fashioned, though it could be seen as an homage to a moribund genre.

The two films, except for the endings—the Coens’ being more faithful to the book—follow, more or less, the same plot. The differences lie rather in the tone than the substance. “It’s partly a question of point-of-view. The book is entirely in the voice of the fourteen-year-old girl. That sort of tips the feeling of it over a certain way,” said Ethan, “which is part of what’s interesting about it.” “We didn’t read Charles Portis when we were young; we discovered him only as adults. But, when I read *True Grit* to my son, I thought that it would be a fun film to make,” Joel added.

According to Bridges, “you really feel that you are back in the 1890s. The book’s dialogue and story are a bit eccentric, and the Coen brothers keep that rhythm going and create the sense that you’re back in the era when the story took place. It’s a great place for Ethan and Joel to be, and when you read the book you can imagine the two of them directing this movie.”

Joel said that they did not want to “mess around with what we thought was a very compelling story and character.” The film’s producer, Scott Rudin, said that the Coens had taken a “formal, reverent approach” to the western genre, with its emphasis on adventure and quest. “The patois of the characters, the love of language that permeates the whole film, makes it very much of a piece with their other films, but it is the least ironic in many regards.”

Just as *A Serious Man* was the most directly personal of all their films, *True Grit* is arguably their most impersonal. It is also the nearest they had come to creating a straight genre film, sticking to all the rules of the western, eschewing revisionism. Also, unlike their previous three films, and dictated by the book, *True Grit* is not open-ended. Aside from the relish of the stylized dialogue and the manner it is delivered—the characters avoid contractions, e.g. “I do not know”—and Roger Deakins’s classical “period” cinematography, this traditional

revenge western could have been made by Eastwood or any other competent director. Perhaps that is the reason it gained its largest audiences, who had their expectations fulfilled.

In a number of interviews, just as they claimed that *No Country For Old Men* could be classified as a western, the Coens somewhat disingenuously questioned whether *True Grit* was a western at all, preferring to call it a “beautiful young adult adventure story,” wherein the heroine has a “divine sense of mission.”

According to Ethan, “We never considered our film a classical western, and honestly never thought about genre at all. We didn’t talk about John Ford or Sergio Leone, even though we like their films. Really, we were driven only by our enthusiasm for Charles Portis’s book.”

But, given the referential nature of most of their movies, the Coens could not have been unconscious of certain Fordian elements in the picture. The silhouetted figures seen in long shot against the horizon—either at sunrise or sunset—in a wide open landscape; the framing of some characters in doorways, and the first appearance of Matt Damon is a reference to Henry Fonda’s tilting a chair back and putting his feet up on the porch railings in *My Darling Clementine*; the voice-over and plaintive epilogue resembles the end of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and the use of American gospel hymns (arranged for piano and orchestra by Carter Burwell) on the soundtrack.

The hymns include “The Glory-Land Way” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” but mostly dominant is “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” written by Anthony J. Showalter (music) and Elisha Hoffman (lyrics) in 1887, more than ten years after the events in *True Grit*. The hymn, which acts as a leitmotif for Mattie, is only sung at the end of the movie over the end credits by country and folk singer Iris Dement. “Choosing that hymn was important,” explained Ethan, “because that Protestant attitude is such a part of who Mattie is. The music speaks of faith and certitude, and that she has in spades.” Ironically, the hymn is mostly associated by cinéphiles with the song sung eerily by the evil serial-killer preacher Robert Mitchum as he pursues the two children in *The Night of the Hunter*.

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Refrain:
Leaning, leaning,

Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Anthony J. Showalter (music) and Elisha Hoffman (lyrics), 1887

XVIII

A FOLK TALE

“Why we were thinking specifically New York in 1961 and the Greenwich folk scene, we don’t know. We listened to a lot of the music and we’d read a number of books, including the memoir that was written by folk musician Dave Van Ronk about that period that got us thinking about it.”

112 “*Please Don’t Tell the Beginning*”

IN 1966, THE TWELVE-YEAR-OLD JOEL and nine-year-old Ethan saw *Gambit*, a sprightly caper, set mostly in Hong Kong and starring Michael Caine and Shirley MacLaine. Although it was one of dozens of such movies in the 1960s, it left a particular impression on their juvenile minds. More than thirty years later, in their maturity, the brothers reworked the original screenplay for a remake, though it seemed to have been written by their prepubescent selves.

Back in 1997, the idea for a remake came to producer Mike Lobell, who had seen and loved the original Ronald Neame-directed movie when it was first released. To obtain a script, Lobell first approached Aaron Sorkin, but he was too busy writing for *The West Wing*. Then British writer Frank Cottrell Boyce delivered a screenplay that moved the story to Japan, but Lobell didn’t think it funny enough. Eventually, in 2003, the Coen brothers, in their feeble farcical period coming off *Intolerable Cruelty* and preparing for *The Ladykillers*, provided a “radical overhaul” of the script, setting it in mainly in London, as a pastiche of Swinging London pictures of the sixties. Yet, despite the name of the Coen brothers appended to the project, directors including Alexander Payne, Mike Nichols, and Robert Altman rejected it. The script continued to be shuffled around Hollywood for some years until, in 2011, Michael Hoffman was signed up as director, with Colin Firth, Cameron Diaz, and Alan Rickman heading the cast. The Coens, who had never intended to direct the movie, were happy to take the money and run.

The greatly altered plot, though woven around a similar theme, concerned a British art curator (Firth in Caine-like horn-rimmed spectacles) who decides to seek revenge on his abusive boss (Rickman) by conning him into buying a fake Monet (*Haystacks at Dusk*) with the aid of a forger (Tom Courtenay) and a Texas rodeo queen (Diaz).

Among the very few elements that the films shared was the rather original structure, which begins with the cunning plot as imagined by the hero, followed by the harsh reality. This concept prompted the earlier film to use the clever publicity line: “Go Ahead: Tell the End—It’s Too Hilarious to Keep Secret—But Please Don’t Tell the Beginning!”

The nominal slapstick remake kept its hilarity a secret. A great deal of it concerned uptight Firth running trouserless around London’s Savoy Hotel; endlessly sneering Rickman; Diaz overplaying a loudmouthed Texas bimbo cowgirl, and various other stereotypes.

One example of the dialogue:

RICKMAN: So, how do you find London?

DIAZ: Well, everybody knows the answer to that one. You turn right at Greenland.

According to Firth: “Doing the Coens’ dialogue is a challenge because they write a lot of stylized and intricate series of monologues. It was vigorous and it was a farce, and farce is a very, very difficult form to specialize in. Comedy can make you a little crazy actually.”

The movie was set to be released in the United States on October 12, 2012, but due to negative reactions from critics, it sat on the shelf for nearly two years before going directly to DVD, although it was released theatrically globally. *Gambit* was the biggest flop with which the Coens had been associated. At the time, it might have given them an inkling of the nature of failure as they were in preproduction of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, another Coenian portrait of a loser.

Ancient elegance and new opulence are all tangled up in a dazzling blur of op and pop. The city is alive with birds (girls) and beetles, buzzing with mini-cars and telly stars. . . . The guards now change at Buckingham Palace to a Lennon and McCartney tune, and Prince Charles in firmly in the long-hair set. . . . In a decade dominated by youth, London has burst into bloom. It swings; it is the scene.

“London the Swinging City,” article in *Time*, April 1966

Inside Llewyn Davis opens at the Gaslight Café in Greenwich Village in 1961. It is dimly lit and smoke filled. On stage is the bearded figure of a youngish man with long, dark, curly hair, strumming on a guitar and singing the mournful folk song “Hang Me, Oh Hang Me.”

Hang me, oh hang me
I'll be dead and gone
Wouldn't mind the hanging
But the layin' in a grave so long, poor boy
I been all around this world

When he completes the entire song, to polite applause, he says, “It was never new and it never gets old and it’s a folk song.” It is the first of thirteen folk songs, more than in most bona fide musicals, almost all of them sung live in their entirety, half of them performed by Oscar Isaac, who plays the title role. Thus, the Coens were not afraid of losing any customers who had an aversion to folk music.

Near the climax, Llewyn’s frustration over his hard luck comes to the surface when he shouts, “I fucking hate folk music!” The picture has divided folkies as well as cat lovers (of which a little later).

According to Isaac, “People hated each other in the music scene. In Washington Square Park, it was amazing because there was all this music, but the drummers hated the bluegrass guys, who hated the folk guys, who hated the jazz guys fighting over their square inches.”

There is an excellent extended cameo from John Goodman as a disabled, drug-addicted, cynical jazzman who taunts Llewyn on a nightmare drive from New York to Chicago, hitting him constantly with his cane. However, although the film is driven by the music, it is allied to its hapless hero, who is only matched in travails by Larry Gopnik in *A Serious Man*.

The Gaslight Café, a celebrated folk coffeehouse on 116 MacDougal Street that opened in 1958 and closed in 1971, was home to performers like Bob Dylan, Luke Askew, Bruce Springsteen, Richie Havens, Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, and Dave Van Ronk.

“Van Ronk’s book, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, was one of many books we drew on,” said Joel. “In the early-sixties folk scene in Greenwich Village, Van Ronk was the biggest fish in the small pond, so he was emblematic of the pre-Dylan folk singers,” continued Ethan. “We gave Dave’s repertoire to Oscar; in the movie, Llewyn plays mostly Van Ronk songs.”

Unlike the struggling Llewyn Davis, Van Ronk was an important figure in the

folk revival of the 1960s, acting as a friend and promoter to many up-and-coming artists by inspiring, assisting, and promoting them. His work ranged from old English ballads to blues, gospel, rock, New Orleans jazz, and swing. Van Ronk was also known for performing instrumental ragtime guitar music. Bob Dylan recorded Van Ronk's arrangement of the traditional song "House of the Rising Sun" on his first album. In 1997, Van Ronk was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). He died in 2002, aged sixty-five.

To recreate that world, the Coens enlisted singer-producer T Bone Burnett, whose previous collaborations with the brothers included *O Brother Where Art Thou?*. "You take these old songs that have been handed down and reinvent them for the time you're in," Burnett explained. "The music for *Inside Llewyn Davis* had to be authentic, but there might be people who would take issue with that. The issue with me is being true to the moment that's happening in the film. I'm less concerned with how a string band would have played a particular song in 1956 in Cambridge than I am with how that guy on the set is going to play it right now. How good is he going to sound? I want to make sure he sounds as good as possible for the character, and that's a very specific job."

For the most part, the songs were in the public domain—old Scottish and Irish tunes, blues, laments, songs of uncertain origin passed down by generations of singers. Justin Timberlake, Adam Driver, and Isaac sing a song called "Please Mr. Kennedy," based on a real 1961 Motown song of the same name. "The original wasn't folky, just catchy," Ethan declared. "Lyrically it was wrong because it was about Vietnam. So we thoroughly rewrote it. We needed a poppy thing." Sitting in on the recording session, Llewyn seems dismissive of the song, asking, "Who wrote this?" The Timberlake character, named Jim, replies, "I did."

At the same time, as a counterbalance, snatches of classical music are heard, most significantly the vocal finale of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, a setting of the folksong "Das Himmlische Leben" (The Heavenly Life) on the radio of Llewyn's car when he pulls up on the snowy highway after avoiding what he imagines is a cat.

One example of the Coens' intertextuality is the casting of F. Murray Abraham as the powerful Chicago owner of the Gate of Horn club. The actor, most celebrated for winning a Best Actor Oscar for his performance as Salieri in *Amadeus*, sits stony faced as Llewyn sings him "The Death of Queen Jane," a mournful ballad as an audition to perform at the club. After the song, all Abraham can say is "I don't see any money in this. . . . Cut the beard down to a

goatee, stay out of the sun.” Like Mozart’s Salieri, Davis is doomed to be overshadowed by Dylan (Benjamin Pike miming), who is seen in long shot near the end of the film, singing “Farewell.” As a further subtle hint, a few chords of Mozart’s Requiem play at the beginning of the film.

There is another cross-reference in the movie. Garrett Hedlund, just coming off playing Neal Cassady, renamed Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* (2012), based on Jack Kerouac’s bible of the Beat Generation, appears as a taciturn beat poet.

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1. “Hang Me, Oh Hang Me,” performed by Oscar Isaac
 2. “Fare Thee Well (Dink’s Song),” performed by Marcus Mumford & Oscar Isaac
 3. “The Last Thing on My Mind,” performed by Stark Sands with Punch Brothers
 4. “Five Hundred Miles,” performed by Justin Timberlake, Carey Mulligan, and Stark Sands
 5. “Please Mr. Kennedy,” performed by Justin Timberlake, Carey Mulligan, and Adam Driver
 6. “Green, Green Rocky Road,” performed by Oscar Isaac
 7. “The Death of Queen Jane,” performed by Oscar Isaac
 8. “The Roving Gambler” (with The Down Hill Strugglers), performed by John Cohen
 9. “The Shoals of Herring” (with Punch Brothers), performed by Oscar Isaac
 10. “The Auld Triangle,” performed by Chris Thile, Chris Eldridge, Marcus Mumford, Justin Timberlake, and Gabe Witcher
 11. “Fare Thee Well (Dink’s Song),” performed by Oscar Isaac
 12. “Farewell (unreleased studio version),” performed by Bob Dylan
 13. “Green, Green Rocky Road,” performed by Dave Van Ronk

The list of songs in *Inside Llewyn Davis*

114 *Inside Oscar Isaac*

Thirty-three-year-old Oscar Isaac, who was born Oscar Isaac Hernández in Guatemala, to a Guatemalan mother, María, and a Cuban father, was raised in Miami, Florida. Before he became an actor, he played lead guitar and sang vocals in a few bands.

For the character of Llewyn Davis, who is hardly ever off-screen, Isaac thought of Buster Keaton. “He had quite an impassive face with a melancholic stare on it,” explained Isaac. “All of these crazy things could be happening—he could be falling in love or a building could be falling on him, but it was all internalized.

“I’d say I definitely found the character through the music. I think that’s the window into his soul, his only connection with the people outside. It was an intense process, but I love the music. Sometimes thirty takes of one song. I would smoke a bunch of cigarettes and drink a bunch of beer before the take.”

For Joel, when Isaac did the audition, “it was lightning striking. The usual

problems of finding the right person and casting were compounded a thousandfold in this case because of the particular requirements of the part. Oscar was a very, very accomplished musician, but it's not like he was playing folk music his whole life or playing guitar the way Dave Van Ronk played guitar, for instance. So that's another way that T Bone was this huge part of the movie, because he was coaching."

T Bone Burnett had months with Isaac before the shooting. "What we discussed was very broad. It had to do with how he carried his guitar case, his wardrobe, hair, everything. It was a character conversation, but it was also about what music he listens to, and, in this case, it was important that he listened to music from a character point of view. It's different with every person. With Oscar, I didn't have to direct him to play guitar; he had that together already. There were just a few things we changed, the main one being his actual guitar, how he treated that and what it meant. And we talked about how you perform. There's a big difference between projecting yourself, as musicians do, and submerging yourself while projecting a whole other character, as actors do. Very few people can cross that divide and in this film we have two: Oscar and Justin Timberlake.

ROLAND TURNER (John Goodman): Solo act?

LLEWYN DAVIS: Yeah, now.

TURNER: You used to . . . what? Work with a cat? Every time you'd play a C-major, he'd puke a hairball?

DAVIS: No, I had a partner.

TURNER: Partner? What happened?

DAVIS: He threw himself off the George Washington Bridge.

TURNER: Well, shit, I wouldn't blame him. I couldn't take it either having to play Jimmy Crack Corn every night. Pardon me for saying this, but that's really fucking stupid. George Washington Bridge? You throw yourself off the BROOKLYN Bridge . . . traditionally. George Washington Bridge? Who does that? What was he, a dumbbell?

DAVIS: Not really.

TURNER: And that's when you picked up the cat? Here, cowboy chords, this would interest you. There was this act I saw in Montreux, Switzerland. . . .

DAVIS: Hey, Mister Turner, I'm wondering: would that cane fit all the way up your ass? Or would a little bit stay sticking out?

Inside Llewyn Davis

115 *That Darn Cat*

When Llewyn leaves the apartment of the Gorfeins, his older, middle-class academic friends, where he has been crashing, their marmalade cat runs out

before he can close the front door. Not having the key, he is locked out and cannot return the cat. Therefore, he takes it to his other friends, folk-singing duo Jim and Jean, to keep until he can return it to the Gorfeins. But it escapes through a window. After a long search, he finds it and returns it to its owners. However, predictably, it is the wrong cat, this being a female. “Where’s his scrotum?” yells Mrs. Gorfein. Llewyn is then stuck with it. Later, in a poignant moment, he leaves the cat in a car he has had to abandon on the highway, never to see it again. Happily, but unconvincingly, the tomcat has found its way back to its original owners.

As Sam Goldwyn was reputed to have said, “We need to put an animal in the picture for human interest.” Joel remarked, “The film doesn’t really have a plot. That concerned us at one point; that’s why we threw the cat in.”

There were, in fact, several cats, all of whom caused problems. “As the animal trainer said to us, a dog wants to please you; a cat only wants to please itself,” remarked Ethan. “So that’s a problem in terms of getting it to do a specific thing. Basically you can’t, so there were several cats that had different attributes. You then just shoot a lot of film, because 99.7 percent of it is the cat doing what you don’t want it to be doing.”

This is reminiscent of a scene from François Truffaut’s metacinematic *Day For Night* (1973), when the film crew tries to get an uncooperative cat to walk to a breakfast tray and drink the milk, but it refuses three times. Truffaut then asks for “a cat that can act.” They eventually find the studio cat, who does what is wanted.

The cat(s) in *Inside Llewyn Davis* has (have) now joined the felines in Holly Golightly’s in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, Blofeld’s cats in several James Bond movies, and Don Vito Corleone’s in *The Godfather* in the pantheon of movie cats.

In one short sequence, Llewyn, deprived of sleep and cold, passes a poster advertising *The Incredible Journey*, the Walt Disney live-action movie that follows a Labrador, a bull terrier, and a Siamese cat as they make their way through 250 miles of the Canadian wilderness. It was another film, like Disney’s *That Darn Cat* (1965), the Coens recalled affectionately from their childhood. Unfortunately, from a standpoint of accuracy, *The Incredible Journey* was released in 1963, two years after the time that *Inside Llewyn Davis* was set.

Toward the climax of the film, Llewyn discovers that the cat’s name is Ulysses, which has Joycean as well as Homeric connotations. Like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the plot follows a musician’s odyssey. None of the cats won awards, but *Inside Llewyn Davis* won the Grand Prix at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival and

was nominated for two Academy Awards, Best Cinematography and Best Sound Mixing.

115 *A Melancholy Journey*

Llewyn Davis is a struggling folk singer. His musical partner has committed suicide; his recent solo album is not selling; he has no money and is sleeping on the couches of friends and acquaintances. It is a cold winter and he has no coat. His ex-girlfriend tells him she is pregnant and asks him to pay for an abortion. “I should have had you wear double condoms. . . . You should be wearing condom on condom, and then wrap it in electrical tape.”

On the way to Chicago with an obnoxious jazz man (John Goodman) in a car driven by a beat-poet (Garrett Hedlund), while stopping on the side of a highway to rest, the driver is arrested. (One of the few contrived moments in the film.) Without the keys, Llewyn hitches a ride to a snowy Chicago where he auditions unsuccessfully at a famed folk singing club. Back in New York, in desperation, he decides to rejoin the merchant marines, but has to fork up more than he can afford for the dues and the seaman’s license. After further mishaps, he is beaten up outside the Gaslight Café, calling “Au Revoir” to his assailant. Llewyn has nothing to look forward to; he alienates everybody he’s in contact with. Only a cat allows him some friendship.

Bruno Delbonnel, the French cinematographer renowned for shooting *Amélie* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, was working with the Coen brothers for the second time after *Paris, Je T’Aime*. (Deakins was busy shooting *Skyfall*.)

“When I read the script, I thought it was like a folk song, and it seems to me that American folk songs have something very sad and unhappy in their stories,” Delbonnel observed. “That was the idea behind the look of the movie: How to convey this sadness? When I suggested the album cover for *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, they said they had that image in mind as well.” In that picture, Dylan walks with a woman on a New York street under a wintry sky. He is wearing a jacket that doesn’t seem quite warm enough, and they are treading on dirty, melted snow. “They told me they wanted ‘a slushy New York,’” which Delbonnel’s bleak, muted photography provided.

Eileen Jones in *The Jacobin* magazine wrote: “Here is an alternate vision of America in its great era of prosperity. The Coens have made a movie about failure in an era when, the standard pop-histories tell us, nobody really failed. They continue to look at the struggle of those on the margins, at failure among

bungling strivers with grandiose dreams. The directors somehow maintain their faith that we'll actually be interested enough in our own lived experience to appreciate their black comic vision of it."

My grandmother was Brooklyn Irish, and time had stopped for her around 1910. She was a great storyteller and an indefatigable singer. She never stopped singing except to talk and eat . . . and she didn't have a good voice, but boy was she loud! She drove the neighbors nuts. Most of her repertoire had been learnt from her mother in Ireland and I picked up all sorts of songs from her. I can still sing *The Gypsy's Warning* from beginning to end. I learned versions of Irish tunes with Gaelic choruses. Many years later, Bob Dylan heard me fooling around with one of my grandmother's favorites, *The Chimes of Trinity*. He made me sing it to him until he had the gist of it then reworked it into *Chimes of Freedom*. Her version was better.

The Mayor of MacDougal Street, a memoir by Dave Van Ronk, with Elijah Wald

XIX

HAIL, COENS!

“Hail Caesar! is about the movie business and life and religion and faith.”

116 Hollywood Revisited

AT THE TIME OF WRITING, Joel and Ethan were shooting *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) on location in Los Angeles. A return to the world of *Barton Fink*, the film, which takes place in a single day, is a satire set in the Hollywood of the 1950s and stars established members of the Coen repertory company: Josh Brolin, George Clooney, and Frances McDormand, plus Ralph Fiennes, Channing Tatum, Scarlett Johansson, Alden Ehrenreich, Jonah Hill, Christopher Lambert, and Tilda Swinton as powerful gossip columnist Hedda Hopper.

Brolin plays real-life Hollywood “fixer” Eddie Mannix, whose job it is to keep the studio’s stars in line, and who is at work trying to find a starlet who has mysteriously disappeared in the middle of shooting a film on ancient Rome. (Hence the title!) Coincidentally, in *Hollywoodland* (2006), Mannix was portrayed by Bob Hoskins, and his wife was played by Diane Lane. Lane was previously married to Brolin and Lambert who appear in *Hail, Caesar!* together.

Lambert has the role of a married European filmmaker whose scandalous affair with the young starlet (Johansson) becomes another headache for Mannix. Johansson suddenly becomes pregnant as her film is about to go into production. (This mirrored her real-life situation, when she became pregnant a couple of weeks before shooting *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.) Clooney, of course, plays a Hollywood idol called Baird Whitlock. In the film within the film, Clooney plays a Roman guard at the crucifixion of a blond Jesus.

Roger Deakins, who had become an advocate of shooting digitally on Arri Alexa cameras, has switched back to 35mm film, because the Coens dislike digital cameras and because shooting on film suits a period piece set in 1950s Hollywood.

As with all Coen movies, the oft-used expression “eagerly awaited” is an understatement.

FILMOGRAPHY

*Unless stated, all the films were produced by Ethan Coen, directed by Joel Coen, and written by Ethan and Joel Coen.

Blood Simple (1984) *Cast:* John Getz (Ray), Frances McDormand (Abby), Dan Hedaya (Julian Marty), M. Emmet Walsh (Visser), Samm-Art Williams (Meurice), Deborah Neumann (Debra). *Production:* River Road Productions. *Executive Producer:* Daniel F. Bacaner. *Associate Producer:* Mark Silverman. *Director of Photography:* Barry Sonnenfeld. *Production Designer:* Jane Musky. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Editor:* Roderick Jaynes, Don Wiegmann. 99 mins.

Plot: Julian Marty, a jealous bar owner, hires a sleazy private detective to kill his wife, Abby, and her lover, Ray, one of his bartenders. But the detective fakes the killing by doctoring photographs of the lovers in bed to look as though they have been shot. He collects the money for the job and then shoots the bar owner with the wife's gun, which he has stolen. He leaves the gun at the scene of the crime. Unfortunately, the lover comes to the bar that night, finds the body and the gun, and assumes that the wife committed the murder. He cleans up the blood and goes to bury the body in a field. However, he discovers that the husband is still alive and is forced to finish the job himself. Abby then believes that Ray has killed Marty, and becomes afraid of him, while he believes she is using him. Ray discovers the doctored photos in Marty's office, and the detective, realizing this, shoots Ray and then tries to kill Abby. He chases her into the bathroom, but she escapes through the window into the next room. He puts his ear to the wall, and reaches out to open the window of the room, but she stabs his hand with a knife, pinning it to the window sill. In order to free his hand, he shoots scores of bullets into the wall. He punches a hole in the wall with his one hand in order to free the other on the other side. In terrible pain, he confronts her cowering in a corner. She shoots him, crying, "I ain't afraid of you, Marty!" As the detective dies, he says, "Well, ma'am . . . If I see him, I'll sure give him the message."

Raising Arizona (1987) *Cast:* Nicolas Cage (H. I. McDunnough), Holly Hunter (Ed), Trey Wilson (Nathan Arizona, Sr.), John Goodman (Gale), William Forsythe (Evelle), Sam McMurray (Glen), Frances McDormand (Dot), Randall “Tex” Cobb (Leonard Smalls), T.J. Kuhn, Jr. (Nathan Arizona, Jr.). *Production:* Circle Films. *Executive Producer:* James Jacks. *Co-producer:* Mark Silverman. *Associate Producer:* Deborah Reinisch. *Director of Photography:* Barry Sonnenfeld. *Production Designer:* Jane Musky. *Costume Design:* Richard Hornung. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Editor:* Michael R. Miller. *Storyboards:* J. Todd Anderson. 94 mins.

Plot: Incompetent robber H. I. (Hi) McDunnough keeps getting caught and returned to the same penitentiary. Every time he gets arrested, he is fingerprinted by the same female cop, Edwina—Ed for short. They fall in love and marry. Ed wants a baby but discovers she is infertile. When they hear that wealthy furniture store owner Nathan Arizona’s wife has had quintuplets, they decide to kidnap one of them because five babies must be “more than they can handle.” They kidnap Nathan Arizona, Jr., and take him to their trailer home. Meanwhile, two of Hi’s former cellmates, Gale and Evelle, escape from prison seeking shelter with Hi and Ed. When they discover that the baby is the kidnapped Arizona child, they decide to get the ransom money themselves. Also on the trail of the reward money is Leonard Smalls, a bounty-hunting biker. After confronting the biker and seeing him being blown up by his own hand-grenade, Hi and Ed decide to return the baby to his parents. They can only dream of having a family.

Miller’s Crossing (1990) *Cast:* Gabriel Byrne (Tom Reagan), Marcia Gay Harden (Verna Bernbaum), John Turturro (Bernie Bernbaum), Jon Polito (Johnny Caspar), J. E. Freeman (Eddie Dane), Albert Finney (Leo), Steve Buscemi (Mink). *Production:* Circle Films. *Executive Producer:* Ben Barenholtz. *Co-producer:* Mark Silverman, *Director of Photography:* Barry Sonnenfeld. *Production Designer:* Dennis Gassner. *Costume Design:* Richard Hornung. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Editor:* Michael R. Miller. *Storyboards:* J. Todd Anderson. Released by Twentieth Century Fox. 115 mins.

Plot: Gangster Johnny Caspar tries to convince his rival mob boss Leo to let him kill Bernie Bernbaum, a bookie whom he suspects of doing the dirty on him. But Leo refuses because he is in love with Bernie’s sister Verna. Gambler Tom Reagan, Leo’s friend, advises Leo not to get into a gang war. Meanwhile, Tom is sleeping with Verna. Caspar’s men try to kill Leo, and a series of killings result.

Leo finds out that Tom has betrayed him and their friendship is broken. Tom goes over to Caspar's side, where he is forced to prove his loyalty by killing Bernie. He takes Bernie into the woods at Miller's Crossing, but fakes the murder and lets Bernie escape. However, Bernie returns to blackmail Tom, who has to kill him at the end.

Barton Fink (1991) *Cast:* John Turturro (Barton Fink), John Goodman (Charlie Meadows), Judy Davis (Audrey Taylor), Michael Lerner (Jack Lipnick), John Mahoney (W. P. Mayhew), Tony Shalhoub (Ben Geisler), Jon Polito (Lou Breeze), Steve Buscemi (Chet). *Production:* Circle Films. *Executive Producers:* Ben Barenholtz, Ted Pedas, Jim Pedas, Bill Durkin. *Co-producer:* Graham Place. *Director of Photography:* Roger Deakins. *Production Designer:* Dennis Gassner. *Costume Design:* Richard Hornung. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Editor:* Roderick Jaynes. *Storyboards:* J. Todd Anderson. 116 mins.

Plot: Barton Fink has just had a hit on Broadway with his social-problem play "Bare Ruined Choirs." He accepts an offer to go to Hollywood as a writer for Capitol Pictures. In Los Angeles, he finds himself staying in the eerie, cavernous old Hotel Earle. The head of the studio, Jack Lipnick, asks Barton to write a wrestling picture for Wallace Beery. But Barton does not know what they expect from him and he seeks the assistance of W. P. Mayhew, an alcoholic Southern novelist in Hollywood to make money, and Mayhew's mistress Audrey Taylor, who helps write her lover's scripts. Barton has writer's block, and when he has to deliver a treatment to Lipnick the following day, Audrey comes to his hotel room to help him out. They go to bed together, but when Barton wakes up, he finds Audrey dead beside him with multiple stab wounds. He screams, attracting the attention of his next-door neighbor, the insurance salesman Charlie Meadows, with whom he has become friendly. Meadows disappears for a while, and the police ask Barton for information about his neighbor, informing Barton that Charlie is really a serial killer called Karl Mundt. Meadows returns to the hotel and shoots one of the cops as the hotel catches fire. Barton manages to complete a script, but Lipnick rejects it. "You ain't no writer, Fink," the mogul tells him. "You're a goddamn write-off." Dejected, Barton goes to the beach holding a box that Charlie had asked him to keep for him.

The Hudsucker Proxy (1993) *Cast:* Tim Robbins (Norville Barnes), Jennifer Jason Leigh (Amy Archer), Paul Newman (Sidney J. Mussburger), Charles Durning (Waring Hudsucker), John Mahoney (Chief), Jim True (Buzz), William

Cobbs (Moses). *Production*: Silver Pictures/Working Title Films. *Executive Producers*: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner. *Co-producer*: Graham Place. *Director of Photography*: Roger Deakins. *Production Designer*: Dennis Gassner. *Costume Design*: Richard Hornung. *Music*: Carter Burwell. *Editor*: Thom Noble. *Storyboards*: J. Todd Anderson. 113 mins.

Plot: New York, 1958. Norville Barnes has arrived in New York from Muncie, Indiana, hoping to become a success with his idea for a hula hoop. On his first day in his job in the mail room of Hudsucker Industries, the founder, Waring Hudsucker, commits suicide by throwing himself out of the window of the 44th floor of the Hudsucker building. The next in line, Sidney J. Mussburger, decides to place a pawn in the chairman's seat so stocks will fall and he can buy them cheaply and take control of the company. When Norville comes to Mussburger's office to deliver a letter, Mussburger discovers that the young simpleton would be ideal as the Hudsucker proxy. Meanwhile, top reporter Amy Archer gets a job as Norville's secretary, in order to expose him as a phony. But when the hula hoop becomes a great success, the company's shares rocket, and Norville is feted as a hero. Meanwhile, he has fallen in love with Amy. Mussburger tries to get Norville declared insane, and exposes the truth about Amy. On New Year's Eve, a depressed Norville jumps off the top of the building, but is rescued by Moses, the clock-keeper, who stops the clock while Norville is in mid-air. He meets Waring Hudsucker, now an angel, who comes floating down to greet him. Hudsucker tells Norville that his will states that his share of the company is to go to his successor.

Fargo (1996) *Cast*: William H. Macy (Jerry Lundgaard), Frances McDormand (Marge Gunderson), Steve Buscemi (Carl Showalter), Peter Stormare (Gaear Grimsrud), Kristin Rudr d (Jean Lundgaard), Harve Presnell (Wade Gustafson), Tony Denman (Scotty Lundgaard), John Carroll Lynch (Norm Gunderson). *Production*: Polygram/Working Title Films. *Executive Producers*: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner. *Director of Photography*: Roger Deakins. *Production Designer*: Rick Heinrichs. *Costume Design*: Mary Zophres. *Music*: Carter Burwell. *Editor*: Roderick Jaynes. *Storyboards*: J. Todd Anderson. 98 mins.

Plot: Minneapolis car-dealer Jerry Lundgaard, in financial difficulties, hires two petty gangsters, Carl Showalter and Gaear Grimsrud, to kidnap his wife so that when his rich father-in-law pays the ransom, he will get the money, less what he owes the kidnappers. After they have kidnapped her, they are stopped by a state

trooper on the road. Gaear shoots him dead, as well as a witness to the crime. Police chief Marge Gunderson, seven months pregnant, investigates the murders. Meanwhile, Jerry's father-in-law Wade Gustafson has taken a suitcase with the money to hand over to Carl, but is shot while doing so. Marge's investigations lead her to Jerry, and finally to the isolated cabin where the kidnappers are holed up and where Jerry's wife has been killed. Marge arrives to find that Gaear has chopped up his partner, and is feeding him into a wood-chipping machine. Marge manages to wound him with her gun and arrest him. Jerry is also arrested. Marge returns to her husband Norm, and domestic bliss.

The Big Lebowski (1997) *Cast:* Jeff Bridges (The Dude), John Goodman (Walter Sobchak), Steve Buscemi (Donny), Julianne Moore (Maude Lebowski), David Huddleston (The Big Lebowski), Philip Seymour Hoffman (Brandt), Tara Reid (Bunny Lebowski), John Turturro (Jesus Quintana), Ben Gazzara (Jackie Treehorn), Sam Elliott (The Stranger). *Production:* Polygram/Working Title Films. *Executive Producers:* Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner. *Director of Photography:* Roger Deakins. *Production Designer:* Rick Heinrichs. *Costume Design:* Mary Zophres. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Editor:* Roderick Jaynes. *Storyboards:* J. Todd Anderson. 113 mins.

Plot: Los Angeles, 1991. Jeff “Dude” Lebowski returns to his beach cabin to find two heavies waiting for him. They shove his head down the toilet and piss on his carpet. He discovers that they had mistaken him for the wealthy philanthropist Jeff Lebowski. Dude visits the Big Lebowski’s mansion to seek compensation for his rug. Lebowski, who is in a wheelchair, refuses. Later, his namesake tells Dude that his young wife Bunny has been kidnapped and wants Dude to hand over the ransom. But Dude is persuaded by his bowling buddy Walter Sobchak to steal the ransom, as he doesn’t believe Bunny has really been kidnapped. However, the plan goes completely wrong, and the pals decide to track down Bunny themselves. Dude is abducted and taken to the house of Jackie Treehorn, a porn film producer, who wants to know where Bunny, one of his stars, is. Dude is then seduced by Maude Lebowski, the Big Lebowski’s artist daughter, who tells him she wants a baby. Three German anarchists, who pretended to have kidnapped Bunny for the ransom, confront Dude, Walter, and their friend Donny outside the bowling alley. They send the anarchists fleeing, but Donny dies of a heart attack.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000) *Cast:* George Clooney (Ulysses Everett

McGill), John Turturro (Pete), Tim Blake Nelson (Delmar O'Donnell), Michael Badalucco (George "Baby Face" Nelson), Charles Durning (Pappy O'Daniel), John Goodman (Big Dan Teague), Wayne Duvall (Homer Stokes), Holly Hunter (Penny Wharvey McGill), Chris Thomas King (Tommy Johnson). *Production*: Universal. *Executive Producers*: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner. *Director of Photography*: Roger Deakins. *Production Designer*: Dennis Gassner. *Costume Design*: Mary Zophres. *Music*: Carter Burwell. *Editor*: Roderick Jaynes. *Storyboards*: J. Todd Anderson. 106 mins.

Plot: Ulysses Everett McGill has escaped from a Mississippi chain gang with Pete and Delmar. He tells them that he wants to get home to his wife Penny and six daughters, and to find the money from a bank heist that he has buried. The trio arrive at Pete's cousin's farm, where they get rid of their leg irons. However, the cousin, Wash Hogwallop, betrays them to the county police, and they go on the run again. They meet up with Tommy Johnson, a black guitarist, and the four of them make a recording of "Man of Constant Sorrow" as the Soggy Bottom Boys. They then meet up with "Baby Face" Nelson, with whom they rob a few banks. Meanwhile, Pete has been seduced by three women and gotten himself rearrested. While Everett and Delmar are having a meal in a restaurant, they are approached by Big Dan Teague, who claims to be a Bible salesman. At a picnic, Big Dan beats them up and steals their money. After rescuing Pete from the prison camp, they come across the lynching of a black man, Tommy, by the Ku Klux Klan. They rescue Tommy and make for a political rally where they perform their song, which has now become a hit. Everett comes across his wife, who has divorced him and is about to marry Vernon T. Waldrip. However, as the valley is flooded, Everett convinces her that he has changed.

The Man Who Wasn't There (2001) *Cast*: Billy Bob Thornton (Ed Crane), Frances McDormand (Doris Crane), Michael Badalucco (Frank), James Gandolfini (Dave "Big Dave" Brewster), Katherine Borowitz (Ann Nirdlinger), Jon Polito (Creighton Tolliver), Scarlett Johansson (Rachel "Birdy" Abundas), Richard Jenkins (Walter Abundas), Tony Shalhoub (Freddy Riedenschneider). *Production*: Universal/Working Title. *Executive Producers*: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner. *Director of Photography*: Roger Deakins. *Production Designer*: Dennis Gassner. *Costume Design*: Mary Zophres. *Music*: Carter Burwell. *Editors*: Roderick Jaynes, Tricia Cooke. 116 mins.

Plot: Santa Rosa, California, 1949. Ed Crane is a taciturn barber who has virtually

no relationship with his wife, Doris. She is having an affair with her married boss, Big Dave, the manager of the local department store, but Ed has never felt motivated to do anything about it. However, when Creighton Tolliver, a shifty entrepreneur, comes to town, he makes it known that he is looking for a silent partner to help finance his exciting new business: dry-cleaning. Ed sees this as a way out of his dreary life, so he schemes to raise the ten grand he needs to buy into the venture by blackmailing his wife's lover. This leads to two trials for murder.

Intolerable Cruelty (2003) *Cast:* George Clooney (Miles Massey), Catherine Zeta-Jones (Marylin Rexroth), Geoffrey Rush (Donovan Donaly), Cedric the Entertainer (Gus Petch), Edward Herrmann (Rex Rexroth), Paul Adelstein (Wrigley), Richard Jenkins (Freddy Bender), Billy Bob Thornton (Howard D. Doyle). *Production:* Universal. *Executive Producers:* Sean Daniel, James Jacks. *Screenplay:* Robert Ramsey, Matthew Stone, Joel and Ethan Coen. *Director of Photography:* Roger Deakins. *Production Designer:* Leslie McDonald. *Costume Design:* Mary Zophres. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Editor:* Roderick Jaynes. *Storyboard:* J. Todd Anderson. 100 mins.

Plot: A fabulously successful Los Angeles divorce attorney, Miles Massey, specializes in protecting the wealth of men caught cheating by their wives. However, Miles falls for Marylin Rexroth while representing her philandering husband, Rex Rexroth, in a divorce settlement trial, although he knows that the much-divorced Marylin is a hard-headed woman pursuing financial independence through serial matrimony. Miles thinks he can change her by marrying her himself, but a wife-seeking Texan oilman, Howard D. Doyle, a determined private eye, Gus Petch, and a soap opera producer, Donovan Donaly, all stand in his way.

The Ladykillers (2004) *Cast:* Tom Hanks (Professor G.H. Dorr), Irma P. Hall (Marva Munson), Marlon Wayans (Gawain MacSam), J. K. Simmons (Garth Pancake), Tzi Ma (The General), Ryan Hurst (Lump Hudson), Diane Delano (Mountain Girl). *Production:* Touchstone/Buena Vista. *Producers:* Joel Coen, Ethan Coen, Barry Sonnenfeld. *Director of Photography:* Roger Deakins. *Production Designer:* Dennis Gassner. *Costume Design:* Mary Zophres. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Editor:* Roderick Jaynes. *Storyboard:* J. Todd Anderson. 104 mins.

Plot: Goldthwait Higginson Dorr III, PhD, is a charlatan professor who has assembled an incompetent gang of “experts” for the heist of a Mississippi riverboat casino. The thieves: experts in explosions, tunneling, and muscle, with the professor as the “inside man.” The base of their operations: the cellar of an unsuspecting, church-going African American widow named Mrs. Munson. The ruse: the five need a place to practice their music. When Mrs. Munson stumbles onto their plot and threatens to notify the authorities, the felonious five decide to kill her, though it’s not as easy as they thought.

No Country For Old Men (2007) *Cast:* Tommy Lee Jones (Ed Tom Bell), Javier Bardem (Anton Chigurh), Josh Brolin (Llewelyn Moss), Woody Harrelson (Carson Wells), Kelly Macdonald (Carla Jean Moss). *Production:* Paramount Vantage/Miramax. *Co-Producer:* Scott Rudin. *Executive Producers:* Robert Graf, Mark Roybal. *Director of Photography:* Roger Deakins. *Production Designer:* Jess Gonchor. *Costume Design:* Mary Zophres. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Editor:* Roderick Jaynes. 122 mins.

Plot: West Texas, June 1980. Llewelyn Moss, hunting pronghorn in the desert, comes across the aftermath of a drug deal gone wrong: several dead men and dogs, and two million dollars in a leather pilot’s case that he takes to his trailer home. He sends his wife Carla Jean to be with her mother, and makes his way to a motel in the next county, where he hides the case in the air duct of his room. Anton Chigurh, a ruthless hitman who has been hired to recover the money, has escaped arrest by strangling a sheriff’s deputy and stolen a car by using a captive bolt pistol to kill the driver. He tracks Moss to his hotel with the aid of a transponder hidden inside the case. However, Moss, who has retrieved the money from the air vent, flees to Mexico. There, Carson Wells, another hired operative, tries to persuade Moss to accept protection in return for the money. Chigurh ambushes Wells at his hotel and kills him, just as Moss telephones the room. Chigurh promises Moss that Carla Jean will go untouched if he gives up the money. Moss refuses. Moss arranges to meet his wife at a motel in El Paso to give her the money and send her out of harm’s way; instead, she reluctantly accepts protection for her husband from Bell. But the sheriff arrives at the end of a gunfight with Mexican drug dealers that leaves Moss dead. Carla Jean returns from her mother’s funeral to find Chigurh waiting in her bedroom. When she tells him she does not have the money, he tosses a coin for her life. Chigurh leaves the house, alone. As he drives through town, he is injured in a car accident

and limps away from his damaged vehicle.

Burn After Reading (2008) *Cast:* George Clooney (Harry Pfarrer), Frances McDormand (Linda Litzke), John Malkovich (Osborne Cox), Tilda Swinton (Katie Cox), Brad Pitt (Chad Feldheimer), Richard Jenkins (Ted Treffon). *Production:* Relativity Media/StudioCanal/Working Title Films. *Executive Producers:* Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Robert Graf. *Director of Photography:* Emmanuel Lubezki. *Production Designer:* Jess Gonshor. *Costume Design:* Mary Zophres. *Music:* Carter Burwell, *Editor:* Roderick Jaynes. 96 mins.

Plot: Faced with a demotion at work due to a drinking problem, Osborne Cox quits his job as a CIA analyst and resolves to write a memoir about his life and career. When his pediatrician wife, Katie (Tilda Swinton), finds out, she sees it as a justifiable opportunity to file for divorce and continue her adulterous affair with Harry Pfarrer, a womanizing Treasury Department employee. Taking her lawyer's advice, she copies financial records and several other files from her husband's computer onto a CD.

When the CD gets left on the locker room floor of Hardbodies, a local gym, it falls into the hands of personal trainer Chad Feldheimer and his coworker Linda Litzke, who mistakenly believe it to be highly sensitive government information. They plan to give the disc back to Osborne for a reward. But when a meeting with Osborne goes horribly wrong, Chad and Linda turn over the disc to the Russian embassy. Linda persuades Chad to sneak into the Coxes' home to get more files from their computer. Meanwhile Harry, who has moved in with Katie, finds Chad hiding in a wardrobe and fatally shoots him in the head. Believing the Russians have kidnapped Chad, Linda then turns to Ted Treffon, the kind-hearted manager of Hardbodies, to go to the Coxes' home to search Osborne's computer. Unemployed and having spent the past several days living on a small boat, Osborne returns to his house. Finding Ted in the basement, Osborne initially takes him to be Katie's lover. He fires a gunshot at Ted, wounding him. Ted manages to get out of the house, only to be fatally attacked by a hatchet-wielding Osborne. Osborne is then shot by CIA operatives and is in a coma. Harry escapes to Venezuela.

A Serious Man (2009) *Cast:* Michael Stuhlbarg (Larry Gopnik), Richard Kind (Arthur Gopnik), Sari Lennick (Judith Gopnik), Fred Melamed (Sy Ableman), Aaron Wolff (Danny Gopnik), Jessica McManus (Sarah Gopnik). *Production:* Relativity Media/StudioCanal/Working Title Films. *Executive Producers:* Tim

Bevan, Eric Fellner, Robert Graf. *Director of Photography*: Roger Deakins. *Production Designer*: Jess Gonshor. *Costume Design*: Mary Zophres. *Music*: Carter Burwell. *Editor*: Roderick Jaynes. 106 mins.

Plot: In an unnamed Eastern European shtetl, a Jewish man tells his wife that he was helped on his way home by Traitle Groshkover, whom he has invited in for soup. She says Groshkover is dead and must be a dybbuk. Groshkover arrives and laughs off the accusation, but she plunges an ice pick into his chest. Bleeding, he exits into the snowy night. In Minnesota in the late 1960s, Larry Gopnik is a professor of physics. His wife, Judith, tells him she wants a divorce so she can marry widower Sy Ableman. Their son Danny owes twenty dollars for marijuana. Larry's brother, Arthur, sleeps on the couch. Larry faces an impending vote on his application for tenure, and is bribed by a Korean student to give him a passing grade. At the insistence of Judith and Sy, Larry and Arthur move into a nearby motel. Judith empties the couple's bank accounts, leaving Larry penniless. Larry learns Arthur faces charges of solicitation and sodomy.

Larry turns to rabbis for consolation, but they offer none. Sy is killed in a car crash. Larry is proud and moved by Danny's bar mitzvah, unaware that his son is under the influence of marijuana. The mail brings a large bill from Arthur's lawyer, so Larry decides to pass the Korean student and keep the bribe money. Whereupon Larry's doctor calls, asking to see him immediately about the results of a chest X-ray, and a massive tornado bears down on Danny's school.

True Grit (2010) *Cast*: Jeff Bridges (Reuben J. "Rooster" Cogburn), Hailee Steinfeld (Mattie Ross), Matt Damon (LaBoeuf), Josh Brolin (Tom Chaney), Barry Pepper ("Lucky" Ned Pepper). *Production*: Skydance Productions/Mike Zoss Productions/Scott Rudin Productions. *Co-Producer*: Scott Rudin. *Director of Photography*: Roger Deakins. *Production Designer*: Jess Gonshor. *Costume Design*: Mary Zophres. *Music*: Carter Burwell. *Editor*: Roderick Jaynes. 111 mins.

Plot: Mattie Ross explains that her father was murdered by Tom Chaney when she was fourteen years old. While collecting her father's body in Fort Smith, Arkansas, Mattie queries the local sheriff about the search for Chaney. After being told that Chaney has fled with "Lucky" Ned Pepper and his gang into Indian Territory, where the sheriff has no authority, she inquires about hiring a deputy U.S. marshal. She approaches the heavy-drinking, one-eyed Cogburn, who rebuffs her offer, not believing she has enough money to hire him. Mattie manages to raise the money, and joins Cogburn and Texas Ranger LaBoeuf in

the search for Chaney. Later, LaBoeuf leaves Mattie and Cogburn after an argument. They track down the Pepper gang, with whom Chaney is reportedly travelling. LaBoeuf rejoins the two of them, helping to shoot two gang members, but Pepper escapes. While getting water from a nearby stream, Mattie encounters Chaney. She shoots and wounds him, but he survives and drags her back to Pepper, who forces Cogburn to leave by threatening to kill her. Being short a horse, Pepper leaves Mattie with Chaney. He tries to knife her just as LaBoeuf suddenly appears and knocks Chaney out. They watch from a cliff as Cogburn takes on the remaining members of Pepper's gang, killing two and wounding Pepper, before his horse is shot and falls, trapping Cogburn's leg. Before Pepper can kill him, LaBoeuf snipes Pepper from roughly four hundred yards away with his Sharps rifle. Chaney however regains consciousness and knocks LaBoeuf unconscious with a rock. Mattie seizes LaBoeuf's rifle and shoots Chaney in the chest. The recoil also knocks her into a deep pit. Cogburn soon arrives, but Mattie is bitten by a rattlesnake before he can get to her. Cogburn cuts into her hand to suck out as much of the venom as he can, and then rides day and night to get Mattie to a doctor, carrying her on foot after Blackie, her horse, collapses from exhaustion. Twenty-five years later, in 1903, Mattie reveals that her left forearm was amputated due to gangrene from the snakebite. She never saw Cogburn again but receives a note from him inviting her to meet him at a travelling Wild West show in which he performs, only to learn, on arrival, that he died three days earlier.

Inside Llewyn Davis (2013) *Cast:* Oscar Isaac (Llewyn Davis), Carey Mulligan (Jean Berkey), John Goodman (Roland Turner), Garrett Hedlund (Johnny Five), Justin Timberlake (Jim Berkey), F. Murray Abraham (Bud Grossman).

Production: Mike Zoss Productions/Scott Rudin Productions/Studio Canal. *Co-Producer:* Scott Rudin. *Director of Photography:* Bruno Delbonnel. *Production Designer:* Jess Gonshor. *Costume Design:* Mary Zophres. *Music:* T Bone Burnett. *Editor:* Roderick Jaynes. 104 mins.

Plot: In February 1961, Llewyn Davis is a struggling folk singer in New York City's Greenwich Village. His musical partner, Mike Timlin, has committed suicide; his recent solo album, *Inside Llewyn Davis*, is not selling; he has no money and is sleeping on the couches of friends and acquaintances. Llewyn wakes up in the apartment of two of his older friends, the Gorfeins. When he leaves, the Gorfeins' cat escapes. Llewyn takes the cat to the apartment of Jim and

Jean Berkey. Jean tells Llewyn she is pregnant. The next morning, the Gorfeins' cat escapes again. Later, Jean, fearing that Llewyn may be the father, asks him to pay for an abortion. At the gynecologist's office, Llewyn sets up Jean's appointment and discovers that a previous girlfriend, whose abortion he also paid for, decided to keep the baby without telling him. While talking to Jean at a café, Llewyn spots what he believes to be the Gorfeins' cat and returns it that evening. But Mrs. Gorfein discovers that the cat is not theirs. Llewyn leaves with the cat. He rides with two musicians driving to Chicago, the laconic beat poet Johnny Five and the odious jazz musician Roland Turner. At a roadside restaurant, Roland collapses from a heroin overdose. The three stop on the side of the highway to rest. When a police officer tells them to move on, Johnny resists and is arrested. Without the keys, Llewyn abandons the car, leaving the cat and the unconscious Roland behind. In Chicago, Llewyn auditions for Bud Grossman's nightclub. Grossman says Llewyn is not suited to be a solo performer. Llewyn hitchhikes back to New York. There he attempts to rejoin the merchant marines. He gets a gig at the Gaslight Café. At the café, Llewyn heckles a woman as she sings. The next evening, Llewyn performs at the Gaslight. Behind the Gaslight, Llewyn is beaten by a shadowy suited man for heckling his wife. Llewyn watches as the man leaves in a taxi.

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INDEX

- Abraham, F. Murray, 285
Allen, Woody, 20, 30, 44, 159, 183
Altman, Robert, 17, 21, 25, 148, 190, 281
Anderson, J. Todd, 91, 115, 129, 162, 194
- Bardem, Javier, xiv, 28, 241–42, 245–46, 249, 251
Barenholtz, Ben, 85, 88, 94, 108–9
Barton Fink, 2, 12, 18, 22, 26–27, 29, 32–33, 43, 53, 68, 73, 75, 105, 110–12, 121, 124–38, 140, 141–42, 158, 162, 171, 177, 184, 188, 222, 225
Big Lebowski, The, 5, 7, 10, 21, 24–28, 33–34, 41, 46–47, 52, 60, 73, 75, 81, 86, 105, 112, 121, 136, 168, 176–93, 225, 238, 250, 255, 273
Blood Simple, xiii, 8–9, 11, 13, 21, 24–27, 32, 46, 53, 56, 58, 61–87, 88–91, 93, 95, 97, 102–3, 109, 112, 119–20, 133–34, 136, 139–40, 158–59, 163, 168, 171–72, 187, 238
Bridges, Jeff, 178, 181, 183, 186, 268, 270, 273, 277
Brolin, Josh, 240, 247–48, 269, 274, 292
Burn After Reading, xiv, 26, 168, 249–56
Burnett, T Bone, 284, 287
Burwell, Carter, 23, 115, 119–20, 161, 207, 228, 251, 278
Buscemi, Steve, 45, 47, 120, 161, 163, 169, 184, 236–37
Byrne, Gabriel, 35, 43, 57, 111, 113, 116, 119, 183
- Cage, Nicolas, 92–93, 99, 183
Cain, James M., xiii, 3, 26, 57, 69, 72–73, 209, 217, 219, 239
Capra, Frank, 146–47, 150, 153
Clooney, George, 4, 48, 149, 197, 200–1, 204–7, 222, 225, 227–28, 250–56, 292–93
Cobb, Randall “Tex”, 92
Coen, Buster, 170, 195, 274
Coen, Debbie, 56, 58
Coen, Ed, 47, 55
Coen, Pedro, 153, 154, 169, 170, 195
Coen, Rena, 40, 47
Cooke, Tricia, 14, 161, 180, 207
Courtenay, Tom, 281
Crimewave, 63, 90, 91
- Damon, Matt, 269, 272–74, 278
Darkman, 107
Deakins, Roger, 12, 24, 132, 152, 161, 164–67, 173, 180, 202–5, 218, 220–21, 228, 234, 237, 241, 250, 276–77, 293
Delbonnel, Bruno, 237, 290
Diaz, Cameron, 281
Durning, Charles, 151, 155
- Elliott, Sam, 190
Evil Dead, 62–66, 83, 169
Evil Dead II, 62, 64–65, 107

Fargo, 5, 15, 17, 23, 26, 28–29, 38–39, 40, 45, 47, 52, 57, 63, 68, 74, 114, 118, 133, 153, 155–75, 176, 192, 210, 222

Finney, Albert, 111, 116, 118, 158

Firth, Colin, 281

Gambit, 233, 280–82

Gassner, Dennis, 30, 115, 133, 143, 202, 212, 296, 297, 298, 301, 302, 303

Gazzara, Ben, 33, 86, 88, 300

Goodman, John, 9–10, 33, 41, 43, 52, 57, 94, 125, 133–34, 177, 179–81, 183, 200, 283, 289

Grazer, Brian, 227

Hail Caesar, 292–93

Hall, Irma P., 231

Hanks, Tom, 231

Harden, Marcia Gay, 35, 113

Hathaway, Henry, 268, 276

Hedaya, Dan, 56

Heinrichs, Rick, 165, 179–81

Hornung, Richard, 30, 115–16, 161

Huddleston, David, 189

Hudsucker Proxy, The, xiv, 4, 9–10, 22–24, 27, 29, 32–34, 36, 46, 63, 66, 68–69, 81, 90, 105, 139–54, 156, 158, 161, 167–69, 184, 187, 192, 211, 219

Hunter, Holly, 55, 72, 77, 84, 93

Inside Llewyn Davis, xv, 282–91

Intolerable Cruelty, 26, 168, 216, 221, 222–29, 234, 254, 281

Isaac, Oscar, 283, 286–87

Jason Leigh, Jennifer, 148–49

Jaynes, Roderick, 2, 5, 84, 171–72, 180, 228, 230

Jones, Tommy Lee, 240, 242, 246, 273

Ladykillers, The (1955), 224, 230, 234

Ladykillers, The (2004), 46, 224–25, 229–35, 281

Lerner, Michael, 43, 128, 259

Lievssay, Skip, 99, 115

Lubezki, Emmanuel, 250

Macdonald, Kelly, 240, 244

Macy, William H., 137, 158, 162–63, 169, 171, 173

Malkovich, John, 250, 252–56

Man Who Wasn't There, The, xiii, 211–12, 223, 225, 250, 254

McCarthy, Cormac, 238–41, 271

McDormand, Frances, 250–55, 265, 292

Milius, John, 177

Miller's Crossing, 1–2, 7, 9, 13–14, 24, 27, 29, 35, 43, 45, 47, 53, 57, 63, 68, 73, 91, 95, 105, 107–124, 132–33, 136, 153, 155, 158, 161, 168, 171, 177, 184, 187, 189

Moore, Julianne, 182

Naked Man, The, 129, 194

Neeson, Liam, 107

- Nelson, Tim, 197, 200–1, 204–5, 207
Newman, Paul, 6, 142, 149–50, 169
No Country For Old Men, xiv, 26, 28, 187, 236–37, 247, 249, 250, 273–77
- O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, 4, 6, 7, 9, 24, 26, 28, 34, 36, 46, 48, 60, 73, 112–13, 125, 127, 149, 158, 168, 187, 188, 192–208, 211, 232, 252, 284, 289
- Odets, Clifford, 127, 130, 131
Ono, Yoko, 21, 182–83
- Paris Je T'Aime*, 236
Peckinpah, Sam, 244
Pitt, Brad, 149, 210, 250–51, 253, 255–56
Polito, Jon, 9, 13, 112–13, 213
Portis, Charles, 257, 273, 275–76, 278
- Raimi, Sam, 13, 21, 38, 61–64, 66, 84, 86, 108, 110, 139, 150, 152
Raising Arizona, 6, 9–10, 15, 23–24, 26–27, 29, 45, 52, 55, 61, 64, 72, 74, 77, 88–109, 111–12, 115, 120, 158, 160–61, 163, 168, 187
- Rickman, Alan, 281
Robbins, Tim, 142, 145, 147–48, 185
Robertson, William Preston, 12–13, 34, 110, 155
- Serious Man, A*, xiv, 26, 34, 42, 168, 259–67, 277, 283
Silver, Joel, 140–42, 149
Sonnenfeld, Barry, 12, 14, 64–65, 67, 70, 75–77, 91, 97–98, 100–1, 110, 115, 117, 132, 167, 233
Steinfeld, Hailee, 271–73
Stuhlbarg, Michael, 260, 265
Sturges, Preston, 6, 36, 52, 146, 153, 196–98
Swinton, Tilda, 250, 254, 292
- Thornton, Billy Bob, 213–14, 228
To Each His Cinema, 248
To the White Sea, 23–24, 87, 149, 193, 209–10, 239
True Grit (1969), 268–70, 273, 276
True Grit (2010), xiv, 26, 245, 257, 268–78
Turturro, John, 94, 110, 112, 121, 136, 158, 183, 197, 201, 204
- Van Ronk, Dave, 283–84, 286, 291
- Walsh, M. Emmet, 9, 80, 90
Wayne, John, 269–70, 273
A Woman, A Gun and a Noodle Shop, 258
- Yimou, Zhang, 257
- Zeta-Jones, Catherine, 222, 227
Zophres, Mary, 161, 228, 252



Billy Bob Thornton, a taciturn barber (a contradiction in terms?) as *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), with his adulterous wife, Frances McDormand, in the Coens' black-and-white homage to 1940s Hollywood film noir.



Joel (left), George Clooney (center), producer Brian Grazer, and Ethan (right) seemingly enjoying themselves discussing the screenplay of *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), the first script not to be originally conceived by the brothers.



Alec Guinness, Danny Green, Peter Sellers, Cecil Parker, and Herbert Lom (left to right) in Alexander Mackendrick's classic Ealing comedy, *The Ladykillers* (1955), remade, relocated, and updated by the Coens in 2004.



Garth Pancake (J. K. Simmons), a Vietnam War vet and his accomplice who suffers from irritable bowel syndrome, and his accomplice Gawain McSam (Marlon Wayans), two of the incompetent would-be robbers and assassins in the Coens' *The Ladykillers* (2004).



Best Supporting Actor-winner Javier Bardem in *No Country For Old Men* (2007), as the irredeemably evil killer Anton Chigurh, in a hair style that the Spanish actor said would prevent him from “getting laid for three months.”



The three protagonists of *No Country For Old Men* (2007)—the Sheriff (Tommy Lee Jones, right), the hit man (Javier Bardem, center), and the “innocent” (Josh Brolin)—who affect each other profoundly but who never meet.



John Wayne and Kim Darby as U.S. Marshal J. "Rooster" Cogburn and his teenage employer Mattie Ross in *True Grit* (1969). The Coens insisted that their adaptation of the Charles Portis novel was not a remake of the earlier film.



Jeff Bridges as the heavy-drinking, amoral one-eyed U.S. Marshal "Rooster" Cogburn in *True Grit* (2010), defiantly taking on the role that won John Wayne his only Oscar four decades earlier.



Hailee Steinfeld as Mattie Ross, fourteen-year-old Coen discovery, in *True Grit* (2013). According to Ethan, “We wanted to put the audience in her mind, so they’d see the story through her eyes.”



Oscar Isaac as struggling folksinger Llewyn Davis with one of the marmalade cats that contributed to the complications in his life. Joel remarked that “the film doesn’t really have a plot. That concerned us at one point; that’s why we threw the cat in.”



The opening scene of *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) at the Gaslight Café in Greenwich Village in 1961, with Oscar Isaac, in the title role, singing the mournful folk song “Hang Me, Oh Hang Me.”



George Clooney, ready for his close-up, in toga and sandals, as a movie idol playing a Roman guard at the crucifixion of a blond Jesus in the film within a film in *Hail Caesar* (2016), set in the Hollywood of the fifties.



The gory end of one of the possessed students in *The Evil Dead* (1983), the slasher picture that was also the gory beginning of Sam Raimi's career as director. Joel Coen, in his first professional job in the movies, was assistant editor, which explains the conscious influence of Raimi and the film on *Blood Simple* the following year.



The illicit lovers, Abby (Frances McDormand) and Ray (John Getz), soon to become suspicious of one another after the murder of her husband in the noirish *Blood Simple* (1984).

The illicit lovers, John Garfield and Lana Turner in Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), the third screen version of James M. Cain's novel, and the model for *Blood Simple*.



Dan Hedaya as Julian Marty the ‘dead’ husband being prematurely buried in a shallow grave. One of the eeriest and most blackly comic moments from *Blood Simple* (1984).



M. Emmet Walsh, the sleazy private eye, in agony as his hand is stabbed at the memorable but stomach-turning climax of *Blood Simple* (1984).



In *Crimewave* (1985), Louise Lasser is being strangled by Paul Smith after he has chased her through a series of doors, his arm having broken through one of the walls. The only Coen Brothers' screenplay directed by someone else (Sam Raimi), the movie contained variations on themes used in *Blood Simple*, and prefigured elements in *Raising Arizona*.



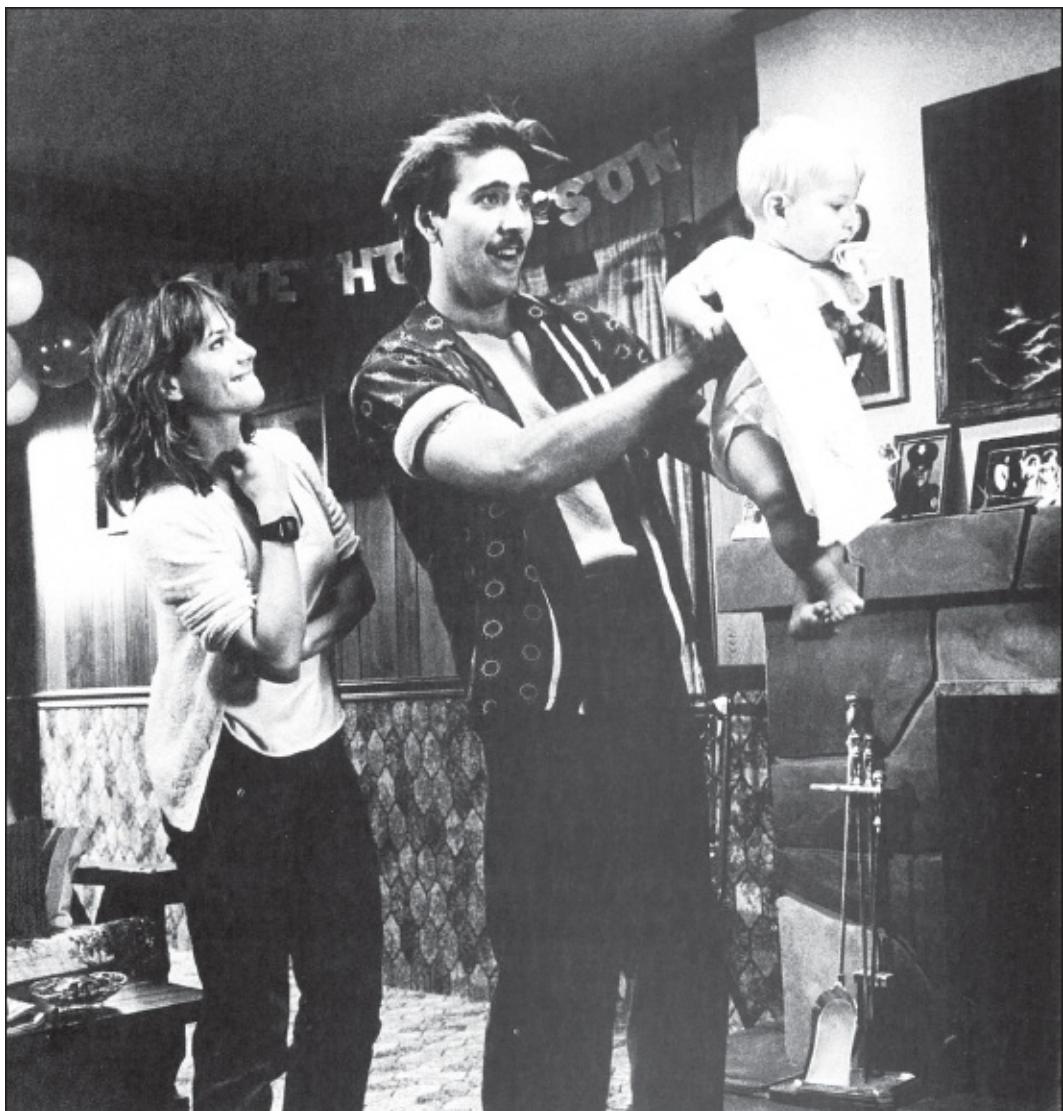
Joel (left) and Ethan on the set of *Raising Arizona* (1987), on location in the state of the title—young (thirtysomething) and trendy, with (significant?) phallic cacti in the background.



In *Raising Arizona*, John Goodman and William Forsythe as Gale and Evelle, the dim-witted, giggling brothers. According to the Coens, they were 'the Laurel and Hardy of the Southern penal society . . . They looked like grown-up babies'.



Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, the favourite comedians and a comic influence on many of the films by the Coen brothers, a pretty good double act themselves.



'Over there's the TV, two hours a day maximum, either educational or football so's you don't ruin your appreciation of the finer things.' A happy family—Ed (Holly Hunter), Hi McDonnough (Nicolas Cage) and Nathan Arizona Jr (T. J. Kuhn) in *Raising Arizona*.



The alarming figure of ex-boxer Randall Tex' Cobb as The Lone Biker of the Apocalypse', trans porting kidnapped Nathan Arizona Jr (T. J. Kuhn) to claim his reward in *Raising Arizona*.



During the long, spectacular and bloody sequence in *Miller's Crossing* (1989), Irish-American gangster Leo (Albert Finney) shoots at his assailants from under his bed



'You can't kill me. I'm praying to you! Look in your heart!' John Turturro as Bernie Bernbaum, the Shmatte, pleading for his life in *Miller's Crossing*.



'You're a sonofabitch, Tom . . . You got me to tell you where he was and then you killed him.' Verna (Marcia Gay Harden) thinks Tom Reagan (Gabriel Byrne) has killed her brother Bernie in *Miller's Crossing*.



'... Six, please.' Barton Fink (John Turturro) in the antiquated elevator with the superannuated elevator man (Harry Bugin) in 'The Hotel for A Day or A Lifetime', the slogan for the rundown Hotel Earle, in *Barton Fink* (1991).

'I respect your artistry and your methods, and if you can't fill us in yet, we should be kissing your feet, for your fine efforts . . .' Studio boss Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) humbles himself before an embarrassed Barton Fink (John Turturro).



The Coens go Hollywood. Ethan (left) and Joel pose uncomfortably on the set of *Barton Fink*. 'Our life in Hollywood has been particularly easy. The film isn't a personal comment.'



The revenge of the 'Common Man'. The likeable insurance salesman Charlie Meadows (John Goodman) turns out to be a serial killer called Karl 'Madman' Mundt in *Barton Fink*. 'Heil Hitler!' he yells.



James Stewart with Clarence (Henry Travers), his guardian angel in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946), which anticipates some of the more supernatural elements, including an angel, in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994).



'I used to think you were a swell guy—well, to be honest, I thought you were an imbecile.' The sappy Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) is no match for the scheming journalist Amy Archer (Jennifer Jason Leigh) in *The Huducker Proxy*, a relationship not unlike that of Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur in Capra's *Mr Deeds Goes To Town* (1936).



'Once a newspaperman, always a newspaperman.' Ace reporter Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) is welcomed back to the newsroom in Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday* (1940). The character was one of the models for Amy Archer in *The Hudsucker Proxy*.



One of the longest desks in all the Coen movies, a launching pad for suicidal businessmen in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. 'I'm getting off this merry-go-round,' yells one of the board members, before attempting to emulate his former boss, Hudsucker, by hurling himself through the window, not realising it has been replaced by Plexiglas.



'Oh! Oh, geez!' William H. Macy as the miserably incompetent Jerry Lundegaard in his parka, in *Fargo*, discovers his father-in-law Wade's body.



'You fucking imbeciles!' At the scene of the drop, Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) has shot Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell) on a snow-covered exterior parking garage in *Fargo* (1996).



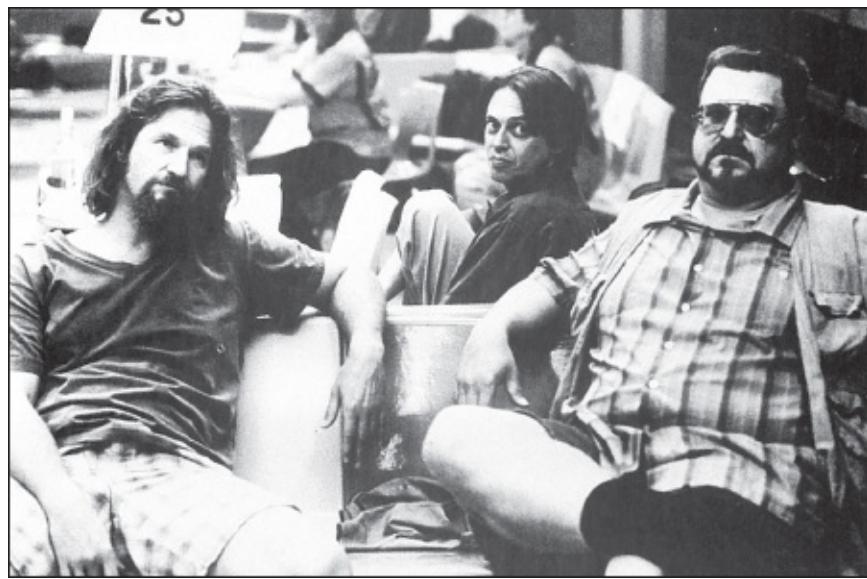
Frances McDormand (Mrs Joel Coen) as Marge Gunderson gets her man at the climax of *Fargo*, and gained a Best Actress Oscar for her performance at the same time.



Humphrey Bogart as Raymond Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe surrounded by heavies in Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946).



'Vee vant zat money, Lebowski.' In Raymond Chandler territory in *The Big Lebowski* (1997), Jeff Bridges, as the Dude, is being threatened with a nasty form of castration by a German nihilist with a marmot.



The laid-back Dude (Jeff Bridges), spaced-out Donny (Steve Buscemi) and belligerent Walter Sobchak (John Goodman), in their favourite hangout, the bowling alley in *The Big Lebowski*.

Joel and Ethan in the cutting room while working on *The Big Lebowski*. Roderick Jaynes, the editor on the movie, refused to have his photograph taken.



A spoiled movie director, John Sullivan (Joel McCrea), tired of making fluff, takes to the road to see how the other half lives in order to be able to make the social drama *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), only to find himself working on a chain gang.



'I don't want to make *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. That's all they've got in this cockeyed cara van.' Movie director Sullivan (Joel McCrea) returns to Hollywood in *Sullivan's Travels*, after suffering on the road and decides not to make 'the greatest tragedy ever made'.



George Clooney (Ulysses Everett McGill), John Turturro (Pete) and Tim Nelson (Delmar O'Donnell) as three cons on the run from a chain gang in the south in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), the Coens' homage to Preston Sturges and to *Homer's Odyssey*. Left to right: John Turturro, Tim Blake Nelson and George Clooney.