

## DANIEL KEYES

### ***The Big Lebowski: The First Gulf War and Masculinity***

The Coen Brothers' film *The Big Lebowski* (1997; hereafter cited as *Lebowski*) reconstructs the Los Angeles of 1991, with the Gulf War as an allegorical backdrop for an idiosyncratic synthesis of cinematic representational modes: the Western, pornography, *film noir*, art house cinema, 1940s dance/musical, the buddy flick, and the white male rampage movie.<sup>1</sup> This cinematic pastiche serves as an ironic lament for a "stable" and normative identity for the white American male with an implied critique of America's foreign policy.

To argue that a movie set largely in a bowling alley where the hero attempts to restore a carpet operates as a metaphor for the first Gulf War may seem implausible, but this film does cohere with a handful of Gulf War films produced by Hollywood in the 1990s. An uncanny dream sequence in *Lebowski* has the hero being offered a pair of golden shoes by Saddam Hussein in a bowling alley. This hallucination curiously resonates with a few genre-blurring comedies that represent a strange carnivalised Hussein as a way of asserting that the business of Iraq is unfinished. Hollywood's default mode for depicting the first Gulf War, which has often been characterised as a television war,<sup>2</sup> is to find humour in this quick little war that seems to occur not in Iraq or Kuwait

but in a self-parodic electronic elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> *Hot Shots* (1991) provides a parody of *Top Gun* (1986) that includes an aerial bombing with precision: like the doomed coyote in the *Road Runner* cartoon, “Hussein” relaxing by a swimming pool at a palace catches a large America bomb that explodes. This film while satirizing the high tech melodrama of *Top Gun* embraces the dream of smart bombs that only hit the dictator and not his citizens. The genre blurring *Three Kings* (1997) while not offering a carnivalised Hussein, projects the thesis that even the image of Hussein is one that strikes terror into tired, abused, and paranoid Iraqis.<sup>4</sup> The film deliberately offers an image of Iraq that suggests a Wizard-of-Oz-like coloured world where hapless American reservists are redeemed of their materialism by confronting not Hussein but his victims. It argues that the American military left Iraqis at the mercy of an insane despot while attempting to give voice to the common Iraqi perspective on the war. *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* (1999) imagines Hussein’s death and after life in Hell where he bullies his gay lover Satan and plots world domination. In the 1990s, while “serious” American war films return to the Second World War for nostalgic reprises like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *The Thin Red Line* (1997) that reject the digital war as fodder for the screen,<sup>5</sup> the treatment of the first Gulf War appears to be inflected into a comedic, rampantly inter-textual mode where Hussein haunts the screen in various manifestations as an abject Other. *Lebowski* may carnivalise Hussein’s presence, but it does so in a way that interrogates the electronic veneer of American militarism, masculinity and President George Bush Senior’s call for a New World Order.

The Coens are not known for producing films that demonstrate “an explicit commitment to political analysis in a social realist vein.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed the Coens are notorious

for offering interpretative red herrings and defying critical engagement with their films. The flippant introduction to the script of *The Big Lebowski*, which wonderfully parodies academic dissection of films is a case in point. It begins, “[t]he script for *The Big Lebowski* was the winner of the 1998 Bar Kochba Award, honouring achievements in the arts that defy racial and religious stereotyping and promote appreciation for the multiplicity of men.”<sup>7</sup> Of course no such award exists. “Bar Kochba” refers not to Gentile-Jewish friendship but to a first century Jewish leader who, via a violent uprising against the Roman empire, created a Jewish nation-state. As such it offers an oblique ironic reference to *Lebowski*’s boorish and violent character Walter Sobchak, played by John Goodman, who as a convert to Judaism and a supporter of force over pacifism vocally insists on the rights of the state of Israel. The Coens’ introduction may be read as joke or a clue to the film’s themes of masculinity and friendship in a time of war.

The Coens’ general caginess around interpretation is echoed in interviews. In a chatty interview with William Preston Robertson, they dodge attempts to ascribe a theme to the film. Ethan Coen concludes that “you sort of do it by feel and not with reasons.”<sup>8</sup> Early criticism of the film, like Carolyn Russell’s *The Films of Joel and Ethan*, sees the Coens as filmic savants who “feel” the production, and thus she underrates the film: “*Lebowski* is ultimately a caricature of their distinct style of filmmaking, a movie that showcases many of the Coens’ motifs with little of the wit with which the filmmakers have typically deployed them.”<sup>9</sup> Against such reductive appraisals is the view that the Coens are not simply formalist jesters who enjoy an empty play of style. George Toles, Guy Maddin’s scriptwriter, asserts that the Coens’ earlier film *Fargo*, which initially may seem like a “visit to the playground of the lie,” is a film that redeems itself via the

unflappable pregnant sheriff Marge Gunderson, who offers a moral centre free of the biting irony that infects the doomed characters.<sup>10</sup> This view of the Coens as leading a strategic retreat from the ist play of “style for the sake of style” is echoed in R. Barton Palmer’s autural study of the Coens. He suggests that although their films are “undoubtedly ,”they “engage in a dialogue with genre and classic studio films that does not slight the political and cultural.”<sup>11</sup> Palmer asserts broad *noir*-ish and post-humanist thematic unity to the Coens’ works, stating the dominant theme of their work is “the twin impossibilities of human experience: coming to a meaningful understanding of others and mastering a brute reality ruled by the principle of seemingly diabolical mischance.”<sup>12</sup> However, *Lebowski* is more specifically historical and political in its critique of the white male and American empire, and ultimately offers a degree of optimism missing from Barton’s analysis.

The view that *Lebowski*, despite its obvious mixing of styles, is capable of insisting on a history is supported by three articles. Maria Cristina Iuli in “Memory and Time in *The Big Lebowski*: How Can the Political Return?” argues the film disrupts the three big discourses of national history, national mythology and “the patriarchal discourse of masculinity.”<sup>13</sup> Iuli like Lisa Donald’s “Bowling, Gender and Emasculation in *The Big Lebowski*” offers a feminist analysis of how bowling operates a metaphor for the inherent instability of the masculine project.<sup>14</sup> Iuli asserts the film “is about a politics without representation and a history without archive. Both history and politics return, but in a transformative movement that frees them from the conventions of History.”<sup>15</sup> The film’s sense of the past as a living pastiche within the context of the first Gulf War suggests history and politics never leave the film but rather the film offers a process where history

in a jumbled form drives characters' actions. This view compliments Todd A. Comer's "This Aggression Will Not Stand': Myth, War, and Ethics in *The Big Lebowski*" which directly connects the film's characterisation to the first Gulf War and the way pacifism is systematically silenced.<sup>16</sup> In *Lebowski* ism operates not as an empty signifier but as a way of challenging the dominant patriarchal war machine. The blurring of genre in the hybrid space of *Lebowski*'s Los Angeles recalls the notion of the chronotope, or "time space," which Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* suggests operates "as the primary means for materializing time in space, [and] emerges as a centre for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel."<sup>17</sup> For Bakhtin, the chronotope usually operates to unify fractured experience for the reader of a novel. However, Lynne Pearce in *Reading Dialogues* suggests Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope should not be restricted to fixing a narrative in a singular time and space, but that chronotopes can exist dialogically, overlapping in a narrative in what she dubs "polychronotopes."<sup>18</sup> uses polychronotopes as embodied by characters' world-views to construct L.A. with the first Gulf War as backdrop.<sup>19</sup> Many of these characters appear to operate within their own peculiar chronotopes as defined by film, music, and television nostalgia that delineate their identities; consequently, the action of the film arises from a clash of heavily stylised chronotopes that question notions of mediated stable white masculinity. In the film's representation of time and space, nostalgia operates as a strategy for fashioning characters' identities on the *tabula rasa* of Los Angeles in 1991 with the Gulf War flickering in the mediated backdrop.<sup>20</sup>

Although this film blends a dizzy array of film genres, it is anchored by the genre of the Western that begins, ends, and absentmindedly narrates the action. The opening

sequence with the actor Sam Elliot's disembodied voiceover serenaded by the Sons of the Pioneers singing "Drifting along with the Tumbling Tumbleweeds," while the camera tracks a ball of tumbleweed rolling across the desert into Los Angeles's barren streets and finally to the ocean, suggests that the Western's colonial enterprise has literally reached the end of its westward expansion.<sup>21</sup> This tumbleweed motif offers the literal end of the mythical Wild West and perhaps the end of a great Western tradition or traditions where patriarchal authority, colonial power, and the moral authority to "act" become diffused.

The film's jarring segue from the rolling tumbleweed to the fluorescent-lit Ralph's Market with the Dude, played by Jeff Bridges, shopping for milk in his sunglasses and bathrobe, and the cowboy narrator's voiceover introducing the Dude as not a hero but as "a man for his time'n place," suggests the Western genre has reached a new level of exhaustion or at least downward mobility. This sequence situates the film in a double loop of nostalgia: the Western and the more recent past, the first Gulf War, as Western, where the Dude is not a hero but simply a man who reveals the spirit of his age. That the Dude is wearing a housecoat, slippers and sunglasses, and is paying for a quart of milk in the middle of the night with a cheque for 69 cents and his Ralph Card suggests he is not the standard iconic Western hero with cowboy hat, boots, and a confident swagger, but a hero who reflects a downwardly mobile form of heroism suited to the early 1990s. Our hero is not John Wayne or Ronald Reagan ready to do battle with an evil empire, but a character that chooses to call himself the Dude (which as the cowboy narrator notes, no one in a Western "chooses to self apply") and seems to exist to bowl and smoke dope.

This opening sequence suggests that the Western genre as a metaphor for masculinity and colonial expansion has reached its limits. Thus the film will shift genres and refract a variety of diffuse and dizzy L.A.-esque genres and sub genres: *film noir*, pornography, white male rampage film, art house, and 1940s dance musical. The first three of these genres exude a hyper-masculinity that hides doubts and fears of “castrating” others, whether these others are a flying vaginal artist, Saddam Hussein, or German nihilist kidnapers bearing marmots, sabres, and huge scissors. The link between political castration by Saddam Hussein of the United States and feminist castration by the flying vaginal artist Maude Lebowski, and the German nihilists, suggests that secure heterosexual masculinity and secure foreign policy are linked. Clearly the film’s representation of 1991 Los Angeles is one riddled by real and imagined fears for the Dude that evoke anxieties about this post-Cold War era where the Western fails to explain coherently the emergent chaotic new world order.

This shift from Western to a more contemporary and humble reality is signalled within the film’s iconography when the rolling westward tumbleweed is replaced by the bowling ball rolling down a narrow alley towards the pins. The white cowboys of the “wide open” mythic frontier are replaced by images of men of every shape, size, and ethnicity, bowling in a 1960s bowling complex. The Dude’s bowling team, comprised of the chronically unemployed Dude, the Vietnam War veteran Walter Sobchak, and Donny, a “surfer” who conspicuously lacks a surfer’s tan or body, suggests the old frontier has been replaced by a more downwardly mobile, dingy, and confining representation of time and space.

To return to the opening sequence, the jarring clash between the humble “bowling alley” chronotope and the adventure of the colonial Western project occurs in Ralph’s as the televised President George Bush in his signature nasal diction declares like every macho cowboy, “[t]his aggression will not stand.... This will not stand,” while the Dude writes a cheque for 69 cents to pay for his milk. The cowboy narrator may have declared the downwardly mobile Dude a hero, but Bush’s declaration references another Western playing in the desert of the Middle East. Bush’s pronouncement, as a gunslinger declaring the moral high ground, speaks to the first Gulf War but against the ethos of the Dude, who invariably chooses to “abide” in the face of aggression, despite the justification provided by his sidekick, the Vietnam vet Sobchak, who echoes Bush’s threat when he urges the Dude to seek compensation for a peed-on carpet: “I’m talking about drawing a line in the sand, Dude. Across this line you do not, uh—and also, Dude, Chinaman is not the preferred, uh.... Asian-American. Please.”<sup>22</sup> Sobchak, dressed in *Desert Storm* brown khaki throughout most of the movie,<sup>23</sup> offers subtle moral logic to mask his aggressive form of masculinity. Like Bush, he seeks justice through violence while attempting to maintain a politically correct use of language to mask his intent and the moral ambiguity of the line drawn in the sand. Sobchak embodies the over-blown colonial project gone awry in this film that is very loosely held together by the frame of the Western.

In the opening sequence, the film’s narrator places the film “just about the time of our conflict with Sad’m and the Eye-rackies,” but the three main characters inhabit a present that is over-determined by their distinctive pasts: the Dude, born Jeffrey Lebowski, is a product of 1960s student rebellions, the paraplegic Big Lebowski is a self-



proclaimed product of the 1950s Korean war and a “can-do” attitude, while the violent and verbose Sobchak is shaped by the military quagmire of the Vietnam War. All three of these characters define themselves through America’s engagement in global geopolitics in the Cold War era as defined by three distinct chronotopes.

The choice of the Western as a frame for this movie’s pastiche of genres suggests the desire to return to a “historical” genre that continually attempts to remake the mythic and universalising past in terms of the film’s present. Nostalgia in a Western can operate as a conservative force to indicate an authentic past where the frontier sets the standard for a raw individuality that the present should emulate. Alternatively, nostalgia can operate as a critique of the past to imply a critique of the present. Nostalgia is essentially a variation of utopian thinking that uses a representation of the past to justify present actions and forecast the potential for an improved future. All nostalgic narratives, including film, use the raw material of the past strategically. renders nostalgia into a series of distorted chronotopes that all profoundly influence the film’s representation of the present. Within this polychronotopic-mediated fun-house, characters invoke mediated variations of the past to stabilise their identities; thus, the film’s present of 1991 strategically digs into the recent past to demonstrate how the present is assembled by varieties of cinematic and televised chronotopes.

The Big Lebowski, the Dude, and Sobchak are clearly defined via mediated versions of chronotopes that blend and blur with other chronotopes. Thus the Dude’s apparent leftist 1960s political radicalism has given way to a decidedly apolitical present that revolves around smoking pot and pursuing the bowling league championship. The Dude’s leftist credentials are established through his supposed drafting of the Port Huron

Statement and not, as he sanctimoniously claims, the later “watered down version.” The film resonates with this touchstone document of 1960s leftist politics that rejects the previous generation’s materialism that is embodied by the Big Lebowski character. The Statement’s authors declared that:

Beneath the reassuring tones of the politicians, beneath the common opinion that America will “*muddle through*,” beneath the stagnation of those who have closed their minds to the future, is the pervading feeling that there simply are no alternatives, that our times have witnessed the exhaustion not only of Utopias, but of any new departures as well. Feeling the press of complexity upon the emptiness of life, people are fearful of the thought that at any moment things might be thrust out of control.<sup>24</sup>

The Port Huron Statement attacks political nihilism with an agenda the Dude seems to have forgotten. The Dude’s reference to this document and his demand, when locked up by the Malibu sheriff (Leon Russom), to call the famous civil rights lawyer Bill Kunstler, suggests the American left of the 1960s is cast adrift in the person of the Dude who seems content to “*muddle through*.”

The Dude’s *alter ego*, accidental namesake, and father figure, the Big Lebowski, is not the self-made millionaire Reaganite he professes to be, but a man who married into a fortune and has re-married a nymphomaniac trophy wife he cannot afford.<sup>25</sup> The Big Lebowski character has resonances of Raymond Chandler’s classic *noir* novel *The Big Sleep*. In an interview with Robertson, the Coens in their cryptic manner admit the linkage to Chandler and to Robert Altman’s *The Long Goodbye* (1973): “*The Big Lebowski* is just kind of informed by Chandler around the edges. Our movie is not a detective story, really. It is only in terms of the kind of flavor you want to extract from it.”<sup>26</sup> Palmer concurs that the film is a “comic send-up of Raymond Chandler’s *The Big*

*Sleep*” that “is undercut by violence and mayhem that are hardly funny.”<sup>27</sup> Robertson sees the resonance between Chandler and *Lebowski* in terms of how both operate as “hodgepodes” and not masterful exercises in deductive reasoning.<sup>28</sup> In terms of chronotopes, the film operates as a very loose but deliberate invocation of Chandler to demonstrate how the varnish of the 1940s patriarchal is an illusion. In the novel the detective Philip Marlowe becomes a modern-day knight-errant for an incapacitated wealthy general who has two “wild” daughters, one daughter is an ice-goddess and the other a nymphomaniac who is involved in a pornography ring. In both the book and the film, a younger woman threatens the patriarch’s King Lear-esque existence. In , the second daughter role is filled by Bunny, the second wife, porn star, and “Gunderson” runaway from Moorhead, Minnesota.<sup>29</sup> The Dude is not the metaphorical knight in shining armour that Philip Marlowe sardonically emulates, nor is the Big Lebowski as entirely trustworthy as Chandler’s General, but the Big Lebowski and his parodic quoting of *The Big Sleep* suggests the 1990s operate as a place where white colonial masculinity, as embodied by the Big Lebowski, is a mask as opposed to an unquestioned state of *noir*-esque supremacy and being. The Dude deflates the Big Lebowski’s overblown rhetoric in their exchange where the Big Lebowski convinces the Dude he is the only one who can save Bunny:

*Lebowski:* It’s funny. I can look back on a life of achievement, on challenges met, competitors bested, obstacles overcome.... I’ve accomplished more than most men, and without the use of my legs. What... What makes a man... Is it... is it, being prepared to do the right thing? Whatever the price? Isn’t that what makes a man?

*Dude:* That and a pair of testicles.

The Dude deflates the noir-esque logic of the brave soldier who falls on his sword for his general, indicating that the biological aspect of masculinity is more important than the symbolic.

verbose, ultra-violent Walter Sobchak, a Catholic Polish-American, who has been divorced for over five years and yet continues to practise his ex-wife's Judaism by not bowling on Saturdays so as to keep the Sabbath, is determined to construct a stable identity despite the contradictory cultural fragments that define him. His claim "I'm as Jewish as Tevye" is ironic because it obliquely refers to the peasant Tevye of *Fiddler on the Roof*, who attempts to preserve his religion and culture in the Tsarist Russia of the early 1900s; Sobchak preserves a tradition not tied to his own Polish ancestors. On another level, he defines his religious faith via a film/musical version of Jewish life as opposed to a particular contemporary religious leader. Sobchak's enthusiasm for militarism and Judaism implies an identification with the state of Israel and a cowboy form of Zionism.

Sobchak off-handedly quotes the founder of modern Israel Theodore Hertzl's slogan, "[i]f you will it, it is no dream," thereby suggesting the power of belief to create a concrete reality. This slogan may apply to Israel's creation, but on another level, it points to the American belief in the ability to concretise the dream or in the case of Sobchak, to become a devout Jewish, ex-Catholic Polish-American Vietnam War Veteran who paradoxically respects the "tenets of National Socialism" because "at least it's an ethos." When confronting the three German nihilist kidnapers, who attempt to collect non-existent ransom money from a kidnapping that never occurred, Sobchak berates them for believing in the "rules" of kidnapping. For Sobchak, the horror of nihilism and those who

claim to believe in nothing are more frightening than the Nazi genocide of six million of “his” people.

Sobchak’s macho politics are undercut by his attention to his ex-wife and her Pomeranian show dog that he pampers when she and her boyfriend are on vacation in Hawaii. Sobchak is a kinder, gentler “white male rampager.”<sup>30</sup> The macho veneer of Sobchak and the Big Lebowski is quite thin. The *noir*-esque bravado of the Big Lebowski’s Raymond Chandler-style entrance near the beginning of the film and the white male rampage of bravado of Sobchak are undercut to reveal weakness and insecurity. Ironically the Dude, whose role as a punchbag for various aggressors in between drinking White Russians and unwittingly impregnating Maude Lebowski, offers a non-standard version of masculine heroics with more substance than either Sobchak or the Big Lebowski.<sup>31</sup>

Just as normative stable masculinity is undercut in this film, so is the notion of violence as a restorative form of justice that is typically part of the Western genre. The inevitably misguided white male rampager Sobchak challenges the narrative formula of Westerns and white male rampage films like *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon*, where a decisive, corrective, violent act by the hero resolves the plot. After the Dude has had his rug damaged by two thugs attempting a shakedown on the wrong Lebowski, Sobchak advises the Dude to seek compensation not from the thugs but from the Big Lebowski who was the true target of the shakedown: “we’re talking about unchecked aggression here.... I’m talking about drawing a line in the sand, Dude. Across this line you do not [cross].” Sobchak’s metaphoric absolute of a line drawn in shifting sand demonstrates a subtle moral logic: Sobchak counsels the Dude to seek compensation from the Big

Lebowski rather than the thugs who peed on the rug because the Big Lebowski has money and the thugs clearly do not. Sobchak's call for revenge invokes the language of moral absolutes to describe a relative moral universe, where money and economic interest drive the pursuit of justice. Such logic parallels the decision of the Bush administration to "free" Kuwait from Saddam Hussein and return it to the feudal Kuwaiti royal family.

Sobchak's equivocation and his attempt to regain the Dude's rug resonates with the shifting ethics and vision of Operation *Desert Storm*'s mission. This linkage of the stolen rugs in the movie to Middle Eastern real estate may seem like a tenuous connection, if not for this description of the Dude's dream sequence in which the script declares that the Dude "like a sheik" rides "a magic carpet." The camera work in the dream sequences has a peculiarly CNN Gulf War perspective with the Dude plunging to earth from great heights much like the famous footage of an American smart bomb landing on a target in Baghdad.

The repeated claim by the Dude that his Persian "rug really tied the room together" resonates with ambiguous post-Cold War American foreign policy that sees Kuwait as part of the "furniture" on the global map that should not be disturbed by others. Paul William Roberts's account of the first Gulf War, *The Demonic Comedy: Some Detours in the Baghdad of Saddam Hussein*, notes that in the days prior to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, American senators from the grain-producing Midwest were eager to placate Hussein's despotic ways to keep their states' grain flowing to Iraq; additionally, Roberts asserts that the United States ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, in a conversation with Hussein on 25 July, 1990, just days before the invasion of Kuwait

“hoodwinked Saddam into invading Kuwait,” in what Roberts surmises was an attempt by the Bush administration to teach the wealthy Kuwaitis a lesson about manipulating currency markets.<sup>32</sup> Both the first Gulf War and contain shifting loopy plot-lines where the original focus of the restorative-justice story-lines, respectively freeing Kuwait and seeking compensation for a carpet, are displaced and become diffused. This parallel demonstrates how the Dude, as bungling sixties radical, penetrates “the fog of war” and, in true *film noir* detective fashion, distinguishes reality from appearance, while Sobchak fixates on reliving and correcting his Vietnam experience by seeking retribution for the “Persian carpet.”

Sobchak, as the Vietnam veteran, represents the memory of a failed colonial mission that will be redeemed by his own “Operation *Desert Storm*” as he first insists the Dude gain compensation for the rug, and then insinuates himself into the Dude’s attempt to exchange ransom money for the apparently kidnapped Bunny Lebowski. Walter’s dubious moral outrage shifts throughout the film. His violence is invariably misdirected at a variety of “unworthy adversaries” like Smokey, the terrified pacifist bowler, little Larry Seller, the twelve year-old who stole the Dude’s cars, the Big Lebowski, whom Sobchak attempts to unmask as a fake “war cripple,” and finally the three ill-fated German nihilists who crumple under his violence.<sup>33</sup> In all these acts, the violence is uncannily misdirected: Smokey quivers and collapses under the barrel of Sobchak’s revolver; little Larry Seller watches as his neighbour’s brand new Corvette is hammered to pieces by Sobchak who believes the child has bought the car with the ransom money; the Big Lebowski is not faking his immobility; and, finally the surfer bowling companion Donny dies from a heart attack in the showdown outside the bowling alley over the

imaginary ransom money. Sobchak's attempt to restore justice or balance debts only leads to comedic pathos; his actions resonate with the Vietnam War euphemism "friendly fire."

With Donny's ignominious death, Sobchak attempts to restore nobility by eulogising it in terms of fallen Vietnam War heroes and great surfers, while distributing Donny's ashes on the ocean from a coffee can. The Dude, who is accidentally covered in the ashes, berates Sobchak's chronotopically confused eulogy. For the Dude, the strategic nostalgia that superimposes the "many bright flowering young men, at Khe San and Lan Doc" with Donny's heart attack outside a bowling alley is a "travesty." Sobchak fails in his attempt to redeem and mythologise a petty street brawl as a defining heroic moment where Donny's sacrifice was not in "vain." The Dude silences Sobchak and, thereby, suggests a heroism that "abides" rather than seeks to mythologise the folly of restorative justice.

This scene ends with Sobchak hugging the Dude, and suggests, at least in this one instance, that Sobchak's bluster for war is silenced into a type of masculine bonding that does not depend on violence. The final scene of the movie, focusing on Sobchak and the Dude bowling with black armbands, suggests a return to "a kinder, gentler" fraternal order. The buddy genre of films reasserts itself in this homosocial moment.

The one character who refuses to submit to Sobchak's imperialistic masculinity is the erotic pant-suited bowling adversary Jesus Quintana. For Sobchak, Donnie and the Dude, Quintana is the quintessential adversary of the bowling alley whose mannerisms, such as like thrusting on his black bowling glove, deviate from heterosexual masculinity. In one episode Sobchak voiceovers a sequence where Quintana is apparently forced by



the courts to go from house to house to explain that he is a paedophile. In this sequence, the viewer relies on Sobchak's version, sensing he may be embellishing the truth. This vilification of an adversary parallels the experience of Gulf War television viewers, who relied on the type of reportage created by the public relations firm Hill and Knowlton, who fabricated Iraqi atrocities for the Kuwait regime.<sup>34</sup> Like the Bush administration's rhetoric that attempted to demonise Saddam Hussein, Sobchak attempts to contain Quintana within a narrative of deviance.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, Quintana silences Sobchak by threatening to sodomise and kill Sobchak with Sobchak's handgun.<sup>36</sup> Quintana's verbal aggression, to paraphrase Bush's speech from the film, is allowed "to stand."

Quintana periodically appears throughout the film with his own theme music, a Latin version of the Eagles' classic mid-seventies rock song "Hotel California," which suggests another version of Los Angeles and otherness.<sup>37</sup> The final bowling conflict between Sobchak's and Quintana's teams, like the United States' showdown with Saddam Hussein, is one that will not occur in this film.<sup>38</sup> The otherness of Quintana and Saddam Hussein stands outside the film's narrative closure: just as viewers will never see Sobchak defeat Quintana, they will never see George Bush Sr. topple Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>39</sup> Unlike the closure achieved in a typical Western melodrama where good is rewarded and bad punished, in this movie the moral absolutes are suspended in favour of a hero who "abides."

The Dude offers an alternative to the Big Lebowski and Sobchak's hyper-masculine façades as he claims to "abide" various hailings by characters eager to place him in their movie.<sup>40</sup> The types of hailing he encounters, from the moment when the two thugs, seeking to extort money from the millionaire Lebowski, thrust his head into his

toilet bowl and demand, “[w]here’s the money Lebowski” are invariably misdirected, but the Dude remains unflappable: “[I]t’s uh, it’s down there somewhere. Lemme take a look.”

In terms of genre, the most pointed example of how the Dude is invested with hyper-masculine qualities by another character operating in a different filmic genre or chronotope occurs when he accidentally confronts the private detective Da Fino whose phallic over-determined dialogue offers sheer admiration for a brother “shamus” by calling the Dude “a dick, man! And let me tell you something: I dig your work. Playing one side against the other—in bed with everybody—fabulous stuff, man.”<sup>41</sup> The Dude does not grasp Da Fino’s *film noir* lexicon and refuses Da Fino’s offer to team up to solve the apparent kidnapping of Bunny Lebowski. Da Fino’s master narrative of the *film noir* chronotope that would explain the film’s narrative is rejected by the Dude just as the Dude rejects other chronotopic hailings by other characters who seek to box in the Dude’s identity.

Perhaps the most ironic instance of hailing is when Maude Lebowski (vaginal artist and *femme fatale*) selects the Dude as her sperm donor. Maude seems to inhabit her own version of a haughty Art House movie. The Dude is the willing and, in the beginning, unwitting pawn in her game of insemination. She demonstrates that masculinity and the male sex are redundant. She debunks the myth that her stepfather is a self-made millionaire, and she does not require anything from the Dude other than his sperm and certainly not his surname, which is the same as her stepfather’s. Played as an “ice goddess,” she suggests a world where men cease to have purpose.<sup>42</sup> In her post Oedipal-Electra world, Western masculinity and strong father figures are not needed. The

narrative closure offered by the self-reflexive and forgetful cowboy narrator hangs on the notion of regeneration that perpetuates society, no matter how unconventional the method of reproduction:

there's a little Lebowski on the way. I guess that's the way the whole durned *human comedy* [emphasis added] keeps perpetuatin' itself, down through the generations, westward with the wagons, across the sands a time until—aw, look at me, I'm ramblin' again. Wal, uh hope you folks enjoyed yourselves.

This voiceover conclusion hints that the Western garb of the larger narrative and Western civilisation's "human comedy" continues. I suggest Maude radically disrupts this narrative logic, unless we view her as the lone Western cowgirl able to engender her own reality and progeny from the raw masculine frontier.

The genre of the Western in this film as represented by the voiceover provides an ironic frame for the film's loose narrative by asserting a kinder, gentler sense of masculinity with less swearing. The Western voiceover as framing device punctuates the action prior to the climax of the film's various loosely related plot-lines when the voice of the introductory voiceover, Sam Elliot playing the role of the "Stranger," appears in full cowboy gear at the bar in the Dude's bowling alley to discuss philosophy after ordering a Sarsaparilla.<sup>43</sup> The Stranger's cowboy is not a historical cowboy, but one drawn from Hollywood's Western film tradition. In his intrusive and meandering voiceovers and later breaking through the narrative frame with his appearance in the film as a character, the Stranger offers a nostalgic way of grasping the narrative. His admiration for the Dude's heroic ability to "abide" is weighed against his moral approbation: "... Dude. Do you have to use so many cuss words?" To which the Dude responds, "What the fuck are you talking about?" The self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme* of

the appearance of the disembodied narrator as embodied character questioning the oblivious hero reiterates the competing and nostalgic versions of masculinity. The Dude refuses the hailing of the Tom Mix version of “good guy” heroics offered by the film’s narrator just as he refuses Da Fino’s *film noir* hailing and Sobchak’s attempts to mythologise Donny’s death into the fight for freedom, democracy and surfing.

This *mise-en-abyme* is complicated near the middle of the film, where the Dude and Walter pay a visit to the home of Arthur Digby Sellers, the creator of a television Western serial called *Branded*, who lies unconscious in an iron lung. Sobchak and the Dude seek the Dude’s stolen car and the phantom ransom money.<sup>44</sup> Sobchak, prior to threatening Arthur’s son, the car thief and poor grade school historian, Larry, speaks in hush reverential tones of the series and its immobile author. Arthur Digby Sellers as the source of the Western macho myth in the film is a peculiarly passive agent. If the wheelchair-bound Big Lebowski represents the façade of old style masculinity, it is even more peculiar that the source of Walter and the Dude’s myth of manly behaviour resides in a coma in an iron lung.

In this scene with the Sellers family, the Dude appears to concede respect for *Branded*, and later after being drugged by the pornographer and heavy Jackie Treehorn and left running wild on the highway, the Dude recites the theme song for the show: “He was innocent. Not a charge was true. And they say he ran awaaaaaay.” This television form of the Western exerts a metafictional influence on the Dude and Sobchak’s sense of honour and masculinity.

*Branded* was first broadcast on 24 January 1965, and originally ran until 4 September 1966. The show tracks the wanderings of Jason McCord, played by Chuck

Connors, a Civil War officer who is court martialled for cowardice after being the lone white survivor of the Battle of Bitter Creek, a Little-Big-Horn-like massacre. In most episodes, the outcast McCord teaches heroism to the faint-hearted, which explains why both the Dude and Sobchak identify with the show. Perhaps for Sobchak, the show operates as an allegory for the abused and dishonoured Vietnam War Veterans who endorse outlawed violence as a way to restore justice, while, for the Dude, McCord represents a post-militaristic form of heroics that runs “away” from war.

The theme song that the Dude recites contains a final verse, which he does not sing, that parallels his own life as a sixties radical and peace activist, who in his first meeting with the Big Lebowski is “branded” as a “bum” whose “revolution failed:”

And wherever you go  
for the rest of your life  
You must prove...  
You're a man.

The Dude as the movie’s punchbag and oblivious sperm donator offers a different type of heroism to that offered by the apparent masculinity of the Big Lebowski, Sobchak, Da Fino, and United States foreign policy. Thus the Western operates as both a framing device for the film and a touchstone for characters seeking to connect with an authentic “televised” form of masculine behaviour.

To paraphrase the Italian Absurdist playwright Luigi Pirandello, offers characters in search of a chronotopic sub-genre to construct coherency and stability. John Harkness’s 1994 review of the Coens’ works in *Sight and Sound*, prior to the release of , claims the Coens’ movies heartlessly plunder Hollywood’s image gallery to construct nihilist jokes:

The Coens' strength lies in a stylization that reduces or even eliminates the human presence from the frame, and a gallows humour they never shy away from. Their happy endings are ironic commentaries on the genres they subvert, and their world is composed only of nightmares.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps *i*'s ineffective and farcical nihilist kidnappers are the Coens' response to Harkness's criticism.<sup>46</sup> Russell, that "the film is ultimately a caricature of their [Coens'] distinct styles of filmmaking, a movie that showcases many of the Coens' motifs with little of the wit which the filmmakers have typically deployed," resonates with Harkness's criticism.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, *i* subverts genres and revels in dramatic and verbal ironies, but there is more than a nightmare in its cinematic vision, that features a recent past as a way of positing a better future, while demonstrating how this "past" hinges on a dialogic integration of a variety of mass-culturally imagined pasts from film, television, and music. Against the backdrop of various imagined and real pasts, of the Western and other genres, this film posits a type of masculinity and foreign policy that "abides" and might eventually generate "a little Lebowski" rather than a Big Lebowski.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Fred Pheil, *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Difference and Domination* (London: Verso, 1995) uses the term "white male rampage films" to delineate action films in the late eighties and early nineties, such as serialised film franchises like *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, and *Lethal Weapon*. Typically these films have working class, white male heroes who overcome bureaucratic and feminine forces with brute force. *Lebowski*'s Dude does not conform to this type.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Lichter, "The Instant Replay War," in Hedrick Smith, ed., *The Media and the Gulf War* (Washington, DC: Seven Locks Press, 1992), 224-230.
- <sup>3</sup> The exception to this trend is the military melodrama *Courage Under Fire* (Zwick 1996), which curiously also focuses on the problem of identity politics within the American military. This film spends very little time looking at Iraq from any other perspective than that of United States military politics: Iraq and Kuwait operate as pretexts for the discussion of gender and race in the United States military. See,

- for an in-depth discussion of identity politics in this film, Yvonne Tasker, "Soldiers' Stories: Women and Military Masculinities in *Courage Under Fire*" (*Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 19.3, 2002), -209.
- <sup>4</sup> This film consciously borrows from Jarecke's stark black and white photographs to challenge the original opening scenes, in which the Gulf War was a fun beach party for American soldiers. In terms of representation, it bends "realism" through a Wizard-of-Oz-like use of filters. Kenneth Jarecke and Exene Cervenka, *Just Another War* (Joliet, Montana: Bedrock Press, 1992).
- <sup>5</sup> John Hodgkins contends that Hollywood's reaction to the digital Gulf War is to retreat into World War II in search of a more noble war. John Hodgkins, "In the Wake of Desert Storm: A Consideration of Modern World War II Films" (*Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30.2, 2002), 74-84.
- <sup>6</sup> R. Barton Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 53.
- <sup>7</sup> Ethan and Joel Coen, *The Big Lebowski* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), vi. The phrase "appreciation for the multiplicity of men" suggests a flippant admission that the film which features scenes of flying vaginal artists, castration, and a "convicted pederast" does engage with the essential definitions of masculinity.
- <sup>8</sup> William Preston Robertson, *The Big Lebowski: The Making of a Coen Brothers Film*, ed. Tricia Cooke (New York, London, 1998), 45.
- <sup>9</sup> Carolyn Russell, *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen* (London: McFarland, 2001), 165.
- <sup>10</sup> George Toles, "Obvious Mysteries in *Fargo*" in George Toles, *A House Made of Light: Essays on the Art of Film* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 263. *Fargo* (Gramercy, 1996) was released two years before *Lebowski* and was both a commercial and a critical success.
- <sup>11</sup> Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen*, 60.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.
- <sup>13</sup> Maria Cristina Iuli, "Memory and Time in *The Big Lebowski*: How Can the Political Return?" in Gigliola Nocera, ed., *America Today: Highway and Labyrinths* (Siracusa: Grafià Editrice, 2003), 651. In the
- <sup>14</sup> Lisa Donald, "Bowling, Gender and Emasculation in *The Big Lebowski*" *Lewboskitheory.com* <http://www.lebowskitheory.com/pages/welcome.html>. Donald admits to being aware of no scholarly work on the film other than Todd Comer's article. This self-published essay heralds the rise of *Lebowski* fan culture the internet.
- <sup>15</sup> Iuli "Memory and Time," 658.
- <sup>16</sup> Todd A. Comer, "This Aggression Will Not Stand: Myth, War, and Ethics in *The Big Lebowski*" (*SubStance* 34.2, 2005), 98-117.
- <sup>17</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" in Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, eds., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 250.
- <sup>18</sup> In applying Bakhtin's term to film I recognise the shift in media. Michael V. Montgomery lays the groundwork for such applications when he argues film's ability to represent the matrix of time and space allows "the chronotope [to] reference real life situations rife with everyday associations for audience, helping to create a sense of shared place." Michael V. Montgomery, "Carnivals and Commonplaces: Bakhtin's Chronotope, Cultural Studies, and Film" (*English Language and Literature* 173, 1993), 6. Arguably, *The Lebowski*'s constant shifting of genre makes the identification with a sense of shared space and time difficult; Lynne Pearce, *Reading Dialogues* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 71.
- <sup>19</sup> Arguably these polychronotopes coalesce as a single unifying chronotope for many dedicated fans of this movie who hold yearly conventions in bowling alleys where they dress as the film's characters. I suspect this film's cult status is due in part to its heavily stylised representations of eccentric characters who tend to reference particular styles and periods. See the official fan club's website at [www.lebowskiifest.com](http://www.lebowskiifest.com).
- <sup>20</sup> The choice of the Gulf War as a setting for this notion of identity as chronotopically constructed does not seem accidental. Larry Beinhart's satirical detective novel *American Hero* hypothesises the Gulf War was essentially created by a Hollywood director to serve President Bush's re-election ambitions. In Beinhart's novel, a director creates a CNN-friendly war by taking snippets from all the great war films, including those produced by Nazi Germany. His satirical point is that the Gulf War for American television viewers exists as nostalgic palimpsest divorced from the reality of the Gulf.
- <sup>21</sup> All quotations from the film are taken from the script available at <http://www.scriptdude.com/frames/moviescripts/biglebowski.pdf>.
- <sup>22</sup> Sobchak contradicts himself seconds later in the dialogue when he uses "Chinaman" to refer to the Dude's attacker.

- <sup>23</sup> When confronting “little Donny,” Walter dresses in a suit and carries a briefcase, which enhances his attempt to play an authority figure.
- <sup>24</sup> Tom Hayden, “Port Huron Statement” (*Voices of the Tribe* [www.orlok.com/tribe/insiders/huron.html](http://www.orlok.com/tribe/insiders/huron.html) paragraph 7, emphasis added).
- <sup>25</sup> The Dude and the Big Lebowski share the same name and in many ways mirror each other in their generational divide. When the Dude observes the Big Lebowski’s trophy wall, the Dude’s face is superimposed on a *Time Magazine* commemorative mirror that asks “ARE YOU A LEBOWSKI ACHIEVER?” The Dude is the great under-achiever. This mirroring occurs on the level of *mise-en-scène*: while the Dude has a picture of President Nixon bowling in his apartment, the Big Lebowski has a picture of himself with Nancy Reagan (The Big Lebowski’s aide Brandt solemnly whispers that the President was unavailable for pictures that day). While the Dude may be cynically celebrating tricky Dick Nixon as a bowler, the Big Lebowski is unable to have his souvenir photo with President Reagan. The Big Lebowski’s desire to have his picture taken with Reagan reflects a presidency that nostalgically invoked the Western as a way of stabilising a macho version of American foreign policy. Reagan’s conscious invocation of the fuzzy chronotope of Hollywood Western sought to reassure voters by simplifying complex foreign policy decisions. The Big Lebowski’s attempt to simplify and mythologise his rather complex life is full of dramatic irony that resonates with Reagan’s blurring of his acting roles with his real life.
- <sup>26</sup> Robertson, *The Making of the Big Lebowski*, 43.
- <sup>27</sup> Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen*, 53
- <sup>28</sup> Robertson, *The Making of The Big Lebowski*, 42.
- <sup>29</sup> This is an oblique reference to *Fargo*, in which Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) is the police chief. Presumably Bunny Lebowski is related.
- <sup>30</sup> Pheil, *White Guys*, 1-36.
- <sup>31</sup> His preferred choice of alcohol in the film offers two connotations: one, the sweet combination of vodka, Kahlua and cream is not exactly a “manly” drink by the standards of heroes of Westerns, and two, he is figuratively consuming “whiteness” in this new post-Cold-War era. He also orders a Caucasian, which appears to be a variation of the White Russian, and resonates with the notion of the film’s hero literally consuming whiteness.
- <sup>32</sup> Paul William Roberts, *The Demonic Comedy: Some Detours in the Baghdad of Saddam Hussein* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 110-111, 119-20.
- <sup>33</sup> Sobchak, in an impassioned speech just prior to the showdown outside the bowling alley with the three nihilists, laments the Iraqi adversary while idealising the North Vietnamese as “worthy adversaries.” For Sobchak, honour is embodied via direct mortal combat versus the Gulf War’s technocratic victory. Sobchak seeks to restore, via his speech, honour and glory to the colonial enterprise while his actions demonstrate the ridiculous futility of such exercises.
- <sup>34</sup> Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992), 67.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 240-242.
- <sup>36</sup> The phallic power of the gun in this “Western” is not an absolute for solving problems. Sobchak’s first attempt to rescue the supposedly kidnapped Bunny Lebowski results in his Uzi falling out of the car and randomly spraying bullets. The Uzi reappears in the “showdown” outside the bowling alley in the hands of the German nihilists who are unable to operate it.
- <sup>37</sup> The Eagles are a part of a later gag on race and music in the film when an African-American Rastafarian taxi driver ejects the Dude from his cab because the Dude does not “like my music,” which is also the Eagles. The notion of a music lover having “his” music that authentically reflects his identity is skewed in this brief scene that reverberates with most of the characters’ overtly and elaborately constructed nostalgic identities.
- <sup>38</sup> Roberts notes that *Saddam* (with the stress on the second syllable) translates somewhat literally to “learned one.” On the other hand, *Saddam* (with the stress on the first syllable and nasal “a” as George Bush used) translates to “shoe-shine boy.” Bush was as conscious of this as he was of the way his singular pronunciation sounded to non-Arabic speakers: *Sodom Hussein* (Roberts, *The Demonic Comedy*, 125). Ironically, in the dream sequences of *Lebowski*, Saddam is featured as a bowling alley attendant who polishes shoes.
- <sup>39</sup> However, the cowboy narrator who appears in the credits as the Stranger states that he will stick around to watch the semi-finals where presumably the Dude and Sobchak will meet Quintana’s team.



- <sup>40</sup> The term “hailing” is derived from Stuart Hall’s explanation of Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation. Hall describes how individuals are “hailed” or interpellated by various ideological forces and thus accept an identity always already constructed for them. Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media” in George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt, eds., *Silver Linings* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981), 32.
- <sup>41</sup> Da Fino shadows the Dude in a seventies-style Volkswagen beetle that does not scream masculinity or reflect his ultra-masculine *film noir* manner of speech; however, in a strange case of “auto” referentiality, the Coens in their first film, the *noir* styled *Blood Simple*, have the philosophical and murdering detective Loren Visser use a Volkswagen to shadow characters.
- <sup>42</sup> Maude Lebowski’s iconography associates her with the goddesses of Norse mythologies, the Valkyries. Maude’s first appearance in the film has her in a flying apparatus shuttling over the Dude’s head as she spatters paint onto a canvas on the floor, thus echoing the flight of the Valkyries. In the most explicit reference in the Dude’s dream sequence, a parody of a pornographic film called *Gutterball*, the Dude dressed as a tiny cable-repair man sees Maude in a bowling alley wearing “an armored breastplate and Norse headgear, [she] has braided pigtails, and holds a trident.” The scene morphs with the Dude’s point of view becoming that of a bowling ball heading down a bowling alley between the legs of a number of women dressed as Valkyries. This dream sequence cuts to the German anarchists wielding large scissors threatening to castrate the Dude. This choice of a female goddess from an ancient violent Norse myth seems particularly apt in a movie that satirises the pitfalls of white masculinity and the tradition of the contemporary, debased and hypocritical “warrior code” as exemplified by Sobchak and the Big Lebowski. The Valkyries offer a promethean afterlife to warriors whom they pluck from the battlefield and take to Valhalla, where the warriors enjoy a never-ending cycle of eating, drinking, and fighting that results in dismemberment and then the rejoining of their severed body parts. Peter A. Munch, *Norse Mythology: Legends of Gods and Heroes*, trans. Sigurd Bernhard Hustvedt (Michigan: Sing Tree, 1968), 32, 48. The Dude’s dream alludes to both the feminine power to achieve a bountiful feminine peace and the more destructive elements of dismemberment involved in Norse mythology.
- <sup>43</sup> I hesitate to call the “Western” a chronotope since typically Hollywood Westerns have a very loose sense of time and place; the cowboy narrator seems to exploit this aspect of the genre.
- <sup>44</sup> Ironically, the Dude tracks down little Larry via a D grade paper in history that Larry left crumpled under the seat of the Dude’s stolen car. This joke about history resonates within the film where history is not a series of facts but is contingent on characters’ chronotopic expression of the facts in terms of their self-constructed identities. While Larry got a D for his history paper, his father created a TV Western that inspires both the Dude’s and Sobchak’s identities.
- <sup>45</sup> John Harkness, “The Sphinx Without a Riddle” (*Sight and Sound*, August 1994), 9.
- <sup>46</sup> The Coens are not known for their explicitly political work, and indeed their oeuvre suggests a more hyper-formalist approach to film-making, yet not all of their films are devoid of social commentary: as Russell notes, *Raising Arizona* critiques the “normal” life of “the family unit” in Reagan’s America. Russell, *Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, 39.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.