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NO COUNTRY FOR OLD AUTEURS: THE NOTION OF THE
AUTEUR REVISITED THROUGH THE CINEMA OF THE
COEN BROTHERS

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I dedicate this work to "film lovers
[for they] are sick people."

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ABSTRACT

**NO COUNTRY FOR OLD AUTEURS: THE NOTION OF THE
AUTEUR REVISITED THROUGH THE CINEMA OF THE
COEN BROTHERS**

MATHEUS BATISTA MASSIAS

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA

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The present thesis consists of an investigation concerning auteurism, as a critical practice, scrutinizing two Coen Brothers' films, *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007), as objects of study. Auteurism is reviewed over the years, from the period prior to *Cahiers du Cinéma* to its takeover and undertaking during the 1950s in France; auteur criticism is also analyzed in the U.S. and in the U.K. An overview and focused features are rendered by critics and theoreticians who formulated, defended, and attacked this critical approach, it also questions what an auteur is. The following chapters aim at analyzing the two films abovementioned by the Coens, its characters and shot analyses, using auteurist perspectives allied to other theoretical standpoints, such as poststructuralism and intertextuality; therefore, the notions of "work," "text," and "author" are studied under the essays by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva. Moreover, adaptation is also tackled, acknowledged as both a process and a product, by Linda Hutcheon.

Key-words: auteurism, intertextuality, adaptation, Coen Brothers.

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RESUMO**ONDE OS AUTEURS NÃO TÊM VEZ: A NOÇÃO DE AUTEUR
REVISITADA ATRAVÉS DO CINEMA DOS IRMÃOS COEN****MATHEUS BATISTA MASSIAS****UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA****2016**

Esta dissertação consiste em uma investigação no que diz respeito o autorismo, como uma prática crítica, escrutinizando dois filmes dos irmãos Coen, *O Grande Lebowski* (1998) e *Onde os Fracos Não Têm Vez* (2007), como objetos de estudo. O autorismo é revisado através dos anos, a partir do período anterior à *Cahiers du Cinéma* até os anos em que a revista assumiu o controle e encarregou-se de tal prática na França dos anos de 1950; a crítica de autor também é analisada nos Estados Unidos e no Reino Unido. Uma visão geral e seus aspectos mais detalhados são oferecidos por críticos e teóricos que se debruçaram formulando, defendendo, ou criticando essa abordagem crítica, objetiva-se também questionar o que é um autor no cinema. Os capítulos seguintes visam analisar os dois filmes citados acima, através de seus personagens e análises fílmicas, usando a perspectiva autoral aliada a outros pontos de vista teóricos, como o pós-estruturalismo e a intertextualidade; portanto, a noção de "obra," "texto," e "autor" são estudadas a partir de Barthes, Foucault, e Kristeva. Ademais, a adaptação também é investigada, como um processo e um produto, por Hutcheon.

Palavras-chave: autorismo, intertextualidade, adaptação, irmãos Coen.

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I ever came across a Coen Brothers film was around 2008, when I was still taking classes of English as a foreign language at Yáziği. In their lab, where students would usually go to do their assignments, especially the *House of English*, I would (also go to do my own assignments, since they were mandatory) generally go to the DVD shelf, where for every week I could borrow a couple of films. One of these films was *No Country for Old Men*; and by the end of my session at home, I was restless, and the only thing in my mind was, "What the hell did I just watch?" It was not only because of the abrupt cut to black after Tommy Lee Jones's character reports his dream to his wife, maybe it was due to Javier Bardem's portrayal of the uncanny Chigurh, and how he gets away from a car wreck with a bone sticking out of his arm. At that time, I would never imagine that as a genuine "Coen Brothers feeling," especially the one you get by the end of their films, or even the last shot of their pictures, such as in *Barton Fink* and *A Serious Man*, which I find wonderful.

This anecdote is just to illustrate how fond I grew of the films made by Joel and Ethan Coen. At college, I bought Ian Nathan's *Masters of Cinema: Ethan and Joel Coen*, a series made by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which I used as one of the main sources when I had to deal directly with their oeuvre. Two years before, I had watched a Coen Brothers film for the first time at a movie theater: *True Grit*. It was a matinee in a weekday and after that I had to walk my way to the university. In those days I was not into film studies, though I had a clear inclination towards films and the cinema, attending to ciné-clubs and movie theaters alike.

I cannot really remember why I chose the Coens for this enterprise, for I could have taken any other filmmaker. Maybe it was the challenge of dealing with auteurism knowing that the notion of the so-called "death of the auteur" would be difficult to determine with them, or even get around, when I was writing my thesis. The significance of this undertaking lies far beyond my fondness of their films; it comprises the very importance of revisiting, historically and critically, the notion of the auteur in cinema, for applying conceptual tools such as intertextuality, collective authorship, and adaptation, which can be seen as a means to refine auteurism. Moreover, bringing out the relevance of

the Coen Brothers and their collaborators to film studies is another reason, since I could not find any study carried out in what concerns auteurism and the Coen Brothers at UFSC.¹

Auteurism or, as some would still insist, auteur theory was big news to me when I was in transition from literature to film studies. My pre-project was definitely different, for I was going to deal only with *No Country for Old Men* and adaptation. Thanks to my advisor, I overcame this problem, and my project took shape. So was I naive afterwards, thinking I might have covered their whole oeuvre in my thesis. To select only two motion pictures was a tough task. In the first presentation of my project someone asked me why I did not choose *Fargo*, for instance. *Fargo* could easily make it, and so many other films. *Barton Fink*² and *Blood Simple.*, which I deem to be some of their best, could be scrutinized here as well. However, *The Big Lebowski* and *No Country for Old Men* stand for what the Coen Brothers do best, I believe: screenplay writing and the combination of genres. But I was also at odds with *No Country for Old Men*, once it is not a Coen Brothers film *per se* and, at the same time, it is not simply an adaptation, though, as I try to make my point here.

At the beginning I thought I was playing my ace with auteurism, for I was enthralled by its notion and its appearance in film history. I soon realized how fraught with failure this sort of criticism could be and I wondered how I could make my way through with it, trying to be very careful and critical. Thus, by problematizing auteurism I have a beginning and a general objective: to scrutinize and improve the notion of the auteur and auteurism by using two Coen Brothers films as my objects of study. The first chapter, "Raising Auteurism: A Critical Discussion," is dedicated to it. It is a coverage of auteurism, as a critical approach, in film studies. It tackles its very methodology at *Cahiers du*

¹ Though the Coen Brothers are not tackled filmically, there is a thesis in the Translation department (PGET - UFSC) entitled *A Tradução do Inglês Sulista Norte-Americano em Três Filmes dos Irmãos Coen: Uma Análise Descritiva*, written by Vanessa Lopes Lourenço Hanes, which aims at analyzing how Southern American English is depicted in three films by the Coen Brothers and how it was translated into Brazilian Portuguese.

² *Barton Fink* is a curious film in the oeuvre of the Coen Brothers. Allied with auteurism one can make interesting comments concerning the role of the scriptwriter and the producer, besides the demands of the film industry. Their latest film, *Hail, Caesar!*, also addresses some issues of the film industry.

Cinéma, however unmethodical it is, from Truffaut's passionate ranting to Bazin's cautious and objective analysis. The extension of auteurism is also portrayed and reviewed by American and English critics overseas, from the rivalry between Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael to the more systematic and differentiated approach accomplished by Peter Wollen. I am again grateful to my advisor for introducing me the work of Jean-Claude Bernardet, especially his book *O Auteur no Cinema*, which is an illuminating work and shed a light on this issue. Furthermore, Alexandre Astruc is another name that provides earlier inquiry towards the notion of the auteur in cinema before *Cahiers* and James Naremore more recently to reflect upon auteurism and its pros and cons.

Apart from these critics and theoreticians, I also resort to Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and their essays in relation to authorship and the very notion of what an author is. Although they were (not only) influential to literary studies, I make use of two essays provocatively written by them, "The Death of the Author" and "What Is an Author?" They enter as a separate but linking section to auteurism, with a poststructuralist standpoint, wherein the notion of the author was either abandoned or somewhat reclaimed. The importance and their contribution is to think further whether there is significance whatsoever to the notion we all know and learned over the years about the author of a work. Hence, "work" is feasibly seen as "text," and "author" as "scriptor." Barthes's and Foucault's concerns are not merely (still) trendy approaches to authorship, they are inquisitive and debatable.

The second chapter, "O Auteur, Where Art Thou?," is when I in fact analyze *The Big Lebowski*. This chapter and the following are, to a certain extent, divided in sections with almost the same purpose. Thus, after introducing the film briefly, a plot overview is given and two motifs are explored: history and misunderstandings. The next section deals with a study of characters, mainly the ones portrayed by Jeff Bridges and John Goodman and their characters' idiosyncrasies, but also covering some others and their relevance to the plot of *The Big Lebowski*. The section "Direction, Editing, and Sound" is rendered in order to present auteurist impressions of the Coen Brothers, particularly how framing and soundtrack are used. The following section tackles theory again, it resorts to Julia Kristeva, another key theoretician of poststructuralism, who works with the notion of intertextuality, essentially borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts. This section is not dully theoretical, it reclaims the comparisons between *The Big*

Lebowski and *The Big Sleep* and how such films share plot structure, characterizations (or even travesties), and style, by the means of shot descriptions and analyses. Last but not least, "Collective Authorship" is brought forward as one of my main thesis. Coenesque as an auteurist signature is not completely accomplished by Joel and Ethan alone, their oeuvre relies heavily on the work of frequent collaborators, such as actors and actresses, cinematographer, storyboard artist, set designer, sound department, film score, and others. This section is theoretically based on C. Paul Sellors's view of collective authorship.

The third chapter, "The Auteur Who Wasn't There," prioritize the analysis of *No Country for Old Men*. Therefore, as I just mentioned above, a plot overview is given in order to situate the reader, with a concern towards the notion of topophilia and how it plays a major role during the film, especially on the characters of Tommy Lee Jones and Josh Brolin. I provide the analysis of some shots so as to better illustrate my point. In the "Characters" section, only the main ones are analyzed, the others are just mentioned in passing; thus, Anton Chigurh is described as the odd man out, Sheriff Bell the old man who does not understand the world around him anymore, and Llewelyn Moss as a unfortunate but tough Texan. Direction, editing, and sound are also examined, I make suggestions about shot similarities and other patterns according to previous films by the Coens; sound, quite differently approached in *No Country for Old Men*, is studied with ears wide open. Adaptation, besides auteurism, is the main critical and theoretical tool in this chapter. I bring Linda Hutcheon's study on adaptation into play almost exclusively, being quite satisfied with her statement about adaptation, understanding it as a "process" and as a "product," besides her questions towards adaptation, such as "what" it is and "how" it is made, "who" is the adapter and "why" adapt, besides "where" and "when" to adapt.

"Auteur Grit" stands for my final remarks about auteurism and how to place Joel and Ethan Coen in film history. This chapter is far from being a conclusion of what auteurism and the auteur are or should be. It defends, to some extent, how auteurism, as a critical tool, can be an auspicious maneuver in film studies and how spectators can benefit from it, due to its mindfulness to styles and themes. Furthermore, it stresses the importance to apply auteurism never putting other film collaborators aside, managing to realize their significance to the overall output of a filmmaker.

CHAPTER 1

RAISING AUTEURISM: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

Bill Nichols asserts that "*Although many argue that the debate about auteur criticism is passé, it seems less resolved than suppressed*" (221). As far as film criticism and theory, and its subsequent institutionalization, have crystallized the notion of the auteur in cinema, accepting and adopting this practice and its proposals, though almost always counterpointing it, I intend to consider and revisit this issue from different perspectives, once criticism and theory have developed its scopes and elaborated new ones, adapting their demands in a continuous fashion. Poststructuralism, intertextuality, and adaptation are undertaken as crucial principles to a further proposal of how to approach auteurism.

1.1. Auteurism as a Critical Practice

A few clarifications should be addressed in relation to some terms: *auteurism*, as I use it, refers to a sort of criticism, be it as an *ism* or as a portmanteau for *auteur* plus *criticism*, it is practiced by critics not filmmakers, unless they are critics as well. On the other hand, *auteurship* is an attribute accomplished not only by directors but by whoever that establishes or reaches the parameters to be regarded as an auteur; thus, auteurship is most often consonant but not entirely with the *politique des auteurs* as it was envisioned by the writers at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The term auteur, consequently, should be defined according to the critics and theorists I have selected to review in this chapter. The selection and its organization aims at reviewing auteurism historically, contextually, and critically; I also comment briefly on the Coen Brothers in order to contextualize them in this endeavor.

1.1.1. Pre-*Cahiers du Cinéma* Years

Although the term auteur had already been in vogue in the 1920s and revealing writings by Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, and Louis

Delluc³ were at one's disposal for the following decades, I selected Alexandre Astruc's essay with the purpose of relating what he wrote to a poststructuralist standpoint discussed in the second section of this chapter. Writing for the French film journal *L'Écran français*, Astruc published in 1948 a manifesto-like essay entitled "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *la caméra-stylo*" that was in a way a catalytic thought regarding what came later as the *politique des auteurs*. Astruc (1) problematizes important issues, such as the notion of language in cinema:

the cinema is quite becoming a means of expression, just as all arts have been before it, and in particular painting and the novel.⁴ [. . .] it is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsession exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. That is why I would like to call this new age of *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen).

Astruc's definition of the *caméra-stylo* is a critique to the cinema that was being practiced, a cinema deeply dependent on the image, which he calls the tyranny of the visual. He is neither pleased with the silent era and its editing techniques nor with literary adaptations of the sound cinema. Rather, Astruc is looking for a sort of writing in cinema that can be "just as flexible and subtle as written language." Of course that this is

³ C. Paul Sellors (12) points that French writers Émile Vuillermoz, Léon Moussinac, Jean Epstein, and Italian Riccioto Canudo had already developed a notion of film language in the 1920s. Besides, he asserts that Louis Delluc, also in the same decade, had the same perspective on writing and directing motion pictures, that is, that artists who write a screenplay should themselves direct it.

⁴ This anxiety of expression and the attempt to justify the needs of cinema in relation to other arts is not only common among critics (Astruc became a filmmaker himself shortly after) but among directors too: Jean Renoir, for instance, once posited that "[his] dream [was] of a craftsman's cinema in which the author [could] express himself as directly as the painter in his paintings or the writer in his books."

a matter of different media, but Astruc's objective here is to propose a tool, the camera-pen, which would overcome what he deems as problems of the past decades in cinema.

The camera-pen, accordingly, would be the ultimate source used by this new avant-garde, which would be a crop of auteurs. It is with the camera-pen, therefore, that filmmakers should conceive a film, writing down in terms of *mise-en-scène* in order to articulate and express thought.⁵ According to Astruc (2), "The fundamental problem of cinema is how to express thought," and *how*, according to Robert Stam (92), dictates the guidelines of the camera-pen: "Auteurism shifted attention from the 'what' (story, theme) to the 'how' (style, technique), showing that style itself had a personal, ideological, and even metaphysical reverberations." The claim for a cinema as a language (or a new language) and as a genuine means of expression, in addition to the notion of the camera-pen, is a deep-rooted and old battle of cinema against literature or literary means:

the scriptwriter directs his own scripts; or rather, that the scriptwriter ceases to exist, for in this kind of film-making the distinction between author and director loses all meaning. Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing. The film-maker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen. (Astruc 3)

In Astruc's director-centered perspective the focus on writing and directing as a unified activity is a way of implying auteurship, so it seems. Writing, in this case, is no longer related to screenplay writing, it rather regards the act of directing as a true way of writing. The notion of the camera-pen and directorial assertion through the language cinema has in its own right is a leading thinking that later would evolve into the *politique des auteurs*.

⁵ Although poststructuralism denies the expression of thought, it is with Astruc's *caméra-stylo* and the notion of *écriture* that I intend to make a connection by the end of this chapter.

The French language film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* was founded in 1951 by joint editors Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, André Bazin, and Léon Kiegel in the financing. Although *Cahiers* has been acknowledged as a cornerstone in film criticism and theory, Jim Hillier (1-5) observes that the major tenets that the journal developed in the 1950s owe substantially to the *Revue du Cinéma* and *Objectif 49*. Operating between 1928-31 and 1946-49 under the editorship of Jean-George Auriol, the *Revue du Cinéma* was the forerunner of *Cahiers*: the founding members of the latter worked in the second phase of *Revue* and Bazin, in particular, had already published in it and in other journals, such as *Esprit*, his central arguments on his theses about realism prior to the emergence of *Cahiers*. The concern with realism was evident in *Cahiers* as well, towards both Hollywood⁶ and the Italian cinema (Neorealism), but their contributors also paid special attention to French cinema. Moreover, there was a continuing interest in key filmmakers such as Jean Renoir, John Ford,⁷ Howard Hawks, Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock, and Roberto Rossellini, just to mention a few.⁸

The influence of the ciné-club *Objectif 49* is undeniable due to its most remarkable feature of having among its members not only zealous cinephiles and critics but filmmakers, such as Robert Bresson and Jean Cocteau, who was as a matter of fact its president. *Objectif 49* became the hearth of young critics who would later become the celebrated cineastes of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Bazin, in order to differentiate the new

⁶ According to Edward Buscombe (23), "The main difference at that time between *Cahiers* and other film magazines was that *Cahiers* did not feel that opportunities of this kind [cinema to be an art form like painting or poetry, offering the individual the freedom of personal expression] were to be found exclusively in the European 'art' cinema."

⁷ In addition to and prior to *Cahiers*, John Caughie (15) observes that "Lindsay Anderson, in the late 1940s in *Sequence*, was already writing about John Ford in a way which anticipated the best of *auteurism*, even to the point of distinguishing (in a *Sight & Sound* review) between Ford's *Wagonmaster* and [Robert] Wise's *Two Flags West* [. . .]." Moreover, the pioneering writings of Paul Rotha, Richard Griffith, and Lewis Jacobs should be remembered as well as "others like John Grierson, Otis Ferguson, and James Agee [who also] frequently discussed directors at length" (Nichols 221).

⁸ Buscombe, once more, notices that "In [*Cahiers*'] special issues nos 150-1 on the American cinema no fewer than 120 *cinéastes* (i.e. *auteurs*) were identified" (23).

contributors from the founding ones, nicknamed them, perhaps ironically,⁹ as "Young Turks," they were: Éric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, and François Truffaut. The latter had a very close relationship with Bazin, regarding him as his spiritual father and protector; whereas Rivette, Chabrol, and Godard met each other in Rohmer's *Ciné-Club du Quartier Latin* around 1950-1. The French film culture, as one can clearly notice, had been sturdily underpinned by cinephilia, ciné-clubs, and film journals,¹⁰ not to mention the huge importance of the *Cinématèque Française*, which was by that time under the aegis of Henri Langlois, an iconic figure in the history of cinema and a pioneer of film preservation.¹¹

1.1.2. The *Cahiers du Cinéma* Years

The *enfant terrible* Truffaut is generally credited for having idealized the *politique des auteurs*. His relentless essay "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" (1954) was an assault on film criticism, making a whole generation rethink cinema and its

⁹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, besides of being "A member of a revolutionary party in the Ottoman Empire who carried out the revolution of 1908 and deposed the sultan Abdul Hamid II," a Young Turk is a connotation for "A person eager for radical change to the established order." The irony resides in the ambiguity of the term: the "Young Turks" at *Cahiers du Cinéma*, as critics, were not concerned at all with politics *per se* (except for Pierre Kast that, though not considered a Young Turk, was clearly a leftist), but they were indeed eager for (radical) changes in cinema or, more exactly, in filmmaking. Their writings, which advocated for a *cinéma d'auteur*, were the first insurgent samples that later materialized into the practices of the *Nouvelle Vague*.

¹⁰ The triad formed by cinephilia, ciné-clubs, and film journals is quite important in order to understand the germs of auteurism. The fact that France was under the Nazi Occupation during the WWII meant that American (and other foreign) films were banned in the country. Thus, it was only after the Liberation that French spectators and critics could realize how different and innovative American cinema was being, especially with the emergence of Orson Welles and film *noir*. Besides, there was passionate interest for lowbrow and "B movies," especially those by Nicholas Ray and Samuel Fuller, for instance.

¹¹ Langlois's career was more recently portrayed in the documentary *Henri Langlois: The Phantom of the Cinématèque*, directed by Jacques Richard. It features interviews with friends, colleagues, academics, and Langlois's protégées, who became filmmakers themselves, such as Chabrol and Godard.

conceptions. This tendency referred in the title is "psychological realism" (which, by the way, is neither real nor psychological, according to its detractor) but goes beyond with Truffaut criticizing vitriolically the adaptations teamed by Jean Aurence and Pierre Bost who, according to him, are "essentially literary men" (229) and misrepresent original literary sources, whereas some cineastes have not only a different worldview but adapt in quite a cinematic way, prioritizing the *mise-en-scène*. These cineastes, such as Renoir and Bresson, are therefore *auteurs*, while the ones who direct "scenarists' films," such as Claude Autant-Lara and Jean Delannoy, are *metteurs-en-scène*,¹² i.e. the ones who "are and wish to be responsible for the scenarios and dialogues they illustrate."

Truffaut regards them contemptuously: "When they [scenarists like Aurenche and Bost] hand in their scenario, the film is done; the *metteur-en-scène*, in their eyes, is the gentleman who adds the pictures to it and it's true, alas!" (232-33). Such scenarists and *metteurs-en-scène* represent the "Tradition of Quality," i.e. the film realm that is unfaithful to the spirit of novels in order to tackle anti-clerical, anti-militaristic, and anti-bourgeois perspectives, as well as "plundering in order to no longer obtain anything on the screen but scholarly framing, complicated lighting-effects, 'polished' photography" (Truffaut 230). The reverberation of Truffaut's essay was quite polemic back in the 1950s and reverberated through many articles of *Cahiers*.

However, it is Bazin's account on the *politique des auteurs*, among the French, that I find most interesting. Many critics at *Cahiers*

¹² The notion of a *metteur-en-scène* is not that simple as Truffaut puts it. Sellors, in his turn, defines them as "frequently, though not always, highly competent directors, but their personalities generally are not evident in the films they direct" (6). Vincente Minnelli, for instance, is a quite disputable director in relation to his status: an *auteur* to *Cahiers* critics, but a *metteur-en-scène* to *Movie* critics. Furthermore, *metteur-en-scène* literarily means "film director" in French, but there was a semantic shift when introduced connotatively by *Cahiers* critics. Furthermore, Buscombe (25) formulates: "Whether this zeal to divide directors into the company of the elect on the right and a company of the damned on the left owes anything to the Catholic influence in *Cahiers* is hard to say at this distance; but what can be identified, yet again, is the presence of Romantic artistic theory in the opposition of intuition and rules, sensibility and theory."

were supporters of this policy,¹³ but it was Bazin who brought out a significant inquiry and problematized the notions of the auteur in cinema. The essay "On the *politique des auteurs*" (1957) is a balance between the pros and cons of the policy that prevailed at *Cahiers*; Bazin (248-49) admits that this policy is a matter of opinion, of likes and dislikes, and though he does not share the same view towards certain films and directors with his colleagues, he affirms that the overall conceptualization of the auteur can be effective and valuable. Furthermore, two distinctions between his perspective and his colleagues': first, he "find[s] that the work transcends the director;" second and accordingly, the way they conceive the "relationship between the work and its creator" (Bazin 249).

Framing his arguments between the notions of work and author—a parallel I undertake in the second section of this chapter from Michel Foucault—Bazin (250) recollects some statements that the work is outshined by the author, such as when Rohmer "states (or rather asserts) that in art it is the *auteurs*, and not the works, that remain; and the programmes of film societies would seem to support this critical truth." Indeed, the notion of the auteur has made possible, to a certain extent, the instauration of a film canon;¹⁴ the selected group of films considered the best of all times are generally the ones under the signature of an auteur. For instance, the academic appreciation of Hitchcock owes a great deal to the seriousness that *Cahiers* (and later *Movie*, in Britain) analyzed and evaluated his oeuvre,¹⁵ something that hardly or did not

¹³ Although it may not seem, Bazin was among the writers at *Cahiers* who wrote in auteurist manners. He wrote memorable studies about Charles Chaplin (*Essays on Chaplin*), Jean Renoir (*Jean Renoir*), and Orson Welles (*Orson Welles: A Critical View*). Besides, there is a wonderful collection of essays designed in auteurist manner translated into English, edited by Jim Hillier (*Cahiers du Cinéma - The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*), covering the period of 1951-59 of *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

¹⁴ According to James Naremore, "This was the period of the French *politique des auteurs*, or 'policy' of canonizing directors in the name of the art, and it remains crucial to an understanding of contemporary film studies" (9-10).

¹⁵ There are several studies published by *Cahiers* and outside *Cahiers* by their collaborators, such as Rohmer's and Chabrol's *Hitchcock* (1957), which anticipates Peter Wollen's approach to "structural auteurism" (1969); Truffaut's *Hitchcock/Truffaut* (1967), which was "adapted" into a documentary and released in 2015; etc. Furthermore, there is a dedicated website, *The Hitchcock Zone*, which collects the major materials written about Hitchcock that are

happen with American critics back then. The assumption that the notion of auteur surpasses the work is double-edged and at least paradoxical, once both of them are inextricable. Besides, Bazin leads his analysis to a further level when he considers historical and social angles arguing that "there can be no definitive criticism of genius or talent which does not take into consideration the social determinism, the historical combination of circumstances, and the technical background which to a large extent determine it" (251). Looking back in retrospect to the American cinema, the context in which the Coen Brothers appeared, i.e. the 1980s, was the "outcome" of established directors of the New Hollywood, whose roles were key contributions to a modern auteurist notion. The Coens, as independent filmmakers (not quite like a Jim Jarmusch, though), worked in a different format, but still betting on artistic and industrial parameters.

Thus, Bazin (251) remarks that "the cinema is an art which is both popular and industrial" and hence posits that:

What makes Hollywood so much better than anything else in the world is not only the quality of certain directors, but also the vitality and, in a certain sense, the excellence of a tradition. Hollywood's superiority is only incidentally technical; it lies much more on what one might call the American cinematic genius, something which should be analysed, and then defined, by a sociological approach to its production.

Bazin's remark might be an invitation to rebuttal; however, I, for one, should already anticipate that besides looking into a reception-like basis—"American cinema has been able [. . .] to show American society just as it wanted to see itself [. . .] by participating with the means at its disposal in the building of this society" and it also applies, in a sense, to the whole world, as a mirror, transcending cultural and behavioral boundaries—he is also claiming and ratifying, perhaps unconsciously,

available on the internet, such as articles and books, besides having its own blog posts and forum.

how powerful the American cinematic apparatus¹⁶ is, both commercially and ideologically. It is not only the issue of technical hegemony what makes Hollywood and American cinema rule over the notion of auteurism, a cinema that is successful both artistically and commercially, operating mightily in distribution and exhibition as well. The American "excellence of tradition" highlighted by Bazin is followed by the notion of the "genius of the system," the filmmaker that knows how to operate in a certain structure, whether strict in artistic control or not. This "genius of system," it is important to notice, is not exclusively American; Hollywood and American cinema in general was, and still is in many ways, a welcoming machine, a "melting pot" that has been importing (and exporting, perhaps in a smaller scale) artists from all around the globe.¹⁷

Furthermore, Bazin (255) defines that "The *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing a personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of references, and then assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next." Thus, it is with this short but incisive definition that I shall try to shed some light on the assumption that the Coen Brothers are auteurs. By "personal factor" Bazin infers that "To a certain extent at least, the *auteur* is a subject to himself; whatever the scenario, he always tells the same story, or, in case the word 'story' is confusing, let's say he has the same attitude and passes the same moral judgments on the action and on the characters." The issue here is that the auteur, contrarily to how it has been largely conceived, is not a single unit, a monad. Despite the fact that Joel and Ethan are brothers—and it should have made matters worse—they work together like an entity, they *coexist*, if I may. Sibling filmmakers in film history are not an unusual occurrence, since its very beginning and

¹⁶ One surely may point that Indian and Chinese cinemas, for instance, have a massive productions and also succeed artistically; nevertheless, one ought not to forget that the impact in distribution that they have worldwide is not compared to what the American cinema has achieved over the years, although there are important auteurs in Indian and Chinese cinemas. See Tyler Cowen's "Why Hollywood Rules the World, and Whether Should We Care" in his book *Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Culture* (2002) and Allen J. Scott's "Hollywood and the World: The Geography of Motion-Picture Distribution and Marketing."

¹⁷ Lang, Renoir, and Hitchcock are among the first figures selected by *Cahiers* members with the purpose of scrutinizing and evaluating their works in their American phase, which were generally criticized and devalued by critics.

invention, cinema was conceived by two brothers: Auguste and Louis Lumière. After them there came other celebrated brothers, such as Albert and David Maysles, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. However, in the American industrial context the DGA (Directors Guide of America) was created in order to prioritize and back up the individual as a professional; therefore, a general rule was established claiming that "With a few exceptions, only one Director may be assigned to a motion picture at any given time [and] may direct it " (DGA 4) in order to preserve the director's function, or, in Bazin's words, the very "personal factor in artistic creation." After almost twenty years working together and sharing the credits—Joel as director, Ethan as producer, and both as writers, though both of them always shared these key steps in filmmaking plus editing—, the Coen Brothers were only recognized as a established duo¹⁸ in 2003, with *The Ladykillers*.

All in all, Bazin (256) praises the *politique des auteurs* as an approach to film criticism because

it reacts against the impressionist approach while retaining the best of it. In fact the scale of values it proposes is not ideological. Its starting-point is an appreciation largely composed of taste and sensibility: it has to discern the contribution of the artist as such, quite apart from the qualities of the subject or the technique, i.e. the man behind the style.

However, Bazin quickly warns against the "aesthetic personality cult" and the hazardous belief that any film made by an auteur is always a chef-d'oeuvre, as if auteurs "appear[ed] as almost infallible directors who could never make a bad film" (248). Besides, a clear concern is set regarding the polemics and harshness that this sort of approach can

¹⁸ The established duo, thus, is this "entity" that, besides working together, shares a common view towards artistic creation and filmmaking. In addition to the Coen Brothers, other established duos acknowledged by the DGA, for instance, are the Hughes Brothers, the Wachowskis, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris (husband and wife), and the Brothers Strause.

engender in the analysis of films and directors, especially the ones (yet) not considered auteurs; after all, a film should be acknowledged due to an array of factors. Finally, Bazin (258) recommends that auteurism, as an "useful and fruitful approach, quite apart from its polemical value, should be complemented by other approaches to the cinematic phenomenon which will restore to a film its quality as a work of art" and that "This does not mean one has to deny the role of the *auteur*, but simply give him back the preposition without which the noun *auteur* remains but a halting concept. *Auteur*, yes, but what *of*?" The following chapters are presented with other approaches that should supplement and hopefully improve the use of auteurism, also as an answer to Bazin's question.

1.1.3. The Sarris-Kael Feud

The notion of the auteur flew overseas and took a different turn in the U.S. Claiming that there was no definition in the English language, American film critic Andrew Sarris formulated an "auteur theory."¹⁹ Like Bazin, Sarris also complains about the vagueness and lack of determined parameters that inform how the notion of the auteur should operate. He, therefore, proposes a "theory" with formulated features in his essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." Sarris's production as a critic has always been focused on the role of directors and their importance in filmmaking²⁰ and even though he does not mention the

¹⁹ Actually, Sarris was not the first to employ and attach the status of "theory" to auteurism: back in the headquarters of *Cahiers*, Luc Moullet, writing about Samuel Fuller in 1959 ("Sam Fuller: In Marlowe's Footsteps," available in Hillier's), applies the term "*auteur* theory" (149) instead of "*politique des auteurs*."

²⁰ Sarris's enterprise in auteurism—especially in his book *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1968)—has been described as being elitist and highly personal, due to his ranking of directors, e.g. *Pantheon Directors* (Ford, Hitchcock, Lubitsch, Renoir, Chaplin), *The Far Side of Paradise* (Capra, Edwards, Losey, Minnelli, Sirk), *Fringe Benefits* (Chabrol, Eisenstein, Rossellini, Antonioni, Polanski), *Less Than Meets the Eye* (Lean, Milestone, Wilder, Huston, Mamoulian), *Strained Serious* (Dassin, Frankenheimer, Kubrick, Lumet, Bresson), etc. Nevertheless, auteurism has always been subjective (whether extreme or moderate), whatever the flaws has Sarris committed over his career.

collaborative aspect in cinema, he acknowledges the importance of the cast (as "subsidiary *auteurs*"), for instance, however poor the direction of a film is. Thus, Sarris (562) admits that:

Obviously, the *auteur* theory cannot possibly cover every vagrant charm of the cinema. Nevertheless, the first premise of the *auteur* theory is the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value. A badly directed or an undirected film has no importance in a critical scale of values, but one can make interesting conversation about the subject, the script, the acting, the color, the photography, the editing, the music, the costumes, the decor, and so forth. [. . .] Now, by the *auteur* theory, if a director has no technical competence, no elementary flair for the cinema, he is automatically cast out from the pantheon of directors.

Defining technique as "simply the ability to put a film together with some clarity and coherence" (563), Sarris's notion of "technical competence" is quite problematic and hence debatable. Besides, the film director has always had a crew with specialized competences to count on, and Sarris recognizes that; and, I hasten to say, if "one can make interesting conversation about [. . .] the color, the photography, [. . .]," it is because another sort of *auteur* can be pointed out.

Sarris (562) goes on pointing that the second premise of his theory lies in "the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value," i.e. directors that, in order to be regarded as *auteurs*, have to display a certain style, something that makes a distinction between them and their oeuvre from the work of others.²¹ Thus, "Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels." Another

²¹ Sarris does exactly what Bazin warns against, "aesthetic cult personality," or in Buscombe's words, "He therefore does precisely what Bazin said should not be done: he uses individuality as a test of cultural value" (27).

quite problematic premise, though intriguing: Sarris debunks an Ingmar Bergman, "who is free to develop his own scripts," in favor of a George Cukor who, according to him, "works with all sorts of projects, [and] has a more developed abstract style" (562). The Coens, in their turn, also write their own scripts, however different their projects are one from another. Furthermore, the third and decisive principle of the auteur theory has to do with "interior meaning" which, according to Sarris, is "the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material. This conception of interior meaning comes close to what Astruc defines as *mise en scène*, but not quite" (562). Sarris's three concentric circles, which are technique, personal style, and interior meaning correspond respectively to a technician, a stylist, and then to an auteur.

Right after Sarris published his theory, he was harshly rebutted by Pauline Kael and consequently reconstructed his principles, followed by a proposal of a theory of film history. After employing the "forest critic" metaphor,²² some points are reinforced: for instance, when Sarris (242) asserts that "Ideally the strongest personality should be the director, and it is when the director dominates the film that the cinema comes closest to reflecting the personality of a single artist. A film history could reasonably limit itself to a history of film directors," it says much about his second premise towards the auteur theory. As a consequence, Sarris remarks that "the auteur theory is a theory of film history rather than film prophecy" (243), i.e. directors can only be

²² The "forest critic" metaphor is employed by Sarris quite pejoratively, though he makes his point. According to Sarris (239), "The trouble up to now has been not seeing the trees for the forest" and that "the forest to which I refer is called Hollywood, a pejorative catchword for vulgar illusionism." Hollywood, thus, "connotes conformity rather than diversity, repetition rather than variation. The condescending forest critic confirms his preconceptions by identifying those elements that Hollywood movies have in common." However, the forest critic fails to see the trees, undermining the output of Hollywood. The forest critic works therefore perfunctorily. Moreover, Sarris points that "The forest critic has had recourse to other snobberies over the years, and brief rebuttals to the battle cries of foreign 'art' films, documentary, and the avant-garde might in order at this point" (240). He also points that "The forest critic tends to emphasize [films *in* history] at the expense of [the history of films]," that is, the forest critic works contextualizing too much, as if the only relevant films were the ones that mirror the events of an era.

regarded as auteurs throughout film history and by the analysis of the films they made, a point I highly agree with him. Besides, Sarris states:

Ultimately, the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude, a table of values that converts film history into directorial autobiography. The auteur critic is obsessed with the wholeness of art and the artist. He looks at a film as a whole, a director as a whole. The parts, however entertaining individually, must cohere meaningfully. This meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings with skill and purpose. (246)

This is another breach that leads to the notion of "subsidiary auteurs," but the director—as its very semantics indicates—is the one in charge to manage and dominate the procedures, and if this director has a "strong personality" and gets to cohere things meaningfully, then this director is an auteur, according to Sarris.

Sarris also admits that "The auteur theory is merely a system of tentative priorities, a pattern theory in constant flux. The auteur critic must take the long view of cinema as if every film would survive in some vault forever" and that "Auteur criticism implies a faith in film history as a continuing cultural activity" (249). Indeed, auteur criticism determines the spots of film history: for example, the directors and films of the "Tradition of Quality" are less known because of their own relevance than by Truffaut's sharp critique regarding them. Yet, Sarris puts it well when he remarks that the auteur theory, or rather, auteurism is a likely-changing approach, that is, some auteurs may have their names and oeuvres forever imbued in film history, others may be forgotten or revisited, and some may rise and define an era. Furthermore, Sarris (250) highlights the importance of the *how* over—but not against—the *what*, i.e. visual style and *mise-en-scène* are much more valuable than plot and themes; however, all those parts are important in the final output of an auteurist statement. Sarris's account on the notion of the auteur goes beyond the questionable three concentric circles, he tackles significant issues, such as the impact of

directors in film history, the formation and maintenance of film canon, and the role of the film critic in different cultures; on the other hand, a different and dialectic view towards auteurism taken by a rigorous lady critic should also be considered.

Pauline Kael, doyenne of film criticism in the U.S., criticized Sarris's auteur theory severely, but with wit and lucidity.²³ Her essay "Circles and Squares" was first published in 1963 in the journal *Film Quarterly*, but it is her revised and extended critique that I deal with here. Circle by circle, Kael attacks Sarris's auteur theory; in general, she believes that "Criticism is an art, not a science, and a critic who follows rules will fall in one of his most important functions: perceiving what is original and important in *new* work and helping others to see" (266-67). Kael's retort is less an outrageous comment than a warning against a hazardous sort of criticism. About the outer circle, which regards technique as a criterion of value, Kael (267) posits that "sometimes the greatest artists in a medium bypass or violate the simple technical competence that is so necessary for hacks." Moreover, "An artist who is not a good technician can indeed create new standards, because standards of technical competence are based on comparisons with work already done." Thus, technique can be a way of eclipsing possible new auteurs and fixing art in an enclosed sphere ruled by paradigms.

The middle circle, which deals with the distinguishable personality of a director, is envisioned by Kael as a peril likely to be trapped in repetition, instead of managing new or different subject matters (268-69). Therefore, the worst films of a director would be the ones which her or his personality is more perceived, due to the axiomatic repetition of devices, be it style or subject matter. A positive aspect in the oeuvre of the Coens, for example, is their gamut of genres and their improvement; repetitions, of course, are all along their films, but they reinforce a determinant quality. After all, according to Kael, "repetition without development is decline" (265). Furthermore, cult of

²³ Kael is probably at her best against auteurism, or more specifically, against Sarris's auteur theory, in her book *The Citizen Kane Book* (1971), "which includes the shooting script for Orson Welles' classic film and a lengthy analysis, 'Raising Cain', in which Kael argues against Welles as its primary auteur by demonstrating through a combination of historical research and textual analysis the contributions of others such as co-screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz and cinematographer Gregg Toland" (Unknown 46).

personality was an issue Bazin already warned against, a feature generally found in auteurism; likewise, Kael advocates against Sarris's "élan of the soul." Finally, concerning the inner circle that prescribes the "interior meaning" which is the tension between the directors' personality and the material they are given to shoot a film: therefore, "Their ideal *auteur* is the man who signs a long-term contract, directs any script that's handed to him, and expresses himself by shoving bits of style up the crevasses of the plots. If his 'style' is in conflict with the story line or subject matter, so much better—more chance for tension" (Kael 273). This tension is believed to be possible (and good for an auteur) because Hollywood may be the place that most limits artistic creation; on the other hand, Bazin (257-58) claims the very opposite, his statement besides neutralizing Sarris's third circle also cancels out the first premise about the technique required of a director.

"Circles and Squares" goes beyond criticizing auteurism, it also questions what a film critic is. Kael (279) defends criticism from the auteur theory and its formulae, arguing that there is no formula to apply: "this range of experience, and dependence on experience, is pitifully absent from the work of the *auteur* critic; they seem to view the movies, not merely in isolation from the other arts, but in isolation even from their own experience." Throughout her essay Kael is primarily denouncing how film criticism was practiced back then in the U.S. and in England (especially in *Film Culture* and *Movie* respectively) and she somehow undermines the different approaches undertaken one decade earlier by the critics at *Cahiers*, who usually debated films in relation to other arts (mainly literature and painting, for instance) and their own experience and passion for the cinema. Kael's concern is about an auteur theory appeal "that it is an aesthetics which is fundamentally anti-art. And this, I think, is the most serious charge that can possibly be brought against an aesthetics" (280). The argument between Sarris and Kael is fruitful and though she has some quite compelling positions against auteurism, I would like to argue that this practice cannot be fully denied but improved.

1.1.4. Structural Auteurism

After the boom at *Cahiers* and the heated quarrel between Sarris and Kael,²⁴ British film theorist Peter Wollen came out with his auteur theory in 1969. Wollen's approach is somewhat different from what was done before, besides being more academic, drawing from Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology and Charles Sanders Peirce's and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology (Nichols 529-30). Even though Wollen earnestly acknowledges the importance of the auteur theory in cinema, he is eager to criticize it from the very beginning of his essay, stressing that "This looseness and diffuseness of the theory has allowed fragrant misunderstandings to take root, particularly among critics in Britain and the United States" (530). Therefore, any film critic could apply any method of auteurist writing, as one may observe in the different styles of writing among journals, such as *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Film Comment*.²⁵

The auteur theory proposed by Wollen is well-defined and structured. As usual in this sort of approach, a list of important directors is set; however, Wollen asserts that "The *auteur* theory does not limit itself to acclaiming the director as the main author of a film. It implies an operation of decipherment; it reveals authors where none had been seen before" (531). As a matter of fact, Wollen does not use "collective authorship" or any other similar term in any moment of his essay, but his assertion regarding the non-exclusivity of the director is always already an useful aegis to the idea of multiple auteurs within a film. The Coens are known for working with a regular team, both with the cast and some longtime partnerships in other instances of filmmaking. Therefore, this feature has much in common to Wollen's "noise" when he posits that "the director does not have full control of his work; this explains why the *auteur* theory involves a kind of decipherment, decryptment" and that "A great many features of films analyzed have to

²⁴ It was actually continued by Sarris in "The *Auteur* Theory and the Perils of Pauline," published by *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 16, no. 4 (Summer 1963). Their dispute apropos the auteur theory has gone down in film criticism as the "Sarris-Kael feud," even though she did not reply him back again.

²⁵ The diffuseness of auteurism should not be seen strictly as a negative aspect, though. Because it was not defined what it should be or how it should operate, auteurism became and still is a very democratic approach in film criticism.

be dismissed as indecipherable because of 'noise' from the producer, the cameraman or even the actors" (540).

Wollen sets a clear distinction regarding the *auteur* theory, positing that "two main schools of *auteur* critics grew up: those who insisted on revealing a core of meanings, of thematic motifs, and those who stressed style and *mise en scène*" (531); obviously Wollen is a supporter of the former. As many other discussions vis-à-vis the notion of the *auteur* in cinema, an issue is raised whether to consider a certain director an *auteur* or a *metteur-en-scène*. Wollen, in his turn, is keen to establish that:

The work of the *auteur* has a semantic dimension, it is not purely formal; the work of the *metteur en scène*, on the other hand, does not go beyond the realm of performance, of transposing into the special complex of cinematic codes and channels a pre-existing text: a scenario, a book or a play. As we shall see, the meaning of the films of an *auteur* is constructed *a posteriori*; the meaning — semantic, rather than stylistic or expressive — of the films of a *metteur en scène* exists *a priori*. (531)

Likewise the other differences between *auteur* and *metteur-en-scène*, Wollen keeps the importance of the former over the latter. From this point on, it is possible to infer that Wollen has taken a structuralist approach and to illustrate his ideas he uses the films directed by Howard Hawks and John Ford. Nevertheless, as these two filmmakers are not my object of study, a very brief analysis of the Coens's filmography shall be tackled in a way that it resembles Wollen's structural *auteurism*. Structuralism may not be the safest tour de force when poststructuralism is undertaken here, but considering thematic motifs in the textuality of the Coen Brothers is an important step.

One of the features about Hawks of which Wollen remarks is that he worked in almost every genre and the same can be pointed about the Coen Brothers. A differentiated range of genres is present in the oeuvre

of the Coens and though their films are quite hybrid, each of them has a distinctive trace of *noir* and/or comedy, especially dark humor. Crime is a key word in the universe of the Coens and their main motifs are inherited from it, followed or not by violence, which is another recurrent aspect. When Wollen (536) asserts that "Structuralist criticism cannot rest at the perception of resemblances or repetitions (redundancies, in fact), but must also comprehend a system of differences and oppositions" one can clearly identify the conflict (and sometimes its eventual upshot) between or among characters in their films, which is often triggered by a tension in power relationships, usually concerning money, not only selfishly but collectively, opposing and contrasting characters in a higher status in society to characters in a lower position, e.g. employer and employee in *Blood Simple.*; a policewoman and an outlaw in *Raising Arizona*; major and minor gangsters in *Miller's Crossing*; a mogul and a young playwright struggling and adapting himself in the film industry in *Barton Fink*; powerful businessmen and a naive fresh graduate that is looking for a job (and also two employees that symbolize good and evil) in *The Hudsucker Proxy*; a middleclass worker who wants to lead an ambitious enterprise but he needs a great amount of money and the closest person that could provide it is the wealthy father of his wife in *Fargo*; two Lebowskis, a very rich and a awfully poor one; and so on.

This "system of difference and oppositions" is also noticed in oeuvre of the Coens regarding space, for all their films take place in the American territory, with a distinctive inclination to displacement, be it in getaways, e.g. *No Country for Old Men*, or in job opportunities, e.g. *Barton Fink* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*; and time, from 1870s in *True Grit* to our present times, such as in *Intolerable Cruelty* and *Burn After Reading*. The main characters almost always face their worst nightmares in the form of a deadly, bully, or menacing nemesis: H. I. "Hi" McDunnough (Nicolas Cage) and Leonard Smalls, also known as Lone Biker of the Apocalypse (Randall "Tex" Cobb) in *Raising Arizona*; Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) and Sidney J. Mussburger (Paul Newman) in *The Hudsucker Proxy*; Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski (Jeff Bridges) versus Jeffrey Lebowski (David Huddleston) and Jesus Quintana (John Turturro) in *The Lebowski*; McGill (George Clooney) and his gang versus the ruthless Sheriff Cooley (Daniel von Bargaen); Marva Munson (Irma P. Hall) and the ladykillers, led by Goldthwaite Higginson Dorr (Tom Hanks), in *The Ladykillers*; Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) versus Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem) in *No Country for Old*

Men; Lawrence "Larry" Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg) against society in *A Serious Man*; Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld), Deputy U.S. Marshall Reuben J. "Rooster" Cogburn (Bridges), and Texas Ranger LaBoeuf (Matt Damon) versus the Ned "Lucky" Pepper gang in *True Grit*, and Llewyn Davis (Oscar Isaac) against anything else, from friends to the weather, in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Further observations are made in the following chapters.

1.1.5. Bernardet's Three Patterns

Jean-Claude Bernardet's book *O Autor no Cinema* (1994) is probably one of the most complete analyses on the notion of the auteur.²⁶ Written in Portuguese, it encompasses the very beginning in France, its influence in Brazil, and the decline of the auteur in cinema. Bernardet's study is rich in citations and, accordingly, in documentation, the historical accounts over the notion cross ages. According to Bernardet (10), "In 1921, essayist and *réalisateur*²⁷ Jean Epstein applies the term 'author' to cineastes, in 1924 he speaks plainly of 'author of films' and declares 'we, authors of films' in 1926".²⁸ Furthermore, when referring to dominance of *Cahiers* in auteurism, he mentions the relationship between literature and cinema and, consequently, their intermediate, criticism: "The Young Turks liked to write, at least they write: few directors have left abundant cinematographic literature, as Eisenstein, Pasolini or Rocha and a few others, and the writer is the representation of the artist and the intellectual" (14). Therefore, "Writers are regarded as safe values in the grounding of culture, so that finding aspects of their themes in films is a way to valorize them and consolidate the *status* of the filmmaker" (Bernardet 16). Literature, as a consolidated art, weighs upon cinema and its attributions and ambitions.

The notion of collectiveness in filmmaking is dealt with, "The *politique [des auteurs]* is the apologia of the individual that expresses

²⁶ Alongside Bernardet's book, C. Paul Sellors's *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths* (2010) goes beyond revisiting auteurism and it comprises a myriad of theoretical reviews and applies further discussions.

²⁷ *Réalisateur* is a French designation for the film director.

²⁸ The subsequent translations of Bernardet's citations are also provided by myself.

himself. This conception totally denies the one which regards the cinema as a collective art, teamwork" (Bernardet 22). Thus, "The *auteur* is a filmmaker that expresses himself, expressing what is inside of him." However, this assertion is too broad and trying to overcome this issue, Bernardet indicates three patterns: the first one aims at uniting the roles of the screenwriter and the *réalisateur* in one person, assuming that direction is the most important of the two; the second tries to comprise three roles, including now the producer, thus a better conception of a film, or rather, any sort of work of art could be designed; the last proposition regards "personal expression," i.e. "the film must be marked in a authorial way by its *réalisateur*; however, it is not required that he has worked as screenwriter and producer of the film" (23). All the *auteur* patterns proposed by Bernardet can be applied to the Coen Brothers, their cumulative roles in their films is self-evident, and "personal expression" seems to be what Ian Nathan regards as "Coenesque," which is something to be analyzed in the following chapters.

Bernardet also tackles the relevance of themes. There is no mention to Wollen's account on "structural *auteurism*," but the idea is the same. Bernardet revisits the study on Hitchcock's films by Chabrol and Rohmer, however (see footnote 15). The repetition of theme over a range of films is another way to identify *auteurs*, according to Bernardet (31): "The *auteur* is, in this conception, a filmmaker who repeats himself" (this is Kael's critique on Hitchcock, for instance). The repetitions form a "matrix," which has to be analyzed by the critic; "The matrix appears from this work of decantation, which lead us to what we could call *arquefilm*." Thus, Bernardet states that "The *auteur* is not built, he is discovered," a condition that could be linked to Wollen's remark that says that "the meaning of the films of an *auteur* is constructed *a posteriori*" (531).

Bernardet gives a brief definition apropos the *politique des auteurs*:

its critical method aims at understanding the *auteur* as an unity, it is the absolute inner coherence of the subject who expresses himself. "Je est un." True walls are erected in order to prevent the dispersion of the subject who only exists when he is uniformly equal to himself.

Terrorism of the unique, of unity, against the
diverse, the multiple. (38)

Bernardet also claims that biographical data, in this case, can be used in order to reinforce the idea of unity. Hence, he points two issues that could be a threat to the oneness of the auteur, such as the producer and the audience. The audience can be a key aspect in the promotion or decline of an auteur, once "The relation with the audience limits the potentiality of expression of the *auteur*." Bernardet goes on announcing that these two factors "harm the integrity of the *auteur*, his evolution, his unity, the full expression and development of the matrix, but they are assimilable factors by the *politique* for being exterior factors" (48-49). To form what Bernardet calls the "tritone of the *politique*" there is the contradictions of the auteur, which has to do with changes in themes or style.

In a second moment of his book, Bernardet unravels auteurism in Brazil, and a third and final section of the book is dedicated to the decline of the auteur. According to Bernardet (153), "Whereas the concept has gained in length, it has lost in depth; its familiarity, simplicity, obviousness correspond to its loss of creativity and power in polemicizing, both in the level of production as in criticism." He also pinpoints the changes in film production and the response of the audience, besides the decline of cinephilia; there is also the advent of "new cinemas" in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, the decline of the auteur is also marked by May of 1968 and its repercussion, the rising of the "Third World Cinema" with its powerful militancy pointing to a new horizon in filmmaking and criticism, which fought against not only the Hollywood cinema, but the auteur cinema. Nevertheless, there cannot be rejected the possibility that auteurism pervades the Third World Cinema. The "death of the author" *per se*, theorized by poststructuralists, such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault is another emergent occurrence.

1.2. The Poststructuralist Standpoint

The theoretical underpinning for poststructuralism (and deconstruction) found its hearth in the French avant-garde literary journal *Tel Quel*, whose output had the participation of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, among many other celebrated thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Umberto Eco. Barthes and Foucault also occasionally wrote for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, during an important transition in the general policy of the journal, since it became highly politicized in 1968 until the early 1970s. The selection of Barthes and Foucault is thought with the aim of bringing out the notions of "author," "text," "work," "writing," and "reader;" apart from the fact that is possible to read Foucault's "What Is an Author?" as a response to Barthes's "The Death of the Author."

1.2.1. Barthes, the Reaper

The essay "The Death of the Author" was first published in 1967 in English in the American journal *Aspen* and later in 1968 in French in the journal *Manteia*. In a quite polemical fashion Barthes announces the "death" of the author, which is succeed by the "birth" of the reader; in this interregnum, writing (*écriture*) is the key aspect and according to Barthes (142) it "is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing." Writing, therefore, is no longer a means of expressing the subject, it becomes a self sufficient act, it reigns over the author. Consequently, this is when Astruc's camera-pen does not hold water. However, the camera-pen is always already this apparatus that claims for writing²⁹—or in any case I undertake it,

²⁹ Astruc's camera-pen and his essay "What is *mise en scène*?" do not solve the problematic between *écriture* and the notion of art, or rather, cinema as a means of expression of the artist. However, the importance given to *mise-en-scène* in the writings of *Cahiers* critics and many others was an important step forward cinematic scripture, however unconsciously and sill prioritizing the personality of the auteur as artistic accomplishment. Analyzing how direction, the disposition of objects and the cast in the frame, the unseen spaces of the *mise-en-scène*, and how sequences and scenes happen were and still are ways to inscribe the empowerment of *écriture*, although the momentum of a

regardless of how poetical and metaphorical Astruc's concept is or sounds—just like when Barthes (143) mentions the groundbreaking writing of Mallarmé in France. The extremes committed by the *Cahiers* critics, named as "aesthetic personality cult" by Bazin, find its parallel in Barthes's words which disclaim the author:

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us. (143)

The importance given to authors and their lives is that of an authenticity, their work is hence valid with their presence; the same happens with the cinema and other arts: imagine, for a second, if Leonardo da Vinci had ever told the world about his intentionality behind *Mona Lisa*'s smile or

performance (which I explain below) and intertextual knowledge of the parties involved are intrinsic in their performance. In "What is *mise en scène*?" Astruc (266-68) tries to define it, making parallels of what is "real" and "truth" and what is represented through the lenses, stating that the director "runs a course between two realities: the image through which he observes the world and the duration within which the resolution comes." He, contradictorily, disclaims the notion of *mise-en-scène*, asserting that "there is no such thing as *mise en scène*, that actors can do quite well without it and that any chief cameraman knows how to position the camera to get the appropriate shot, that continuity between the shots takes care of itself, etc." Thus, the task of directors, according to Astruc, "could more aptly be described as presenting them, watching how they act and at the same time what makes them act." Of course, there is no guideline saying how each director should manage her or his function; however, some autonomy is granted to the cinematic figures, be it directly or indirectly, in the *mise-en-scène*. Cinematic writing, therefore, flows and is born simultaneously from different sources, with different but coherent participations.

if Stanley Kubrick had ever confessed what on Earth the monolith was in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The absence of the "Author" gives place to the "scriptor:" while the former, now dead and buried, used to conceive the text, existing and living before and after it, the latter "is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing" (Barthes 145). The notion of the (modern) scriptor (*écrivain*) could be translated into cinema or seems to be translatable as *écrivain-en-scène*, or rather, *écrivains-en-scène*, instead of auteur, the cinematic figure exclusively responsible for employing *mise-en-scène*. Thus, the momentum of a performance³⁰—the "here and now" of a *mise-en-scène*—is what and when *écrivains-en-scène* exist. However, such act is not completed all at once, since a film is not finished only in its production. Furthermore, Barthes asserts that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." Therefore, "The text is a tissue of quotation drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). In cinema, it can be inferred that the shot is this "tissue of quotation" and then the film *in toto*. Thus, sriptors draw from and on a myriad of past texts, giving place to intertextuality:

Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. (Barthes 147)

³⁰ The momentum of a performance, as I employ it, should be understood as a driving force developed by cinematic figures whose participation is crucial in the formation of artistic meaning and auteurist textual evidence. Momentum, as a Latin word, comes from *movimentum* and *movere*; therefore, the space and time (the "here and now") of the *mise-en-scène* is taken into account. These cinematic figures vary according to the film analyzed, but the functions of the director, the cinematographer, some members of the cast, and the art director are *a priori* the main ones.

Eventually, according to Graham Allen (74), it is intertextuality and Barthes's notion of text that guarantees his essay a poststructuralist standpoint, not his declaration of "death of the author."

The Coen Brothers, as scriptors, are not as resourceful as a Godard in *Film socialisme* or *Adieu au langage*, but their films, as writerly texts,³¹ draw heavily from and on many sources of cultures and directors, such as Howard Hawks (especially in *The Big Sleep*, which is a hypotext³² to *The Big Lebowski*), Frank Capra, Preston Sturges, and Billy Wilder, for instance. Therefore, when auteurism, as a critical practice, builds and develops the notion of the auteur as a sole and ultimate agent, it withers its potential, because "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes 147). Sarris's so-called "pantheon of directors" is the heaven of Barthes's disclaimed "Author-Gods," on the other hand, when Sarris (564) realizes the "joys of the *auteur* theory" in the connection between a scene of Raul Walsh's *Every Night at Eight* and John Huston's *High Sierra*, it is when

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering in mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one

³¹ According to Barthes, there are readerly (*lisible*) and writerly (*scriptible*) texts. These texts differ in the way readers interact with them: in short, readerly texts are the ones in which readers consume and passively discover the meaning, whereas in writerly texts readers produce meanings, which are multiple, in an active way. These definitions are better conceptualized in Barthes's book *S/Z* (1974).

³² Hypotext and hypertext are terms defined by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette (who was also a *Tel Quel* collaborator, but his work is usually associated with structuralism) in his book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Hypotexts and hypertexts are spectra of hypertextuality, which according to Genette (5), "refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not of commentary." A classical example between a hypotext and a hypertext is that of Homer's *Odyssey* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author. (Barthes 148).

Sarris, and many other critics who were envisioning auteurism, was this reader, but perhaps unfortunately he was keen to assign a center where the auteur could be taken for granted and assumed to be an ultimate source.

1.2.2. Foucault's Quest

Foucault's essay "What Is an Author?" was originally a lecture presented to the *Société Française de philosophie* in 1969. Similarly to Bazin, Foucault problematizes the notion of work and author, going beyond when he discusses writing and, foremost, the concept of the "author function." Writing (*écriture*), according to Foucault, is customarily associated with expression and death (of the author): on the one hand, writing "has freed itself from the dimension of expression. Referring only to itself, but without being restricted to the confines of its exteriority, writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority" (102). Writing, therefore, privileges the signifier, it finds no end, no center or source in the author who, in contrast, "must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (103). The author, who was the figure that supposedly provided the path to the signified, with final and stable meaning, is no longer a locus for Truth. However, the disappearance of the author is not a recent occurrence,³³ as Foucault remarks, and Barthes's proclamation of the death of the author is far from being a solution: "A certain number of notions that are intended to replace the privileged position of the author actually seem to preserve that privilege and suppress the real meaning of his disappearance" (103) and these notions are those of work and, again, of writing.

³³ According to Allen (74), "With its focus on system rather than the traditional notion of work-and-author as site of meaning, structuralism had already dispensed with the figure of the author." Besides, there are other notions, such as "intentional fallacy" developed by New Criticism and Wayne Booth's "implied author," which dismiss the figure of the author.

Defining what a work (*oeuvre*) is is a task fraught with difficulties. Foucault does not give a final statement but leaves some unanswered questions to be thought about and only one thing is certain: "The word *work* and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality" (Foucault 104). However problematic the notion of work is, whenever I refer to the Coen Brothers' work, I shall be making reference to their sixteen feature films (from *Blood Simple*. to *Inside Llewyn Davis*³⁴), of which they at least shared the credits of producer, writer, and director. Yet again, Foucault ratifies that:

Another notion which has hindered us from taking full measure of the author's disappearance, blurring and concealing the moment of this effacement and subtly preserving the author's existence, is the notion of writing (*écriture*). When rigorously applied, this notion should allow us not only to circumvent references to the author, but also to situate his recent absence. The notion of writing, as currently employed, is concerned with neither the act of writing nor the indication—be it a symptom or sign—of a meaning which someone might have wanted to express. We try, with great effort, to imagine the general condition of each text, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds. (104)

In addition to work and writing, Foucault tackles the use of the author's name, which according to him, brings out a series of observations: "The author's name is not [. . .] just a proper name like the rest" (106), thus "it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others" (107). Such statement allows a connection to the realms of *auteurism* and how Nathan deploys the term "Coenesque"

³⁴ By the time I was finishing my thesis, the Coen Brothers latest film, *Hail Caesar!*, had not yet premiered in Brazil.

in his analysis of the films of the Coen Brothers, so Coenesque as a discourse³⁵ encapsulates determined features conducted by styles and thematic motifs associated with the work of the Coens. Unlike proper names, therefore, the name of authors are the indicative parameter to their works besides what (and how) their names possibly epitomize their oeuvre. The name of the author, therefore, triggers the notion of discourse, because "the author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture" (Foucault 107).

Discourse is as key term in Foucault's essay and once "[. . .] there are a certain number of discourses that are endowed with the 'author function,' while others are deprived from it [. . .]" and thus "The author function is therefore characteristics of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (107-08). All in all, Foucault presents four modes of author function, and, although he recognizes that there may be others, the most significant ones are the following:

(1) the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times in all types of civilization; (3) it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several objects—positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals. (113)

³⁵ The author's name, as a discourse, also finds a similar attribution with auteur-structuralists who "put the director's name in quotation marks, to emphasize their view of the author as critical construct rather than an originary, biographical flesh-and-blood person" (Stam et al. 190).

Foucault's "author function" is a conceptual tool that should be used to repair the flaws of Barthes's notion of "the death of the author." In the first feature, Foucault (108) asserts that in the beginning discourses were not capitalist products, merchandises, but "essentially an act" and ownership as a following occurrence transforms texts. Thus, when production and distribution companies, as superstructures, hold the Coenesque discourse, they in a way transform it in something else. Although the Coen Brothers have founded their own film company production (Mike Zoss Productions) and have had control over the major steps of filmmaking (especially the final cut privilege), movie theaters can also articulate the ways in which a discourse operates, as well as other specific parties responsible for film posters, teasers, trailers, translation of the film title, translated subtitles, dubbing, etc. Besides, the participation of film criticism and film festivals (be it in nominating or awarding a film) play a significant role in the transformation and reception of a discourse by the audience; and perhaps most striking in its influence is the power assigned to Internet and its users in our current times, which has transformed discourses in relation to, for instance, copyrights and reproduction, that is, the way we consume films nowadays.

Films, as transnational products, fit quite well in Bazin's statement that says that "the cinema is an art which is both popular and industrial," and the sociological approach to the production of the cinematic genius can find a solution in Foucault's four features of the author function. The second and third features can also be ascribed to what was mentioned above. Furthermore, the fourth feature of the author function problematizes an aforementioned issue: film as a collaborative enterprise and, depending on the artistic and auteurist driving forces operating in the momentum of a performance, the *écrivains-en-scène* involved. *Écriture*, Barthes's notion of text and Foucault's concept of author function proclaim the death of auteur. The appearance of *écrivains-en-scène* is not that of a birth, because they have always been in and out the filmic texture, begetting discourses and having them transformed: the star system, film producers and industry's moguls,³⁶ screenwriters,³⁷ film directors turned into auteurs, and so on.

³⁶ Matthew Bernstein's essay "The Producer as Auteur" discusses, as the very title indicates, the role of producers and their status as auteurs.

* * *

Thinking about auteurs in the plural and throughout the selected critics and theorists—who in one way or another point the issues of "subsidiary auteurs" and "noise" of other cinematic figures—I chose to review and work with, besides the notions of *écriture* by Barthes and Foucault, and their conceptions of text and author function and a new "ethics of reading,"³⁸ is that I build my tenets for the following chapters. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's and Julia Kristeva's notion of, respectively, dialogism and intertextuality, I shall analyze the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* in auteurist manners, trying to extract the best of its approach.

³⁷ David Morris Kipen dedicated a whole book, *The Schreiber Theory: A Radical Rewrite of American Film History* (2006), in which he argues that screenwriters are the principal authors of films instead of directors.

³⁸ The term "ethics of reading" is applied by Sérgio Luiz Prado Bellei in a interesting review of Barthes and Foucault in his essay "A Morte do Autor: um retorno à cena do crime" (Revista Criação & Crítica n. 12, 161-171).

CHAPTER 2

O AUTEURS, WHERE ART THOU?

The Big Lebowski was a watershed in the career of the Coen Brothers. Besides being their last film of the twentieth century, it definitely stamped their humorous vein throughout their oeuvre. After the unexpected successful release of *Fargo* (1996), the Coens approached the other screenplay they were writing even before their failed *The Hudscucker Proxy* (1994) was finished.³⁹ *The Big Lebowski* (hereinafter *TBL*) was released in 1998 and since then it has become a cult classic:⁴⁰ annual festivals celebrating the film were created and even a religion, Dudeism, was founded; more importantly, *TBL* has been praised over the years and it has ranked positively in film lists, though it did poorly at the box office and received mixed reviews.

2.1. Plot Overview: History and Misunderstandings Abide

Like most of the previous films by the Coen Brothers, *TBL* delves into a certain moment of American history. Whereas *Barton Fink* is set in the 1940s in a Hollywoodian frenzy and *The Hudsucker Proxy* in a capitalist turmoil of the 1950s, *TBL* is almost contemporary to its release. It is set in the early 1990s, "just about the time of our conflict with Saddam and the Iraqis," as the narrator, yet unknown to the spectator, observes in the very opening of the film. The process of reading-writing inserts the Coens in previous texts and therefore in history; in cinema, by using intertextuality the Coens participate in

³⁹ On the other hand, Scout Tafoya's video essay *The Unloved - The Hudsucker Proxy* (available at Vimeo) praises and makes interesting comments and observations about it, focusing especially on its intertextual nature.

⁴⁰ Acknowledging *TBL* as a cult classic, Ryan P. Doom (84) defines the term as "a film largely ignored by mainstream audiences, but revered by a rabid fan base who keep the movie alive and elevate it to another level. They are films that have endured while more successful box office releases have largely faded from public view." Moreover, "Cult classics contain an intangible quality impossible to duplicate with the proper concoction of cast, story, characters, setting, and timing—everything that *The Big Lebowski* includes."

history at least twice: by working with films in history and history in films. According to Josh Levine (141), "The time period — the Gulf War of 1991 — did not, as usual, come from any burning interest in that moment of history. Instead, the brothers just wanted to give Walter something to rant about." And, "Besides, it was better, they believed, to set every film in a specific moment rather than just the vague present." A distinctive flair for narratives that take place in the past can be easily noticed in the films authored by the Coens, as well as the use of space, once all their films are grounded in American soil. Los Angeles in *TBL* is the chosen scenery.

Before the opening credits the unknown narrator, billed as The Stranger (Sam Elliot), is about to unfold a story about a "fella." He therefore presents Jeff Lebowski, a man who "called himself the Dude." The spectator never sees the narrator but twice, in the middle and in the end of the film, we only hear his deep but serene voice with a distinct Western accent. This is the first gamut of differences in a multiethnic society of *TBL*: the film portrays characters with different racial and economic backgrounds, different political concerns and viewpoints, besides various tastes for music (arts in general, actually) and clothing. Ian Nathan (83), for instance, observes that "Concepts of assimilation and depiction of diverse subcultures (ghetto of ethnic, regional, cultural and vocational minorities) suffuse their work. Everywhere we turn there are tribes." Furthermore, Ryan P. Doom (92) highlights and ratifies that "Every character in *The Big Lebowski* possesses a particular quirk that's not just intended to be comedic, but also to further the examination of Los Angeles' melting pot. Failed actors, porn stars, artists, con men, pedophiles, pacifists, loners, cowboys—Los Angeles has them all."

The narrator himself, for instance, alerts that Dude "[is] a name no one would self-apply where [he] come[s] from." However, he declares that he finds the place interesting, even though the Dude and Los Angeles were unbeknown and intriguing to him. While the spectator hears this voice-over narration, a tracking shot shows the ground, it is a desert-like pavement, and the lighting indicates the passage of time, from daylight to a mild darkness. Still in the same tracking shot a tumbleweed⁴¹ is led by the wind and falls from a precipice. Then, with a

⁴¹ Image and sound are corresponding, as the Coen Brothers chose to play "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," composed by Bob Nolan, but performed by the Sons of the Pioneers. Tumbleweeds are associated as a symbolic element of Western

little lifting of the camera, a sort of crane shot introduces Los Angeles with a panoramic view. The following shots are cut as if to juxtapose the previous one with the next, showing sites of the city. The tumbleweed keeps on moving, wandering through the streets and finally is seen on the beach: the first joke of the Coens? Quite possibly.

In the next shot the narrator informs us about the Dude's context. Wandering through the bright aisles of a supermarket, Jeff Bridges's character, the Dude, walks towards the camera, which is also tracking towards him: a middle-aged white man, long haired and with a goatee, wearing Bermuda shorts, a white shirt, a shabby robe, leather sandals, and sunglasses. The narrator introduces the Dude as if he were enthralled by the Dude's looks, despite how lazy he may seem, philosophizing about his existence until he gets lost in his own words. Thereafter, history comes as a consecrating element of audiovisual diegesis: first, when the Dude is paying for his milk in the counter we hear "[. . .] with them all for a collective action. This will not stand." Then, we see George H. W. Bush in a mini TV stating "This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait." Coincidentally and oddly enough, the check with which he pays dates "September 11."

The plot of *TBL* is marked by misunderstandings. Whether it has a purpose whatsoever, it certainly is a catalyst that makes comedy and noirish atmospheres bloom. The Dude, little known among his friends as Jeffrey Lebowski, is taken for a millionaire whose nymphomaniac trophy wife is owing money to a wealthy pornographer called Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara). When the Dude arrives at home after the supermarket he is assaulted by two thugs sent by Treehorn and one of them, Woo, urinates on his rug, triggering an amalgam of idiosyncratic events. Accordingly, as advised by his close friend Walter (John Goodman), the Dude seeks his namesake, a millionaire paraplegic (David Huddleston), in order to understand the reasons of the mistaken identity event. Or rather, because of the rough and rude manners of the rich Lebowski, just to be compensated for the rug. Later on, Lebowski's wife is kidnapped and he asks the Dude to be a courier in a ransom delivery. It goes wrong and the plot thickens: the Dude's car is stolen, he eventually meets Lebowski's daughter, and he is also threatened by three

film genre, especially when a gunfight is about to happen. However, they can also punctuate comic effects.

men who are later identified as members of a German electronica band, infamously known for being nihilists as well.

The aforementioned misunderstandings are both plot developers in the most part and they are rather used as jokes or as a sort of visual gag. The Dude reports to Walter that a Chinaman peed on his rug and, by the end of his ranting, Walter observes that "'Chinaman' is not the preferred nomenclature. Asian-American, please." Thereafter, when the Dude is about to meet his namesake in his house, he identifies Lebowski as a "handicapped kind of guy." Brandt (Philip Seymour Hoffman), Lebowski's personal assistant, hasten to correct the Dude, "Mr. Lebowski is disabled, yes." Moreover, Nathan remarks:

Walter also pinpoints one of the film's central themes: misrepresentation. People and things are not what they appear or are taken for — we need to look deeper. From The Dude being the wrong 'Lebowski' and the kidnap not being a kidnap, a terrier is taken for a Pomeranian, a ferret for a marmot, we meet a Jew who is not a Jew, an arrogant Hispanic bowler who used to be a pederast, and a cowboy narrates the story. [. . .] The film is full of phoneys, yet feels genuine, which is because, in the case of Walter and The Dude, they shaped from real people, eccentric Angelenos the Coens got to know on their travels to the city. (45)

These misunderstandings and misrepresentations are not merely there in *TBL* for the sake of comedy. The background of the characters and their behaviors on the screen provide what can be taken as comical. The following section, dedicated to characters, portrays their features and motivations.

2.2. Characters

The construction of characters in *TBL* is rich and rather myriad. The atmosphere of Los Angeles as a melting pot created by the Coens may be stereotyped and eccentric; however, the inscriptions of such characters have historical backgrounds and even personal recollections. The main characters, Dude and Walter, for instance, were inspired by people the Coens really knew, as commented above. Levine (140-41) reports that the film producer Jeff Dowd was the inspiration for the creation of the Dude, whereas the characterization of Walter was drawn from screenwriter and director John Milius (known, among other works, for *Conan the Barbarian*), besides the brothers' Uncle Peter, whose past as a Vietnam veteran and stories were borrowed.

2.2.1. "This Aggression Will Not Stand, Man."

The main character, Jeffrey "the Dude" Lebowski, as most if not all the Coens's protagonists descend a downward spiral. Levine (141) wisely observes that "The story followed another typical Coen brothers pattern too; the poor hero had to undergo countless humiliations and maulings before hitting bottom." The mistaken identity case and the subsequent events that the Dude lives through makes him acquainted with people he would probably never come across. When introducing him the narrator wonders about what kind of man the Dude is, whether he is a hero (or should we rather regard him as an antihero?) or just a man, "the man for his time and place." Critics often highlight the role of the "common man" in the oeuvre of the Coens, and as another auteur signature, the Coens place the poor Lebowski in many misadventures. Little is known about his past, when Maude asks about himself, he says that there is "not much to tell," briefly boasting about the organizations (Students for a Democratic Society and the Seattle Seven⁴²) he participated as a political activist. The 1960s is a quintessential locus where the Dude resided and he is an idiosyncratic remaining and abiding character from that period.

⁴² The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was a student movement in the U.S. that took place in the mid-1960s and was dissolved in 1969. The movement was acknowledged as one of the main representations of the New Left. The Seattle Liberation Movement, otherwise known as Seattle Seven, was radical anti-Vietnam War movement, based in Seattle, Washington.

Walter and Dude are two converging characters in history: whereas the former is an ultraconservative, warlike adherent and violent individual; the latter does not put up with violence and considers himself a pacifist,⁴³ he is much more inclined to the kind of person who would have been a hippie in the late 1960s and fought against the American war ideology, as one can tell by his marijuana smoking and vocabulary, which encompasses terms such as "fucking A," "far out," and "to dig," which resonate the 1960s. The rich Lebowski, also a war veteran (Korean War, where he lost his leg movements), is another unlike character compared to the Dude's persona. "Your revolution is over, Mr. Lebowski! Condolences! The bums lost!" Which revolution is this? That this is can be a reference to the laid-back bodies and souls of the 1960s is a possibility, and Lebowski's rough words is another verbal assault to the Dude's welfare. "This aggression will not stand, man."

Studying the characters of the Coens's world through a violence-oriented analysis, Doom (86) describes the Dude as a person that never appeals to violence, he "relaxes at will and exhibits complete freedom without delivering moral judgments on what's right or wrong. He never worries about money, employment, or social status, and he only cares for bowling, White Russians, marijuana, and friends." His laid-back and easy-going nature is reflected in the way he dresses, walks, and sits; his stripped-down home is an extension of his person, for all he cares besides bowling is his rug, which "really tied the room together." Furthermore, the Dude is not an inherently inert person, "He rebels against stereotypical Los Angeles vanity and ego, against social expectations, against society's call for marriage and procreation, and against excess" (Doom 87). On the hand, his best friend Walter Sobchak is his counterpoint.

⁴³ After drawing his gun and pointing it to Smokey's face, they have to leave the bowling alley and hide in the car because someone called the police, so Walter tells Dude that he himself "dabbled in pacifism in one time. Not in Nam, of course." He continues pointing out that "Pacifism is not... Look at our current situation with that camel fucker in Iraq. Pacifism is not something to hide behind."

2.2.2. "Smokey, My Friend, You Are Entering a World of Pain."

Walter Sobchak, the Dude's loyal squire, is the character from where comedy and violence—two arch-motifs in the oeuvre of the Coens—mainly emanate. History is inscribed in Walter as an abiding phantasm; as a Vietnam veteran Walter's mood can be drastically disturbed: in the bowling alley a bowling fellow of theirs, Smokey, steps over the line and Walter rebukes, "I'm sorry, Smokey. You were over the line. That's a foul." Smokey refuses to accept and asks the Dude to mark the pins he knocked down; Walter immediately interferes, "Excuse me. Mark it zero. Next frame." Smokey, not convinced of his foul at all, insists and Walter states in a quite serious and grave way, "Smokey, this is not Nam. This is bowling. There are rules." They argue, Walter loses his temper and draws a gun threatening Smokey, "Smokey, my friend, you're entering a world of pain." Bowling is not Vietnam, even though it can get as violent with a person like Walter, who minutes before was talking about the dog he was taking care of for his Jewish ex-wife, who is in Hawaii with another man. If anything is expected from Walter and his raging, he could be easily an anti-Semite, though that is hardly the case.

A Polish Catholic that converted to Judaism⁴⁴ after marrying his ex-wife, Walter is transparent about his religious beliefs: he considers himself as "Jewish as fucking Tevye," he does not roll on Shabbos, as he does comply to any other rule of the Jewish day of rest. Being a Jewish convert, Walter's religious duties may appear ludicrous and laughable during *TBL*, reiterating misrepresentations and its comical purposes, though he is always cold serious about his religion, Vietnam, and other issues. Because Walter had to break his Sabbath on a "matter of life and death" to help the Dude, they argue and the Dude criticizes him, "You're living in the fucking past." The clearest example of that is any of Walter's rantings which he relates to Vietnam, a war much more commented than the contemporary one in the Gulf.

Doom (86) describes Walter as "the embodiment of chaos" and "a walking misplaced threat." Walter is violent and so was his past, his

⁴⁴ Being Jewish themselves, Judaism and Jewish people in the films of the Coens are somewhat common. *A Serious Man* (2009) is their best example, "The Coens' Jewish heritage has been a major influence on Coenesque" (Nathan 83).

condition as a Vietnam vet shaped his mind and his attitudes; if he is not on the brink of using physical strength or a firearm, he attacks people verbally. "Emotionally unstable yet protective and loyal, Walter is antithetical to Dude in every respect except a few," one of which is their mutual passion, bowling, the film portrays that straightforwardly. Also, Doom (90) reminds that both men "exhibit a lack of ego and lack of excess. They're content with life." Among them three, Walter is the only one, apparently, who has a job, he owns a security company, Sobchak Security.

2.2.3. "I Am the Walrus."

The bowling triumvirate is completed by the unassertive Theodore Donald "Donny" Kerabatsos, performed by Steve Buscemi, a recurrent actor in the Coens's filmography, just like John Goodman. Among the Dude and Walter, Donny is the only one seen on the screen bowling, performing strikes. He is always trying to keep up with conversations and whenever he comments on something Walter tells him to "shut the fuck up." Meek and yielding, Donny never fights back and any imminence of violence scares him; he rather stays silent or when he speaks his lines are shorter than Walter's or Dude's, also probably making viewers laugh: when the Dude tries to quote Lenin, Donny mishears and, as if he has understood it, he proudly quotes back, "I am the walrus," to Walter's rampant bursting, "Shut the fuck up, Donny! V. I. Lenin! Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov!" Then, puzzled and to his bewilderment, Donny replies, "What the fuck is he talking about?" In another case of misunderstanding, poor Donny phonologically mistakes Lennon for Lenin. Besides, Buscemi's character in *TBL* is the very opposite to the one he played in *Fargo*, a chatterbox who is anything but good-natured and naive.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The Coens would later do the same with Billy Bob Thornton. Whereas Ed Crane is the taciturn type in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), Howard D. Doyle in *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) is a motormouth.

2.2.4. Other Characters

Another typical character of the Coenesque style is a rather old, paternalistic and condescending man. Men imbued with money and power, or so some of them seem to be: Dan Hedaya in *Blood Simple* as a demanding boss and jealous husband; Trey Wilson as Nathan Arizona Sr. in *Raising Arizona*, portraying a well-known furniture magnate; Albert Finney in *Miller's Crossing* as a powerful mobster; Michael Lerner as a Hollywood mogul (and war veteran) in *Barton Fink*; Paul Newman in *The Hudsucker Proxy* depicting a despicable businessman; and Harve Presnell in *Fargo* as a wealthy old man and tough father-in-law. In *TBL* it could not have been different, David Huddleston portrays a wheelchair-bound man,⁴⁶ who lost the use of the legs in the Korean War. He is the rich Lebowski, a condescending man that does not measure his words, which are rough and sharp. When he asks the poor Dude if he has a job, Lebowski is already trying to belittle him, judging first and foremost by the way he dresses and looks. Sit behind a big desk (like some of the aforementioned characters), Lebowski is the symbol of the powerful and rich man, however untrue it is as unfolded throughout the film, just to emphasize the story's taste for misrepresentation. He, nevertheless, is the "big Lebowski" referenced in the title of the film.

Framing the characters in a past-centered examination, Doom (85) stresses that "every character in *The Big Lebowski*, vicious or not, remains hunted by a violent past, unable to escape its grasp and live in the modern world." Besides the Dude, Walter, and the rich Lebowski, "Lebowski's daughter, Maude, lives in a faded avant-garde world. Even the nihilists cling to an idea long since dead. Each character emerges stuck in the past, unwilling or unable to change who they are or the way they live." Julianne Moore plays Maude, a charming, inquisitive, and eccentric artist, who talks with an English accent, or what would be identified as Mid-Atlantic accent.⁴⁷ According to Levine (142), her

⁴⁶ Levine (142) spots a cross-reference, stating that "The character of the rich Lebowski came from Chandler, but the wheelchair may well have been borrowed from the evil Mr. Potter in Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, an influence left over from *The Hudsucker Proxy*."

⁴⁷ The Mid-Atlantic accent is almost always associated with American upper class (that consciously acquires an accent and a vocabulary which consist of combining American English and British Received Pronunciation), besides the theater and the film industry of the 1930s and 1940s (which is revered by the Coen Brothers).

character "was based on the real Fluxus movement of the 1960s which was more concerned with process than outcome." Jackie Treehorn (Gazzara), additionally, is another figure that can be placed in the past, if the 1970s and the 1980s were considered the zenith of the pornographic film industry (as portrayed in *Boogie Nights*, a contemporary to *TBL*). When the Dude asks about the "smut business," Treehorn says he "wouldn't know" and that the video is taking over, so he and his associates are "competing with those amateurs." Even though Treehorn is looking forward to the future and its technological apparatuses (the Internet, maybe?), his character still be can located at least two decades earlier.

Jesus Quintana is another quite emblematic character in *TBL*, played by one of the Coens's favorite actors, John Turturro. His character mirrors another side of Los Angeles: a Latin American with a heavy Hispanic accent. And, as it could be expected, Quintana is presumably a violent character. His violence, though, comes down to acerbic verbal assaults on screen, he once used to be a "pederast" and a "sex offender with a record," as Walter tells the Dude. Highly sexualized, Jesus Quintana is presented according to parts of the body: he first puts his purple sock up, quickly delineating his leg; the next shot shows the bowling reset button, the surface is made of metal and Quintana's face can be seen, blurred and reflected on it—he dries his left hand on it, which displays three rings and a red long nail on his pinky finger. He is using a bowling glove in his right hand and the next shot, a full shot that portrays other people bowling in the background depicts Quintana preparing to bowl, writhing like a serpent; then a close-up (lateral shot) on his face, he licks his pink bowling ball; another close-up with the camera dolling towards his name printed on his shirt, "Jesus." He strikes and celebrates with a little dance, in the background there can be heard a Hispanic version of "Hotel California" (originally performed by The Eagles, a band the Dude hates, as shown later). "That creep can roll, man."

2.3. Direction, Editing, and Sound

The direction of the Coen Brothers has no excesses in the sense that they do not spend time on acrobatic camera movements or on too

many special effects.⁴⁸ In *TBL* there are few tracking and crane shots, the Coens rather focus on framing, as one can notice in the usual conversations of the Dude and his fellows in the bowling alley. *Mise-en-scène*, as visual discourse, is discreet in the brothers' work, precisely arranged when combined to their editing. In field size, the shots of the Coens in *TBL* range from full shots to close-ups; there are almost no extreme long shots or long shots, which are rather preferable in *No Country for Old Men*, for instance. Dude, Walter, and Donny are always—or almost always—framed together, the camera is placed to depict them while they talk and interact, thus the shots last a little longer and the actors have more room to perform freely.⁴⁹ This threefold approach to characters would be later repeated in the Coens's next film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000).

⁴⁸ There may be some reasons behind this "economy" in direction. One of them is the budget, which can limit directorial desires and stylistic choices, the other is the simple will to make it plain as regards *mise-en-scène*, although the Coen Brothers have established a style of their own.

⁴⁹ This, however, does not mean that the Coen Brothers leave room for improvisations in their films. Levine (54) observes that "Joel's reputation for *not* being an actor's director started with *Raising Arizona*. Because the brothers stuck so closely to the storyboards, [. . .]." Nicolas Cage, a Method actor himself, felt very limited and unhappy for not contributing more to his characterization of H. I. "Hi" McDunnough.



Image 2.1: Assemble of six shots of *The Big Lebowski* in which the Dude, Walter, and Donnie are framed together. They range from full shot to American shot to medium shot.

TBL was shot primarily on location, it also took many night scenes to be arranged, and the Coen Brothers were counting on the skills of British cinematographer Roger Deakins for the fourth time. Levine (145) recollects that "Joel wanted to give the picture a more over and frankly showy visual style," therefore "A lot of time was spent talking about the bowling alley scenes and 'Brunswick styling,' a reference to the Brunswick company's classic 1950s decorative styled used in many alleys" (145-46). Moreover, Levine points that whereas the Coens's previous films had a distinct and prevailing color, "*The Big Lebowski* would be a whole range of Californian pastels." Indeed, there can be hardly ascribed a dominant color to *TBL*. Otherwise, the photography of the film relies on well-lit settings, especially the bowling lanes.

The direction of the Coens in *TBL* would be quite simple, had it not been for their highly stylized dream sequences where the Dude ventures in. In the first one he flies over Los Angeles trying to catch Maude (obviously shot by using chroma key), who flies away seated on the rug she took from him—a rug her father supposedly gave to the Dude but that "it was not his to give"—then, he realizes he is holding a bowling ball so he consequently falls fast. In the next shot the Dude is a miniature afraid of a bowling ball that is going to roll over him. The dream sequence is over when Maude strikes, this is a very interesting shot where the point of view comes straight from the inside of the ball, which is spinning in 360 degrees, showing the lane, the pins, and Maude upside down.

The second dream sequence comes after Treehorn drugs the Dude's White Russian: while a lysergic fading in takes place, the shot waves to black while Sam Elliott's character intervenes with a voice-over: a computerized opening credits sequence with phallic allusions using bowling balls and pins is shown, "Jack Treehorn Presents," with "The Dude" and "Maude Lebowski" in "Gutterballs." The Dude is once again a miniature, dressed just like the cable repair man in Treehorn's *Logjammin'*. There is also a man named Saddam, who looks like Saddam Hussein, handing out bowling shoes, who can be read as another reverberation of the Gulf War. The Dude comes down the black and white stairs dancing to *Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)* performed by Kenny Rogers & The First Edition, a song from a counterculture era which was written in order to warn about the use of LSD and its risks. His dance and the whole dream sequence have an explicit sexual connotation, Maude is dressed as a Viking and there are women dancing around her, in a Busby Berkley-inspired style, as Levine, Doom, and Nathan were keen to observe.

The editing of the Coens's films has always been done by themselves under the pseudonym Roderick Jaynes. However, in *TBL* Tricia Cooke, Ethan's wife, was for the first time officially credited. The editing of *TBL* follows some patterns: strikes in the bowling alley are a sort of predictable cuts, followed visually by the pins being knocked down and the sound of it. Likewise, doors opening or closing indicate a cut, such as when Treehorn's thugs left the Dude's house and the opening credits sequence starts, or when the rich Lebowski is being introduced. Furthermore, the Coens and Cooke rather use slow motion in two particular sequences: first, in the opening credits, then, in Jesus

Quintana's first appearance. Both sequences use non-diegetic music: Bob Dylan's *The Man in Me*, which is later repeated in the Dude's first dream sequence, becoming slightly diegetic nevertheless, through his headphones when he wakes up; and Gypsy Kings' Spanish version of The Eagles' *Hotel California* (which is also diegetic through the PA system of the bowling alley). Besides songs, the sound of objects also work as match cuts, such as the phone ringing when the Dude leaves the bowling lanes and his fellows and in the next shot two police officers are filing a complaint in the Dude's home, the phone is still ringing and they both look awkward.

2.4. *The Big Lebowski* vs. *The Big Sleep*

Joel and Ethan Coen have become known for drawing inspiration from a variety of sources, be it literature or film. Levine (139) and Nathan (10) pinpoint the raw material the Coens pursued in writers of hardboiled literature and crime fiction, such as James M. Cain⁵⁰ and Dashiell Hammett. While the former was "One of the founding fathers of the aesthetic of film noir," the latter had a substantial effect on *Blood Simple*. (1984) and *Miller's Crossing* (1990). *The Hudsucker Proxy*, on the other hand, seems at least to be a clear-cut reference to Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* (1941). In the literary milieu, besides Cain and Hammett, Raymond Chandler completes the triad of literary influences, whereas Howard Hawks along with Frank Capra and Preston Sturges, it could be argued, completes the triumvirate of auteurs of which the Coen Brothers descend from. Critics have always highlighted that *The Big Lebowski* is a reference to Chandler's and Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (hereinafter *TBS*), therefore in this section I shall be analyzing the similarities and the nuances that both films display, shedding a light on it by using Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality.

⁵⁰ Writing for *The Guardian*, Philip French notices that "In their highly accomplished new film, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the Coens' model is James M. Cain, leader of the hardboiled school of the 1930s Californian writers whom Edmund Wilson called 'the poets of the tabloid murder.'" Furthermore, French also calls attention to the fact that *The Man Who Wasn't There* makes references to *Shadow of Doubt*, *Scarlet Street*, *The Night of the Hunter*, and *Double Indemnity*, all classics in the film noir pantheon, accomplished by reputed auteurs.

In Kristeva's essay, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," there is a scrutiny oriented towards Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin and his notion of dialogism. Dialogue between or among writings converge to three participants, which are the writer, the reader (or addressee, as Kristeva refers to), and cultural context, be it current or from a prior time. These participants are observed in the following passage:

By introducing the *status of the word* as a minimal unit, Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them. Diachrony is transformed into synchrony, and in light of this transformation, *linear* history appears as abstraction. The only way a writer can participate in history is by transgressing this abstraction through a process of reading-writing; that is, through the practice of a signifying structure in relation or opposition to another structure. History and morality are written and read within the infrastructure of texts. The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture. (Kristeva 65)

The process of reading-writing which is, as Kristeva argues, itself a rewriting, is one the best filmmaking strategies the Coens adopt. They are clearly located in history and so are their films. Is *TBL* a signifying structure in opposition to *TBS*? As a text, *TBL* (and *TBS*) is located in American history, the film also ventures in history as I mentioned above, using the Gulf War as a backdrop, even though it is only an excuse to contextualize the narrative and its characters. The latter have past resonances, many of them located back in the 1960s. Society, attached to history, plays its role too, whether as Western society or that of the Angelenos viewers see on the screen.

The continuation of Kristeva's previously quoted passage is marked by the introduction of Bakhtin's *carnival*. Carnavalesque situations and characters abound in *TBL*, unlike in *TBS*, and this is the

first opposition in their structures that I shall be reporting soon. Kristeva (65-66) points that the text is arranged according to three dimensions: writing subject, addressee, and exterior texts. "The word's status is thus defined *horizontally* (the word in the text belongs to both writing subjects and addressee) as well as *vertically* (the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus)" (66). The vertical axis, which deals with text and context, is related to Kristeva's intertextuality: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read at least *double*" (66). Moreover, Kristeva declares that the horizontal axis and the vertical one, in Bakhtin's work, are related to dialogue and ambivalence, respectively. These two concepts, according to her, are not plainly differentiated in the studies of the Russian theoretician.

Dialogism and ambivalence are two key concepts in Bakhtin's theorizations. Kristeva (68) states that "Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality." On the other hand, "The term 'ambivalence' implies the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history; for the writer, they are one and the same" (Kristeva 68-69). Summing them up, Kristeva (69) assumes that "Dialogue and ambivalence are borne out as the only approach that permits the writer to enter history by espousing an ambivalent ethics: negation as affirmation." Moreover, discourses can be either monological or dialogical. In the first case, monologism is found in the epic, in historical and scientific discourses, once their nature is not allowed to dialogue. On the other hand, dialogism resides in Menippean discourses, carnivalesque writings, and polyphonic novels; Kristeva (77) emphasizes that "In its structures, writing reads another writing, reads itself and constructs itself through a process of destructive genesis." The carnivalesque feature in *TBL* should be addressed later in this section, for the time being the following deals with the opposing structures of *TBL* and *TBS*, as well as with what they have in common and their intertextual bonds.

The first possible connection that can be made between *The Big Lebowski* and *The Big Sleep* is in the word "big," which is manifest in both titles. Also, there are correlated features in their plots and characters: the narrator of *TBL* came to life because of the Coens's "fondness for narration, and their wanting to catch something of

Chandler's novelistic voice, the brothers decided to frame the story with a voice-over" (Levine 141). The voice-over, as a narration device, is a hallmark in film noir. Usually in first-person narration, i.e. provided by the protagonist, the voice-over can also be concocted by a third person. Elliott's The Stranger is one of the Dude's acquaintances, he attends the bowling lanes and even chats with the Dude, who might have told him about his misadventures. The Stranger shows up only twice (see comment above), the second time to finish the story he has been telling, addressing the viewer directly, breaking the fourth wall. He is only one of the many characters that abound in *TBL*, once "Characters appear and disappear without thought, which again refers back to the Chandler influence" (Doom 92).

The connections between *TBL* and *TBS* have been made many times. However, the first time I came across it was in the website *Spectres du Cinéma*, in an article organized by Dr. Apfelgluck. Although there is nothing written, Dr. Apfelgluck makes his point clear: in two columns he compares shots from *TBS* and *TBL*. The first comparison, as I mentioned above, is of the title of the films, which contain the word "big" in both of them. The second and third links are interesting ones:



Image 2.2: Assemblage of four shots: top left frame, Philip Marlowe in a long shot while he is examining a painting; top right frame, the Dude and Brandt, in

a medium shot, examining Lebowski's various achievements; bottom left frame, Carmen Sternwood, in an American shot, while she meets Marlowe; bottom right frame, Bunny, in a medium shot, talking to the Dude.

In the top left frame Humphrey Bogart's Philip Marlowe has just arrived in General Sternwood's mansion. He examines some sort of painting on the wall and then immediately is surprised by the General's younger daughter entrance, Carmen Sternwood (Martha Vickers). Their encounter is somewhat risqué, Carmen is provocative and Marlowe gets into it. Later, as he meets the General, the old man asks the detective what does he know about his family; Marlowe mentions the fact that the General is a widower and a millionaire, but he hesitates to attribute adjectives to the General's daughters, eventually declaring that they are "both pretty and both pretty wild." On the right side of the frame, in *TBL*, the Dude is indulged in to analyze the many prizes his namesake has collected over the years. After the Dude's meeting with the rich Lebowski, which is not as friendly as Marlowe's with the General, he comes across Bunny, Lebowski's wife (Tara Reid), who is painting her toenails by the pool. The Dude's encounter with Bunny is more than risqué, one might even say obscene: she says she will "suck [the Dude's] cock for a thousand dollars." The Dude goes farther than Marlowe, declaring that he is "just gonna go find a cash machine" while he is walked out by Brandt (Hoffman). The pairing Carmen-Bunny may not be as exact as what their characters are in the films (daughter and wife), but their "wild" nature totally match.⁵¹

Dr. Apfelgluck also notes the relation between the two wheelchair users, General Sternwood and Jeffrey Lebowski. Both of them worked in the armed forces and now they seem to have in common wealth and privilege, despite their physical condition. The shots,

⁵¹ Both Carmen and Bunny are associated to pornography. In Hawks's *The Big Sleep* there is little indication to Carmen's nude photographs, whereas in its remake of the same title (1978), directed by Michael Winner and starred by Robert Mitchum, there is much more exposition of pornographic material and even nudity by actress Candy Clark, who plays the General's younger daughter, Camilla Sternwood. Bunny, on the other hand, is a former porn actress, who had worked for Jackie Treehorn, and starred in *Logjammin'*, a pornographic film that Maude shows to the Dude exposing her stepmother's former occupation.

moreover, show the fondness Marlowe and the Dude have for beverage and smoking:



Image 2.3: Assemblage of four shots: top left, Marlowe in an American shot, fixing up a drink; top right, the Dude is also fixing a drink, in a medium shot; bottom left, medium shot that shows Marlowe smoking inside his car; bottom right, the Dude in a medium shot, also smoking inside his car.

Marlowe does not go without a drink whenever he is offered one and so does the Dude, being White Russian his favorite drink. Whereas Marlowe smokes cigarettes, the Dude holds marijuana dear. More shots are paired, such as the entrances of Vivian Sternwood Rutledge (Lauren Bacall) and Maude Lebowski (Moore), who are both daughters and get involved with the leading roles; the appearance of stained rugs, one by blood, the other by urine; Eddie Mars (John Ridgely) has a matching character in *TBL*, Jackie Treehorn (Gazzara); and even dialogues involving "laundry," once Marlowe is "a guy paid to do people's laundry" and Walter plans to fool the kidnapers by giving them his "dirty undies, Dude. Laundry. The whites." Acts of violence, additionally, can be linked:



Image 2.4: Assemblage of four shots: top left, Marlowe is attacked by two henchmen in a dark alley, a full shot establishes the setting; top right, the Dude is attacked by one of Treehorn's henchmen, it is a low-angle shot; bottom left, an American shot of Marlowe and Harry Jones in the same alley; bottom right, Da Fino and the Dude, about to fight in the street, in a full shot.

Marlowe and the poor Lebowski undergo physical assaults by henchmen. They are beaten no matter what their connection with something they know or not are; dark alleys are a perfect and usual place for noirs, whereas sticking somebody's head in the toilet seems to be a handy torture method in order to get what you want, this can be also an example of the Coens's flair for dark humor. The bottom shots presents two men: both of them are tailing the protagonists; in *TBS* Elisha Cook, Jr. plays Harry Jones, who is willing to sell Marlowe some information about the whereabouts of Mars's wife; now in *TBL* John Polito plays Da Fino, a private investigator hired by Bunny's parents to bring her back home. There is no coincidence, the Coens borrow language again from *TBS*: intrigued by who the man is, the Dude asks him, and Da Fino says he is a "brother shamus." Carmen, back to the opening of *TBS*, asks who Marlowe is, and he answers he is a shamus, too. A shamus is a slang that stands for private detective, originated in the 1920s in the U.S.

The Dude might pass for Marlowe, however different their looks and methods are. Marlowe is a true detective, he owns an office and earns his living as a private eye, whereas the Dude is unemployed and becomes a detective by accident. Bogart's Marlowe is sharply dressed, he is never seen wearing anything but his suit, a tie and a hat, while Bridges's Dude is unconcerned with his outfits, no matter where he is, he is never wearing shoes, for instance. The carnivalesque aspect enhances the comic in Bridges's character: he is not a detective and he does not ask to be one. To be a detective is a task that orders sharpness and seriousness, one has to know how to get along, searching and talking are two intrinsically important deeds, but knowing how to use a gun may be necessary when the time comes. No matter how many misfortunes the Dude undergoes, he never carries a gun, or rather, he never uses it, nor does he fight the ones who bully him.

While reviewing dialogism, Kristeva analyzes the Menippean discourse, which according to her, "is both comic and tragic, or rather, it is *serious* in the same sense as is the carnivalesque; through the status of words, it is politically and socially disturbing" (82). *TBL* is comic and tragic, having comic aspects even in tragic sequences: after Donnie's death, for instance, the Dude and Walter are on the top of a cliff in order to scatter Donnie's ashes in the ocean. Trying to bless his bowling fellow with some kind and solemn words in a awkwardly funny eulogy, Walter can barely say but that Donnie was a man who loved bowling. After refusing to buy a 180 dollars receptacle, the "most modestly priced receptacle," Walter puts his friend's mortal remains in a Folgers' Coffee tin can, and when he is scattering the ashes, the wind obviously blows, and the ashes flutter back, covering the Dude's face. He is not only mad at Walter because of this desecrating mess, but because Walter had to mention Vietnam as he always does. After a gangling apologizing hug, what could Walter have said? "Come on, Dude. Hey, fuck it, man. Let's go bowling."

Kristeva also observes that "Menippean discourse tends towards the scandalous and eccentric in language. The 'inopportune' expression, with its cynical frankness, its desecration of the sacred [e.g. the ashes scattering sequence], and its attack on etiquette, is quite characteristic" (83). The scandalous in language is visibly in Walter's way of talking, whereas the eccentric is present in Maude's. The Dude may be cynical and frank at times, his vocabulary as an attack on etiquette can also be pointed, highlighting his carnivalesque character. Kristeva also notices

that Menippean discourse presents contrasts, qualities that do not match with their characters, besides "transitions and changes," such as "high and low, rise and fall, and misalliances of all kinds." What is the relation between the Lebowskis but a misalliance? Could the same be said between the Dude and Walter? They succeed in the bowling alley, but their investigations fail, which are definitely the occurrence of high and low moments or rise and fall.

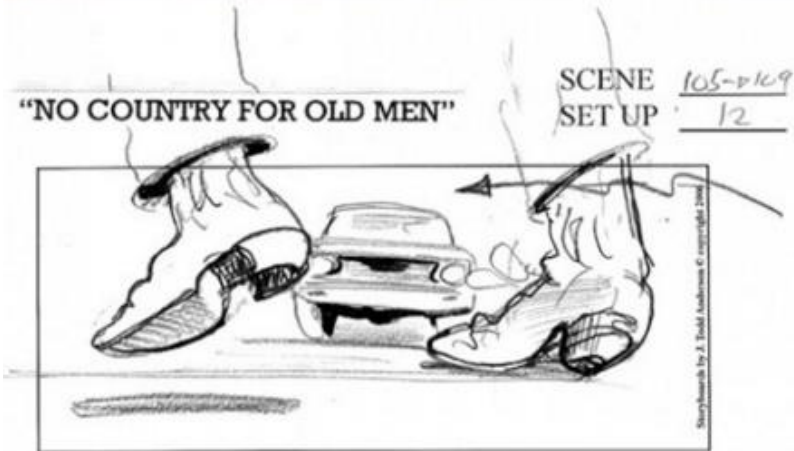
The Vietnam and Gulf Wars context can be located in the "exploration of the body, dreams, language, this writing grafts onto the topical: it is a kind of political journalism of its time. Its discourse exteriorizes political and ideological conflicts of the moment" (Kristeva 83). Bodies in *TBL* suffer: Donnie dies, the Dude is beaten, a paraplegic is thrown to the floor. Dreams, in their own rights, take place twice in *TBL* as I commented on above.

2.5. Collective Authorship

The Coen Brothers have had a faithful good deal of collaborators in thirty years of career. Roger Deakins is the steady hand behind the cinematography of most of the brothers' films; J. Todd Anderson has storyboarded every film shot by the Coens but their first one; Nancy Haigh has been set decorator for the Coens in many films as well as Mary Zophres has worked as costume designer for them; Carter Burwell has provided music for all the Coens's feature films; Peter Kurland and Skip Lievsay have worked for the brothers in the sound department in all their films as well. These names are quite frequent in technical departments, but there are obviously actors and actresses likewise regular in the Coens team: Frances McDormand, Steve Buscemi, John Goodman, John Polito, and John Turturro, just to mention a few. These names and their occupations are key elements to understand how collective authorship works in the oeuvre of the Coen Brothers.

The visual aspect of the films made by the Coens would not have been the same, if they were not shot under the aegis of Deakins and Anderson. British cinematographer Roger Deakins is a frequent collaborator not only of the Coen Brothers, he has also excelled with Sam Mendes and Denis Villeneuve, for instance. Anderson, the storyboard artist, though important to visual accomplishment of the shot,

is less remembered than the cinematographer. Their roles may be performed in different times of production, the storyboard usually anticipates the making of the shots, as a planning, providing in a sketch how the shots will be like, be it by field size, camera placement, or other criteria. Such pre-visualization helps the cinematographer, who is going to be responsible for camera lenses, lighting, film stocks, filters, and can also be consulted on framing. Linda S. Price reports that "although most of today's movies use storyboards only for important scenes, Ethan and Joel Coen like to storyboard everything, which means that Anderson creates as many as 1,000 drawings for one movie." Anderson reads the script in advance and then he meets with the Coens, "Joel has a shot list, and Ethan has already done thumbnails sketches," their collaboration flows as the brothers talk and Anderson draws, but he argues that he "go[es] inside their heads, tr[ies] to understand what they are thinking, and put[s] it on paper. [Anderson] always tr[ies] to make the drawings theirs, not [his]" (qtd. in Price).



12. LOW ANGLE WIDE -THE TRUCK IN THE BG AS MOSS FEET ENTER AND HE RECEDES TOWARD THE TRUCK, BLEEDING ONTO THE STREET

Image 2.5: A low-angle shot (wide) of Moss's feet (entering the frame) and a car approaching in the background, followed by its storyboard drawing.

Therefore, Anderson's role "is less creative than interpretative." Anderson storyboards later at home and then shows what he has got to the brothers, who may modify it or not.

Anderson, not unlike cinematographers, wanders around location. Price observes that "He still walks around with his pencils, notebook, and clipboard, and he has his light table installed in the production

office." Anderson's work is not subordinate only to the Coens's likes, "By asking questions he can find out from the prop man what type of gun a character will be using or discover details on furniture and wallpaper from the set decorator. Sitting in costume meetings ensues that the clothing he depicts is accurate" (Price). Like a network, the complete storyboarded film is handed to the crew before shooting begins, thus everyone is somewhat aware of what is going to be done. Even though Anderson argues that his work is not creative, his drawings are not only visual aids to the Coens or to Deakins, his participation can tell a lot about the shot we see on the screen.

Although Nancy Haigh did not work in *The Big Lebowski*, she worked with the Coens in other nine films, including *No Country for Old Men*. Credited either as set decorator or set designer, Haigh's role is intrinsic to the composition of the shot; therefore, *mise-en-scène* relies a good deal on the skills of the professional responsible for the set. The sound department in the filmography of the Coens, on the other hand, has always had the collaboration of Peter Kurland and Skip Lievsay, the former as boom operator (in *TBL*) and production sound mixer, and the latter as sound re-recording mixer and supervising sound editor (in *TBL*), also being sound designer. Whereas Kurland and Lievsay are accountable for technical aspects of the film, T-Bone Burnett lends his talents as a composer and was a musical archivist for *TBL*.

The soundtrack plays a substantial role, be it to construct a background for the Dude and his tastes, be it to keep up with the narration and its dramatic arcs. Some of the musical content was handpicked by the Coens, such as the Dude being a fan of the Southern rock style Creedence Clearwater Revival, while he is not fond of the Eagles (notice that "Hotel California" plays in Quintana's entrance and the Dude argues with a taxi-driver who kicks him out his car in the middle of the road); there is a German electronica band under the name Autobahn (which is possibly a homage or a parody of the German band Kraftwerk, which released an album and a song entitled "Autobahn"); a country tune is reserved for The Stranger ("Tumbling Tumbleweeds" played by the Sons of the Pioneers); "Lujon" by Henry Mancini was chosen for Jackie Treehorn. Burnett guaranteed the musical zeitgeist of the late 1960s by choosing songs by artists such as Captain Beefheart and Bob Dylan, besides some odd acts, such as Moondog and Yma Sumac.

Focusing on *TBL* it is quite important to mention the relevance of Steve Buscemi and John Goodman and their collaborations with the Coen Brothers. Buscemi may have been given minor roles—Mink Larouie in *Miller's Crossing*, a bellhop named Chet in *Barton Fink*, a Beatnik bartender in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, a greater role in *Fargo* as the criminal Carl Showalter, and then Donny in *The Big Lebowski*—however, his involvement is always marked by peculiar characters that can crack a smile or provoke repulsion. It is worth noting, therefore, that Buscemi's characters in the Coens's universe are never similar to each other. Differently, Goodman's characters are quite always violent men: in *Raising Arizona*, he is an escaped prisoner along with his brother, and they persuade Hi (Cage) to return to his criminal old times; in *Barton Fink* he plays an alcoholic and murderous neighbor, Charlie Meadows, a role written by the Coens specifically for him; a minor role as a Rockwell newsreel announcer in *The Hudsucker Proxy*; the loud, temperamental, and aggressive Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski*; another minor role in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* as the hustler Daniel "Big Dan" Teague; and the unpleasant and demanding Roland Turner, a jazz musician, in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Goodman's characters rely heavily in his body language, his bulk and humor, however truculent his characters are.

In the fifth chapter of C. Paul Sellors's *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths*, he formulates what an author is, having previously defined the role of an author. Rather than working with the notion of the auteur, Sellors's proclivities are towards the author, claiming that the observations he makes for an author can be applied to an auteur, if a definition of art and work of art is pursued. The chapter is entitled "Intention," a principle which is a key notion in order to understand collective authorship; therefore, Sellors "rel[ies] on the premise that authorship is essentially an empirical activity and that any theory of film authorship must be able to account for actual production conditions and inform historical research into filmmaking" (106). Based on Paisley Livingston's definition of author, Sellors discusses and improves it, adapting it to film:

Filmic author = the agent (or agents) who intentionally token(s) a filmic utterance to communicate a meaning. 'To token' refers to any

relevant action, an intended function of which is to compose a filmic utterance; a filmic utterance is the material film constituting an expression conveying a meaning; and communicate implies the possibility of an audience capable of understanding such an expression. (110)

Sellors points some tenets to his redefinition, such as "filmic utterance," which is intrinsically related to "communicate meaning." This bond is quite important in order to verify who is an author. Whenever an author communicates, he or she does it purposefully, his or her utterances are not by accident. Thus, Sellors (110) contends that an utterance is "the *result* of expressing or communicating intentionally."

According to Sellors, if a film lacks utterances, it has no author. On the other hand, if a film displays utterances, it does have an author, or authors: "If a film possesses an utterance, then the number of people who authored the film will be the same as the number of people who tokened the filmic utterance in that film" (Sellors 110). Sellors also notices that the number of people who proceeded to token the film utterance and therefore helped to author it is not equal to the number of people who worked on the film. Moreover, Sellors (112) enumerates the infelicities why it is wrong or unfair to attribute the accolades of auteur solely to the director: "(1) too critically insensitive to the actual production history of any film to be useful; (2) to impose a literary model of authorship onto film; and (3) to conflate the critical concern of artistry with the more basic concern of film authorship." Sellors revisits the early years of filmmaking in which writers had little impact on films and then the Hollywood studio era, in which producers were influential on their own behalf as well as the system, which dictated its rules and needs.

The case of the Coen Brothers is quite complex. The studio era was long gone and the emergence of directors who managed to shoot as suited them best matched the emergence of the New Hollywood. The Coens are not part of the New Hollywood, though they reaped the rewards that film productions had been unfolding: from their first feature film, they have been writing, producing, directing, and editing their own films. This, however, does not grant them the title of sole auteurs or authors of the films they made. It is also important to bring to

the fore that Sellors comments on "control," which is a substantial concept that imbues the notion of authorship. Joel and Ethan, as it has been seen over the years, are the main minds at control. Sellors, furthermore, highlights that "Film also demonstrates these types of external interventions. These can range from multi-language prints, director's cuts, format changes, changes in rations, and DVDs with their supplementary tracks" (118). He notices that authorship, and even auteurship, is put in check when it comes to restoration of old or silent films, such as *Metropolis*. Another important observation is made by Sellors: "Antje Ascheid (1997) argues that translating a film into a different language constitutes a new text because of the relationships between language, cultural and national identities" (119).

In addition, production is, according to Sellors (119), "The main area of multiple authorship in film." The participation of cast and crew, be it cinematographers, composers, choreographers, etc. is significant, as I commented and pointed above in relation to the oeuvre of the Coen Brothers. Another problem in order to set collective authorship and its definition is the difference and peculiarities of action and intention, which can be both collective. At this point, Sellors reviews Berys Gaut, who believes that "the more people involved in authoring a film, the more diluted intentions become, since many intentions now compete through the work." Sellors also notices that Gaut "seems to presume that collective action is coupled with multiple individual intentions" (121). Recurring to John Searle, Sellors ratifies that collective action is possible because of collective intention, the notion of cooperation among members who have a common goal. Joel and Ethan may have divergent opinions and ideas towards writing or directing, but in the end they have to come to terms. Cooperation is needed. Thus, if it is assumed that they are in control, they have to work (to act) with their cast and crew in order to achieve what was intended. A member of the team may have an individual intention; nevertheless, to complete the film collective actions will be needed. As not all members of the filmmaking are authors, not all members are members of the collective, and so not all members of the collective are authors. According to Sellors (124), "For a film to be collectively authored, there must be a filmic intention that the authorial collective utters collectively."

* * *

History, backing the use of space and time in the films made by the Coen Brothers, is an essential element in their oeuvre, indicating how characters think and behave, according to the society they abide or reject. Certain patterns, regarding characterization, are found throughout their work and they ratify a Coenesque mark. The combination of genres, which almost always include comedy and crime are there to be discussed, analyzed, and questioned. Violence, as a recurrent theme, has its implications, though it is never shown purposeless, even if it is for the sake of style. Hardly this could be the case, as the Coens are more likely to mock and problematize, despite their lack of straightforwardness in political issues.

Because Joel and Ethan have for a long time relied on the same collaborators, the chances to succeed collectively in intentions and actions are higher, and so are the ones to author together a film. As it was pointed many times before, they produce, write, direct, and edit the films they make; however, this is not the reason why they must be regarded as authors or auteurs solely. Coenesque is a key aspect of their films, as Ian Nathan remarks, but the construction of such a mark is achieved through the touches of third-party members. Auteurs abide, but not alone.

CHAPTER 3

THE AUTEUR WHO WASN'T THERE

The Coen Brothers already had prestige in their career when the twentieth-first century came. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) were successful at the box office and they received positive reviews from critics. However, the reception of their two subsequent films, *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) and *The Ladykillers* (2004), were mixed, and they are considered one of the weakest motion pictures in the their oeuvre. When *No Country for Old Men* came in 2007, Joel and Ethan Coen received the best reviews of their careers and now, some may argue, it is still the best films of the brothers. *No Country for Old Men* (hereinafter *NCfOM*) was a landmark for the Coens, adding an extra flavor of Coenesque.

3.1. Plot Overview: No Man's Land and Topophilia

No Country for Old Men is the first adaptation properly tackled by the Coen Brothers. The novel of the same title was written by the American author Cormac McCarthy and it was published in 2005. The title refers back to the poem "Sailing to Byzantium," written in 1926 by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats and published in 1928; it derives, more specifically, from its first line, and the first stanza goes as the following:

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in 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 unaging intellect. (193)

Yeats's poem can be read as a metaphor for a spiritual journey, which would encompass themes such as aging, the pursuit of peace, and immortality. These themes can be found in *NCfOM*, especially in Tommy Lee Jones's character Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, whose reminiscences are portrayed in the beginning of every chapter in McCarthy's novel, whereas in the film Jones narrates the remembrances with a voice-over. Bell's narration mirrors a sort of Southern wisdom, which one can address serious American issues, such as gun violence and drug trade, but also immigration and racism.

The cat-and-mouse game, set in West Texas in 1980, is not only about killing. The plot of *NCfOM* basically revolves around Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin), Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Jones), and how these men face destiny and death, or, in Ryan P. Doom's words: "Joel and Ethan Coen's adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's grim crime novel about man's strength of will, of word, and of dedication. It's about death and fate, about American violence, about how the old West's carnage never ended, it just erupts in cycles" (149). Moss, a welder and Vietnam veteran—"another echo of a distant war," as Ian Nathan (75) observes—, comes across the aftermath of a drug trade gone wrong. After wandering cautiously, like a soldier, among the dead, Mexicans and dogs, Moss talks to a wounded Mexican, who begs for water, and then he goes away looking for the man that is probably carrying the money. He finds and takes it, returns home, and goes back later to the same place. Two men in a truck arrive at the very same place and pursue him. He escapes alive and decides to send his wife, Carla Jean (Kelly McDonald), to her mother's house, in order to keep her safe.

Texas is the ultimate place. Although Moss flees to Mexico, all the action resumes in Texan territory. The cosmos of *NCfOM* is finite, a well-ordered whole fraught with chaos: there is no escape, no turning back. Actually, the only turning back there to be seen is the most regretful one: Moss's restless feeling to help the Mexican by taking some water with him was as dangerous as a taking the satchel full of money. Chigurh would be sooner or later in Moss's tail and no mercy would be shown, as he first demonstrates in the jail scene, where he is handcuffed and manages to strangle a deputy. Everywhere Chigurh goes

he leaves a blood trail, there is neither pity, nor remorse; Chigurh is relentlessly after Moss because of the money and, to Moss's bad luck, a tracking device is hidden in the money, being just a matter of time to Chigurh finally catch him.

If Texas is portrayed as the ultimate milieu, the topophilic aspect of *NCfOM* is sustained throughout the film. The environment plays almost as a character, especially in the scenes where Llewelyn is in the desert, first hunting, then checking the dead bodies, and later on hunted by other men. According to Nathan (72), "The characters would also correlate with the landscape, and would be portrayed as real human beings, no less." Moss lives in a trailer park with his wife, whereas Sheriff Bell lives in a more remote place, with his wife too. The notion of topophilia that I employ here is the one which stresses the bond between individuals and a certain place, more natural than cultural, even though the latter plays a significant role and is far from being excluded. Topophilic aspects can be found in Sheriff Bell's passages, especially his voice-overs, and Moss's relation with nature, his hunting and love for the outdoors. Texas is not only a convenient place, the Coens have been there (*Blood Simple*. and even its vicinities, such as in *Raising Arizona* and later in *True Grit*), and its soil seems to be but drying the blood of past killings.

NCfOM has some further aspects in common with other films made by the Coen Brothers. The first possible connection is the very opening of *NCfOM* which is similar to the opening of *Blood Simple*.: the Coens set the atmosphere with many static shots of landscape,⁵² from the mild blue and orange of the sky to the dawn overhead in the wild grass. In *NCfOM*, the shots are followed by Jones's voice-over, no other soundtrack, whereas in *Blood Simple*., M. Emmet Walsh provides the voice-over for his character, Investigator Loren Visser. Bell recollects his sherifffdom, which started when he was "twenty-five years old," his folks were also lawmen, and the fact that some old-time sheriffs did not wear a gun amazes him a lot, so do the stories told by these old-timers.

⁵² The opening of most films of the Coen Brothers follows these patterns: an opening shot depicting a landscape of the area where the film is set, e.g. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *The Ladykillers*; or a voice-over, e.g. *Raising Arizona*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *True Grit*; sometimes both of them at the same time, e.g. *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *The Big Lebowski*; or with a quotation, e.g. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *A Serious Man*, *True Grit*.

On the other hand, Walsh's voice-over is much more a reflection than a recollection, a warning instead of a memory:

The world is full of complainers. The fact is, nothing comes with a guarantee. I don't care if you're the pope of Rome, president of the United States or man of the year. Something can always go wrong. Go ahead, you know, complain, tell your problems to your neighbor, ask for help and watch him fly. Now, in Russia, they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else. That's the theory anyway. What I know about is Texas. Down here, you're on your own.

These lines could have come straight from McCarthy's novel but the only thing taken for granted is that the title, *Blood Simple.*, was borrowed from the American writer Dashiell Hammett's novel *Red Harvest* (1929). Who on Earth could Moss complain to? The fact that "something can always go wrong" is proven in *NCfOM* and Moss is definitely on his own. And he is in Texas.

He is perhaps the character that is most connected to nature, the wild nature, be it in the desert or in the asphalt. However, Sheriff Bell's bonds to Texas are also quite strong and with no cheap sentiment. Bell has seen a lot in his career but nothing like what is about to happen to Moss. The following shots picture how topophilia is a key concept embedded in Moss's character:



Image 3.1: Extreme long shot of desert landscape, a big black cloud above the deer.

The Coens and Roger Deakins, their frequent collaborator as cinematographer, invest in extreme long shots (*NCfOM* was shot in 2.35:1, that is, anamorphic format, therefore it enhances the width of the image) in order to depict, in a bigger extent, the surroundings: the scorching weather, deer over yonder, and a big black cloud reflecting on the ground. This shot is also a POV shot, showing approximately what Moss is seeing, besides another POV shot through the binoculars Moss is using.

The big black cloud comes nearer after the gunshot when the deer disappear. Moss decides to check other spots and, thus, another striking shot depicts the wilderness of nature and the smallness of man:



Image 3.2: Extreme long shot of desert landscape. Moss, as a tiny little figure, can be seen in the left side of the frame. Symmetry can also be pointed, as the shot is slightly divided by the sky and the clouds, on top, whereas on bottom, the desert and its vegetation reside.

Moss, as a tiny little figure, on the left side of the frame, seems to be swallowed by nature. What is it that waits for him out there? A blood trail, cars and dead people around. His doom. The following sequences are also shown through long extreme shots, e.g. when Llewelyn first sees the cars down there in the desert and then when he searches for the last man standing, who would probably be with the money. Hours later, when Moss decides to go back to the "getting place," it is late at night, a few hours possibly before dawn. Deakins makes use of a bluish tone in these sequences, they are better depicted for suspense (or tension, as it was explored by Barry Sonnenfeld, the cinematographer of *Blood Simple.*, the color blue might hardly be just indicating the moonlight), especially when Moss, already apprehensive, is surprised by another car that arrives and parks next to his:

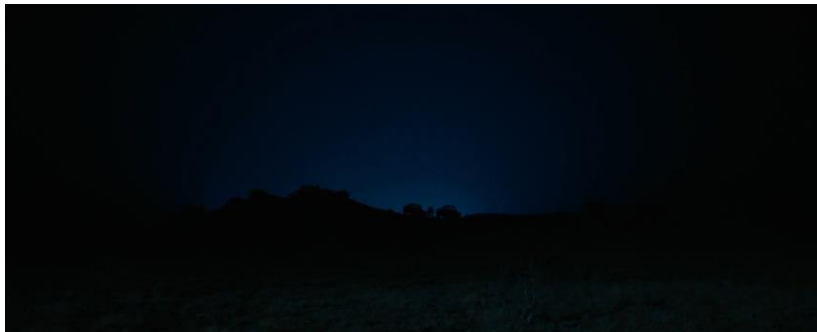


Image 3.3: Extreme long shot of two cars in the background. The bluish tone of the shot is centered, whereas its edges are darkened. The cars appear as silhouettes.

The blue light used behind the actors and the cars, in another extreme long shot, provides the shadows and the imminent danger. Moss runs for his life, his shadow is not a threat, but it is menaced:

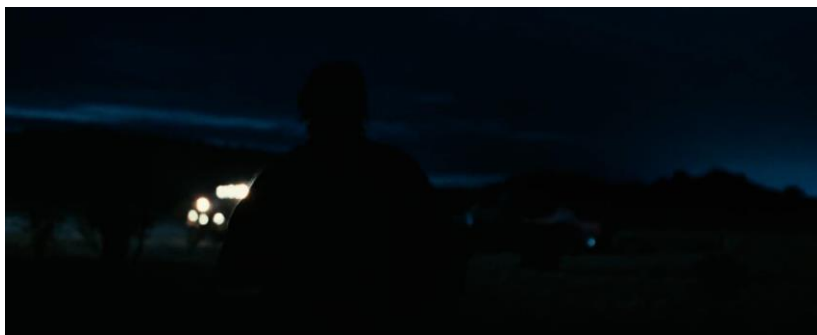


Image 3.4: Long shot depicting Moss's silhouette on the foreground, while the car right behind him is almost the only light source, aiding visually the spectators' gaze.



Image 3.5: Long shot depicting Moss running, now the camera catches him from behind. The dark shot is poorly lit by a thunder the blasts overhead.

The weather is not friendly as well. A thunder blasts overhead and the noise of the car engine is closer and closer to Moss. Dawn is breaking and he eventually succeeds at escaping, though it almost cost his life.⁵³

Moss is eventually killed by Mexicans, Sheriff Bell is regretful and he is the one who breaks the news to Carla Jean about her husband's death. Chigurh, who had promised Moss to kill his wife, keeps his word and gets away with everything but not uninjured. Violence is a key element in Coenesque and it fuels *NCfOM*, as Doom (149) observes: "Every Coen brother movie has utilized violence as a way to enhance realism, entertainment, and narrative. Each film employs bloodshed in various ways," however, "*No Country for Old Men* effectively encapsulates all those elements to formulate the nature of American violence: dirty, bloody, unforgiving, gruesome, and unrelenting." Doom, furthermore, explains the use of violence by the Coens:

No Country for Old Men kills for more. It personifies the way the Coens use violence for social commentary—that America's lust for blood

⁵³ The short documentary *The Making of 'No Country for Old Men'* (2008), however, shows that this sequence was shot during the day. Therefore, much of the visual tension is provided in the post-production of the film, with special and visual effects.

isn't a modern occurrence, but a part of American history. As one character states, "What you got ain't nothing new. This country is hard on people." Judging from the title, it's easy to decipher the social commentary with its content references to the elevation of the murderous drug trade along the Mexican border. The film never masks the problem as a modern occurrence. Unrelenting violence always surfaces; it's just that old men can't play the game. Death remains every person's fate, it just becomes a matter of when and how. Characters can attempt to run from violence, but there's no need because no one has a say in death. As the film's villain explains, "That's the way it is." Regardless, the hero sheriff cannot comprehend modern chaos and claims, "I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand." The movie becomes defined by this notion of understanding the evolution of violence, understanding what makes it, and how one battles it. (149-150)

Violence is a trademark in the Coen Brothers' filmography that is not difficult to realize and *NCfOM* establishes another level in their oeuvre, being even considered by themselves their most violent film.

3.2. Characters

The threefold characters pattern can also be pointed in *NCfOM*, just like in *The Big Lebowski* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, for instance. However, differently from these films, *NCfOM* never depicts the three main characters all at once, that is, framed together. The paths taken by Sheriff Bell, Moss, and Chigurh converge due to at least two reasons: money or killing, which seem to be two inseparable elements in the Coenesque universe.⁵⁴ One entails the other, leaving a blood trail

⁵⁴ As Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) says to Gaeear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare) in the end of *Fargo*, "There is more to life than a little money, you know. Don'tcha know that? And here ya are, and it's a beautiful day... Well... I just don't understand it." Violence, as some of the Coens's characters observe

behind. Good and evil can be pointed straightforwardly, but spectators cannot take them for granted. Nathan (75) observes that the Texan milieu of *NCfOM* is divided between heaven and hell, with Sheriff Bell on the righteous side and Chigurh on the evil one, whereas Moss's locus is in-between the two ends of the spectrum.

3.2.1. "What's the Most You've Ever Lost in a Coin Toss?"

Among them three Anton Chigurh is the most peculiar, both in his looks and in his temper or principles. According to Nathan (75), he "bears an uncanny resemblance to The Terminator, even partaking in a grisly sequence of self-surgery," and another cross-reference can be made according to the weapon he uses, a captive bolt pistol, which was also a central weapon in Michael Haneke's *Benny's Video* (1992). Both Chigurh and Benny, coincidentally, share a ghastly personality, making them murderous psychopaths. Doom (153) highlights a very interesting point about Chigurh's weapon, assuming that his "choice matters as it explains a viewpoint on society. We are cattle waiting for the slaughter, and Chigurh is the butcher, killing as if it's just another day on job." Bardem's Chigurh is never in a hurry, his lack of haste is not a synonym of lack of hazard, though. He is vicious, his deeds follow a wicked moral code that seems hard to break, but his attitudes are never precipitate: his coldness is his confidence, he does not distinguish unknown people from acquainted ones, he kills whenever people are inconvenient to him, no matter where and how. If he could be compared to any of the Coens's characters, he would be more like Peter Stormare's Gaear Grimsrud than John Goodman's Charlie Meadows, for instance, though Chigurh does not share Gaear's greed for money.

Moreover, Doom (153) states that "The savagery of American violence begins with Chigurh's introduction," which comprises two sequences: first, the deputy's strangulation in the office and, then, the murder of a civilian just to switch cars. The former is an exercise of camera angles and editing, the shots are quite articulate and effective. Pain exhales straight from the screen. Blood spills from the deputy's

and believe, is a pointless act. Marge, just like Bell, just does not understand violence and the need to kill, which is generally for money (and/or, accordingly, power).

throat, his body is motionless, Chigurh sighs in relief. The death struggle is not backed up with soundtrack, the only sound to be heard is diegetic and it is appalling: the deputy choking and "a barrage of boot marks [that] tattoo the floor with hundreds of black streaks pointing to the desperation for life when death approaches" (153). The other man killed, in broad daylight, was just unfortunate to be in Chigurh's way: Chigurh, driving a police cruiser, signals to the man pull out and asks him to step out the car; the man does not understand what is going on, "Howdy, what's this about?," but it is too late. Chigurh asks him to step out of the car and to hold still so he can shoot him right in the forehead with his cattle gun.

What does make Chigurh so different? Doom (155-156) analyzes him as "A killer sporting a Prince Valiant hair style and lugging around a cattle gun and an oxygen tank sounds more fit for a slasher sequel to something like *Slumber Party* than one of most memorable characters of the last 20 years." Besides that, "Chigurh portrays the embodiment of evil living outside societal rules. Only he knows whatever code by which he follows" (Doom 156). Whereas Sheriff Bell thinks Chigurh is "pretty much a ghost," crazy is a word too perfunctory to describe Chigurh, but Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson) and Carla Jean (McDonald) do it anyway when they meet him. Despite that, Wells goes beyond: when the man who hires him to find the money asks how dangerous Chigurh is, Wells replies unconcerned, "Compared to what? The bubonic plague? He's bad enough that you called me. Yeah, he's a psychopathic killer but so what? There's a plenty of them around." Later on, Wells manages to find Moss first, who is lying in a Mexican hospital, after being shot by Chigurh. In their conversation, Moss mentions that he has seen Chigurh and Wells does show some surprise:

You've seen him? And you're not dead.

Is this guy supposed to be the ultimate badass?

I don't think that's how I'd describe him.

How would you describe him?

I guess I'd say... he doesn't have a sense of humor.
His name is Chigurh.

Sugar?

Chigurh. Anton Chigurh.

[. . .]

You don't understand. You can't make a deal with him. Even if you gave him the money back, he'd still kill you just for inconveniencing him. He's a peculiar man. Might even say he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that. He's not like you. He's not even like me.

He don't talk as much as you, I give him points for that.

The passage even attempts at humor, in spite of its seriousness, when Moss does not get Chigurh's name right. Wells fails to help Moss, he is also killed by Chigurh in cold blood.

Doom, furthermore, reminds that "Coen villains always live by their own sense of ethics," special mentions to Loren Visser (*Blood Simple.*), Leonard Smalls (*Raising Arizona*), The Dane (*Miller's Crossing*), Charlie Meadows (*Barton Fink*), and again Gaear Grimsrud (*Fargo*). This is true and according to Doom, these characters "exist in a separate plain with a disgust of civilized life, of normalcy. Only their values and beliefs matter because they are destroyers without conscience." Thus, "The characters invoke violence for reasons ranging from insanity, to professionalism, to greed, but all share the commonality of alienation, unable to function among average people" (156). Javier Bardem's performance is striking, although his character might seem effortless to be portrayed. He gives life to uncanniness, his seriousness is thrilling, and his actions are unbelievably cruel.

3.2.2. "Old Age Flattens a Man, Wendell."

Sheriff Bell, on the other hand, is an embedded character in American history and culture (and so is Chigurh, but less accepted perhaps?), as his very honorary title indicates. The sheriff is responsible for keeping the peace and, unlike other professions, he exercises his duties without the usual requirements, at least in the "classical" way. Thus, a "classical" sheriff becomes a sheriff because the position is conferred to him as an honor, which denotes another social and moral code: a sheriff must be respectable and law-abiding, he is sometimes the law himself, and this may or may not trigger condescendence. Sheriff Bell, however, does not play the condescending type. He is humble and a simple man but not exactly a personification of an innocence (if such thing is possible in the film whatsoever), he is not also the fearless type, he knows what is ahead of him.

Doom is keen to observe that Tommy Lee Jones has given life to many lawmen over his career, "whether as sheriff, detective, or military man." However, in *NCfOM*, there is no previous formula: "his role of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell adds depth to his clichéd image. No longer stressed, demanding, or intimidating, Bell's a retired man who is short on answers." And, "The world has changed, but he isn't sure when it did, and doesn't know if he stills wants to be part of it" (Doom 158). Is the title, *No Country for Old Men*, a warning to Jones's character? According to Doom, Sheriff Bell's voice-over is a

voice of reason bringing a conscience to the story, because, as the outsider examining the carnage left behind, he's unable to comprehend the weight of all the death. He observes not only as a sheriff, but as a man watching his world change. As an aging sheriff, Bell depicts the difference of age and social class—age, not in years, but in a belief in outworn American values. These values included simple respect for your fellow neighbor and courtesies like using sir and madam to address others. (159)

Tired of his job and maybe of the world that grows like a cancer around him, Sheriff Bell is looking forward to retire. When he visits his friend Ellis (Barry Corbin), they talk about the occupational hazards of their careers, since Ellis was once a deputy, and the scene closes with Ellis warning Bell with a foreclosing remark: "This country is hard on people. You can't stop what's comin'. All ain't waiting on you. That's vanity." Jones succeeds at portraying weariness, his performance throughout the film is sympathetic, and the last sequence in which he tells Loretta (Tess Harper), his wife, about the two dreams he had the night before was just made to marvel.⁵⁵

3.2.3. "If I Don't Come Back, Tell Mother I Love Her."

Llewelyn Moss, according to Nathan, stands between heaven and hell, that is, between Sheriff Bell and Chigurh. Therefore, it takes a few observations to notice that Moss is the most earthly character among them three. Doom also notices this, pointing the ability the Coens have to make common characters (does the urge of Barton Fink to create the "common man" ring the bell?). "The Coens know how to make characters underwhelming and average, usually lacking social skills, normalcy, and steady jobs as they sit a few rungs down on the social ladder," and besides that, "They live on the outskirts of the norm, fighting their way to achieve their own definition of success" (Doom 154). As pointed out earlier, Moss is a Vietnam veteran, and Doom highlights that Moss's lack of surprise when he comes across the dead bodies in the desert. Moss seems to be much more skillful (and less shaken) than Walter Sobchak, who is another Vietnam vet in the Coens's universe.

Moss, despite what viewers can presume from the desert sequence, is not like Chigurh. Doom (154) states that Moss "is not heartless. His moral choices reflect the difference between himself and Chigurh. As much as Moss believes he can match a heartless killer, that he can match chaos with chaos, he cannot. A conscience controls him." Moreover, "Moss has roots and lives with common morals—elements

⁵⁵ Jones would go further, he directed a television film, *The Sunset Limited* (2011), based on a play written by Cormac McCarthy. The film also communicates serious themes, such as suicide and religion, Jones starred alongside Samuel L. Jackson, whose character's beliefs are opposed to Jones's.

he cannot afford to have in the face of unrelenting violence" (Doom 155). Moss may be passionate, but Chigurh has no passion at all, his tactics works in cold blood. Doom is also aware of another Coens's feature, stating that "Socially, Moss falls in line with all Coen leads, living in basic solitude with his wife Carla Jean" (155). Moss's only family seems to be Carla Jean, since his mother is dead and no one else is mentioned—except for Roberto, possibly a friend, who Moss was hopeful to borrow a car from—, which makes Doom notice that the Coens rarely present detailed background of their characters.

The performance delivered by Josh Brolin is steadfast. His character demands grit, he ought to be tough. Brolin portrays Moss seriously, as the very script requires; there are few moments which are relaxed and when Moss is eventually at ease, dropping his guard and having some beer with a female company, he is killed. Brolin's character is the one who spends most time on the screen, even though the other two have a fair share, and this is the impression one gets, that the film is well balanced. Brolin is also the one who most works with the body, his character's mishaps are demanding: he has to run, swim, spend some time in desert inappropriately dressed, hitchhike in order to run away from Chigurh, and finally fight against him when the time comes.

3.3. Direction, Editing, and Sound

No Country for Old Men can be considered a simple film in relation to direction, editing, and sound. Simple, however, does not mean inferior. As I pointed earlier in this chapter, most viewers would rate *NCfOM* as one of the best films ever made by the Coen Brothers, if not the best. As an adapted product, Joel and Ethan made *NCfOM* by tackling the novel with no tergiversation: dialogues are fairly shortened, but the words are McCarthy's own, and the action of the film follows the same sequence of the book. There are modifications, of course, but my objective here is far from analyzing what the novel presents and what the film does not (pledge to) portray. According to Nathan (71), *NCfOM* "didn't entirely resemble the Coenesque of old," mainly because it is an adaptation; however, I refrain from agreeing with Nathan, as I intend to point in this section. Also, because the title of this chapter is "The Auteur Who Wasn't There," it does not premise the lack of auteurship, though.

What could be said of *NCfOM* admitting that it is truly Coenesque? First, as I mentioned above, the plot revolves around a tripartite regarding characters: the threefold character pattern found in Bell-Chigurh-Moss can be linked to Dude-Walter-Donny in *The Big Lebowski* and Ulysses-Pete-Delmar in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. Furthermore, since *NCfOM* is the most serious film in their oeuvre, it still bears traces of comedy, nevertheless. For instance, Deputy Wendell (Garret Dillahunt) is far from being as experienced as Sheriff Bell; when they are looking for Moss in his trailer, Bell notices that the lock has been plucked, Wendell asks, "We goin' in?," and Bell orders, "Gun out and up," calmly with his hands on his hips. Wendell takes his gun out of the holster and to his bewilderment he asks Bell, "What about yours?," to which he replies, "I'm right behind you."

Another sequence which can be taken as a comic example is when we see Moss already in Mexican territory. After he crosses the border, all ensanguined, Moss is lying asleep in stone steps; he is awakened by a group of mariachis that start singing to him. When they, after a few seconds, realize that Moss is all bloodied and quite possibly injured, they stop. The song, in Spanish, goes like this: "You wanted to fly without wings, you wanted to touch the sky, you wanted too much wealth, you wanted to play with fire."⁵⁶ These lines work probably as a reference to Moss's trajectory. There is no similar passage in the novel, Moss is otherwise awakened by a man who is just sweeping the floor. The mariachi group passage reflects, in a way, the Coen Brothers' proclivities to dark humor: a man bleeding to death is awakened by Mexican musicians. They turn out to help Moss find a hospital where he can convalesce.

Right after this sequence comes Chigurh's time to look for help, except to the fact that he asks nobody for help. He himself manages to recover by self-surgery. In order to accomplish that, Chigurh explodes a car parked in front of a drugstore, and the name of this drugstore? Mike Zoss Pharmacy. As one might have already noticed, Mike Zoss Productions is how Joel and Ethan named their production company; furthermore, the IMDb trivia informs that "It's a reference to Mike Zoss Drugs, a Minneapolis pharmacy where the Coen Brothers spent time in their youth." Chigurh is the less funny character, not that *NCfOM* is full

⁵⁶ Originally written and composed by Michel Eloy Sánchez, the quoted passage is from the song "Puño de tierra."

of jokers. Carla Jean's mother, Agnes Kracik (Beth Grant), however, may be the character that combines tragedy with humor, such as (and only) when she is complaining about moving and that she "got the cancer."

The direction envisioned by Joel and Ethan are not totally orientated towards action, as a genre. *NCfOM* presents remarkable passages containing thriller as key aspect, such as in the hotel shootout. A certain sequence might even bring to mind a sequence where Barton Fink enters in his room:



Image 3.6: Assemblage of two shots: on top, Moss in background walking in the hallway of a hotel, dimly lit and lowly painted, whereas on bottom, Barton Fink is opening the door of his room, the hallway walls have wallpaper and they are more illuminated.

Hotel or motel rooms are usual locations in the films of the Coens.⁵⁷ When Moss is all settled, he finds the transponder in the suitcase and realizes that Chigurh will be there soon. Deakins provides low-key lighting, diegetically there is only a lampshade in Moss's room (and street lights are also another source), and further lighting is improved before and beyond the door: Moss turns the lights off waiting for Chigurh, who is in hallway and then behind the door; the shadows of his feet are visible, but Moss does not panic. Chigurh turns the lights of the hallway off, Moss grows clueless, as his face demonstrates. Before this hotel sequence, the motel sequences in which Chigurh almost catches Moss is significantly suspenseful as well. Besides action and thriller, *NCfOM* presents some passages with a Western-like atmosphere, being actually labeled as a neo-Western thriller by some. Or, as Kelly Macdonald states in *The Making of 'No Country for Old Men'* (2008), "I think it's a Coen Brothers film. They're their own genre."

All in all, *NCfOM* is a film that is mastered with pace and continuation. Editing, for most of the Coens's films, is linear, because most of their films are like that. They hardly introduce flashbacks. Characters are their best feature regarding screenplay writing and all the action revolves around them, so does the editing: for instance, after Chigurh kills the man in the highway in order to swap cars, the Coens (who were using their pseudonym, Roderick Jaynes) turn to Moss in the desert shooting at the deer. Both characters, before knocking down their victims, utter the words "hold still." The main difference between them, however, is that Chigurh accomplishes his maneuver, whereas Moss, at a long distance, misses his target. And that says a lot about how things will turn out for them. The editing of *NCfOM* is plain, for most of the shots are introduced and finished with a straight cut, but there are a few dissolves; the ellipses of the film are not too long, and the whole plot takes place in a week or less.

Last but not least, the sound of *NCfOM* is like no other film made by the Coen Brothers. They have showed, throughout their careers, a predilection for pop music, ranging from rock to folk, mostly. Carter Burwell is a frequent collaborator, as mentioned in the previous chapter, he has scored all of the Coens's films, even though T-Bone Burnett

⁵⁷ The Coen Brothers occasionally make references to the films of Stanley Kubrick. In *No Country for Old Men*, a possible reference is the room 114 in which Llewelyn Moss is killed. 114 is a number usually used in Kubrick's films.

produced much of the music in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*⁵⁸, *The Ladykillers*, and *Inside Llewyn Davis*, whereas in *The Big Lebowski* he was in charge as a "music archivist." However, *NCfOM* lacks the richness of music,⁵⁹ but not of sound. Sound plays as a significant component in many parts of the film, e.g. the wind in the sequence where Moss is in the desert; when Chigurh asks a lady, who is in charge of the trailer park, about Moss's whereabouts and she refuses to give the information, Chigurh only spares her life because he hears someone flushing the toilet (which is heard off-screen); Jeffrey Overstreet observes that "The sound of footsteps on the hardwood floors of a hotel hallway are ominous as the drums of war." And "When the leather of a briefcase squeaks against the metal of a ventilation shaft, you'll cringe, and the distant echo of a telephone ringing in a hotel lobby will jangle your nerves." In addition to that, further observations about the sound in *NCfOM* are made in the following section.

3.4. Adaptation as Product and Process

My theoretical framework to analyze adaptation was taken from Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). Her book, as the very title indicates, is an attempt to understand and theorize about adaptation, aiming at specific questions, such as "what" is an adaptation and "who" the adapter is, "why," "how," "where," and "when" it is made. Hutcheon does not delve into a thick theorization of adaptation and she does not focus on only one medium; she is rather concerned with adaptation in its various forms, from theater to opera, literature to film, but also painting, music, installations, and videogame—something which may bother readers who are interested in a specific medium, with deeper and detailed analyses—nevertheless, the examples given and the way Hutcheon carries out her examination are very rich and illuminating. My interests towards her work on adaptation encompass some of my earlier

⁵⁸ Music plays a major role in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Coens "could never have imagined they were starting a revival of a whole genre of music" and they "were showing a cultural awareness beyond their usual literary and cinematic corner" (Nathan 52).

⁵⁹ The sequences in which Burwell added his scores are the ones that portray tension and suspense, such as in Moss's escape when he is running away from the truck in the desert and when Chigurh is having one of his deadly conversations with an elderly rural gas station clerk (Gene Jones).

theoretical concerns, such as intertextuality and the palimpsestic nature of adaptation, which should be interconnected throughout my work here. Moreover, Hutcheon's main thesis is quite reasonable, arguing that adaptation is both a process and a product.

One of the reasons why adaptations are so much pursued is due to the necessity to recount stories over and over again. Adaptation, in a way, is also the recounting of history. Hutcheon affirms that

All these adapters [from the cinema, musicals, opera, ballets, or songs] relate stories in their different ways. They use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualize or concretize ideas; they make simplifying selections, but also amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect, and so on. But the stories they relate are taken from elsewhere, not invented anew. Like parodies, adaptations have an overt and defining relationship to prior texts, usually revealing called "sources." Unlike parodies, however, adaptations usually openly announce this relationship. It is the (post-) Romantic valuing of the original creation and of the originating creative genius that is clearly one source of the denigration of adapters and adaptations. Yet this negative view is actually a late addition to Western culture's long and happy history of borrowing and stealing or, more accurately, sharing stories. (3-4)

The notion of the Romantic genius is a difficult one to stand up for. One can barely demean the work of Alfred Hitchcock or Stanley Kubrick, for instance, who were masterful adapters. Are they less auteurs than the filmmakers who write original screenplays and direct them? Hardly. Or, in a larger scope, one can hardly debase a category, such as the film noir, whose corpus was mainly accomplished by the means of adaptation, from crime fiction and its subgenre, the hardboiled.

Following this passage, Hutcheon (4) comments that adaptations are made time after time because "Part of this pleasure [. . .] comes

simply from the repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise." Accordingly, adaptations may be executed because of financial factors (Hutcheon 5) but this is not always a completely safe enterprise. Fans of the original work and critics can be harsh on adaptations; however, to be acquainted previously with a work is an important factor, and depending on the level of acquaintance, whether some or none at all, there will be different receptions by the public. In the case of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*—who is to a certain extent not so much known to the American public⁶⁰—the book was not a bestseller⁶¹ like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* or J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* in that year; therefore, the Coen Brothers were not betting on a low-risk project.

Besides Hutcheon's view of seeing adaptations both as process and product, she states that adaptations should be seen as "adaptations," that is, "To deal with adaptations *as adaptations* is to think of them as [. . .] inherently 'palimpsestuous' works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts" (6). This assertion may seem obvious; however, "When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works." Hutcheon hence compares it to Gérard Genette's notion of the "second degree," which denotes an origin, a source; to be second or adapted does not mean to be inferior, Hutcheon deprives this possibility straightforwardly. Moreover, she believes that "To interpret an adaptation *as an adaptation* is, in a sense, to treat it as what Roland Barthes called, not a 'work,' but a 'text'" and that "Although adaptations are also aesthetics objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double- or multilaminated works that they can be theorized *as adaptations*" (Hutcheon 6).

Fidelity to the adapted text has become a major issue in adaptation studies. Hutcheon is not inclined to examine adaptation

⁶⁰ According to Richard B. Woodward, McCarthy "may be the best unknown novelist in America," and "None of his novels have sold more than 5,000 copies in hardcover. For most of his career, he did not even have an agent." The article, extracted from the session of books at the *New York Times on the Web*, was published in April 1992. By that time, McCarthy had *All Pretty Horses* published, a book which brought widespread recognition, followed by *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1995); these books are known to compose McCarthy's Border Trilogy.

⁶¹ The website *USA Today* informs that *No Country for Old Men* is a bestseller.

through this scope—"Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (7)—, neither am I, instead she comments on the dual nature of adaptation as both product and process. The former, seen also as a "formal entity," acknowledges adaptation as "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works." According to Hutcheon (7-8), this transposition can happen through a "shift of medium," e.g. *No Country for Old Men* is the "transcoding" from a novel to a film, but also between genres (could one say that McCarthy's novel, in a way, is an adaptation of Yeats's poem?). Additionally, the context of a text can be adapted, e.g. Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* takes place during the Great Depression, but it is loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*; Hutcheon also mentions "a shift in ontology from real to fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama," e.g. *Inside Llewyn Davis*, in which the main character's life is inspired by the autobiography of Dave Van Ronk, an American folk singer.

On the other hand, adaptations can be seen as "*a process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective" (Hutcheon 8). Moreover, adaptations can be seen as a "*process of reception*," that is, as a "form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation." Hutcheon (9) concludes that "an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing." From this moment on on her book, Hutcheon addresses the questions I mentioned on the first paragraph of his section.

3.4.1. What Is Adapted and How?

Hutcheon's first questions are: what is adapted and how? She assumes that "The form changes with adaptation (thus evading most legal prosecution); the content persists. But what exactly constitutes that transferred and transmuted 'content'?" Hutcheon (10) recalls that most people, be it the critics or the audience, prioritize what is called the "spirit" of the adapted work; nonetheless, she contends that the notion of the "spirit" is a subjective matter and unlikely to be theorized. The

content of a work is generally, if not always, synonymous of the story, which is the "common denominator," as Hutcheon calls it; within the story there are many adaptable elements, such as "themes, events, world, characters, motivations, points of view, consequences, contexts, symbols, imagery, and so on."

Intertextuality is another key concept in Hutcheon's analysis of adaptation. According to the author, "For the reader, spectator, or listener, adaptation *as adaptation* is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality *if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text*" (Hutcheon 21). This notion of intertextuality within adaptation is not as specific as she claims; Hutcheon rather observes that

By stressing the relation of individual works to other works and to an entire cultural system, French semiotic and post-structuralist theorizing of intertextuality (e.g., by Barthes 1971/1977; Kristeva 1969/1986) has been important in its challenges to dominant post-Romantic notions of originality, uniqueness, and autonomy. Instead, texts are said to be mosaics of citations that are visible and invisible, heard and silent; they are always already written and read. So, too, are adaptations, but with the added proviso that they are also acknowledged as adaptations *of specific texts*. Often, the audience will recognize that a work is an adaptation of more than one specific text. (21)

NCfOM is obviously an adaptation of a specific text, McCarthy's text. However, the links with previous work go further: Ian Nathan asserts that *NCfOM* "shares the codified male behaviour and spasms of violence of *Miller's Crossing* [. . .]. *No Country for Old Men* also recalls *Blood Simple*'s generic Texan milieu and *Fargo*'s unforgettable void" (72). Furthermore "And most alluringly, here too was a chance to examine the cinematic texture of John Ford, Anthony Mann and, most of all, Sam Peckinpah. 'Hard men in the southwest shooting each other — that's definitely Sam Peckinpah's thing', admitted Ethan." Hutcheon's previous quotation also matches what I stated before about my theoretical

concerns, which unite Barthes's notion of the "death of the author" and "text" with Kristeva's "intertextuality," thus, Hutcheon's view of adaptation comes in handy, justifying not only my previous choices but why I chose her work.

Adaptations are also framed in a medium specificity. Offering another brief description of what an adaptation is, Hutcheon (33) suggests that "As a creative and interpretative transposition of a recognizable other work or works, adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often transcoding into a different set of conventions." According to her, the medium is "the material means of expression of an adaptation" and "When a change of medium does occur in an adaptation, it inevitably invokes that long history of debate about the formal specificity of the arts—and thus of media" (34). Because of this shift of media, adaptations may come across mishaps, most due to the "idea of a hierarchy in the arts" (Hutcheon 34). Literature and the theater are much older than the cinema, something that might compromise the way how one should be analytical towards films; however, the cinema plays with its own aces, comprising

"A composite language by virtue of its diverse matters of expression—sequential photography, music, phonetic sound and noise—the cinema 'inherits' all the art forms associated with these matters of expression ...—," such as "the visuals of photography and painting, the movement of dance, the décor of architecture, and the performance of theater." (Stam 61 qtd. in Hutcheon 35).

Film adaptations are not immune from losses, even more when a film is adapted from a book (contrasted by Hutcheon as "Telling ← → Showing"). However, Hutcheon (37) reports that "Sometimes what is meant is simply a reduction of scope: of length, of accretion of detail, of commentary;" and certainly there are reductions of scope in the Coens's adaptation of McCarthy's, though subtractions can be convenient additions. Although the work made by the Coens was considered faithful to the original, changes are inevitable, some may please, some

may dissatisfy: how did the audience, at least the ones who had already read the novel, respond to Javier Bardem's portrayal of Chigurh? In one of McCarthy's descriptions of Chigurh his eyes are "Blue as lapis. At once glistening and totally opaque. Like wet stones" (56). Bardem's eyes are originally brown and they are kept like that in the film, in his personification he hardly blinks, and his eyes are as well totally opaque like wet stones.

Regarding film adaptation Hutcheon (40) observes that theoreticians pay much more attention to the visual than to the aural, however important the latter is. Besides words which are spoken in films, constituting mostly but not exclusively the dialogue, Hutcheon perceives that there are also "separate soundtracks that permit elements like voice-overs, music, and noise to intermingle" (40-41). Sound can be used in myriad ways in films and the Coens have realized that from the very beginning of their *métiers*: their collaboration with Carter Burwell has been fruitful and so are the technicalities accomplished by Peter Kurland and Skip Lievsay. Yet, *NCfOM* is the least sonorous film of the Coens. Paulo de Tarso⁶² remarks that *NCfOM* is "a film that works much better in silent and controlled surroundings, ideal conditions in order to experience its conceptual and aesthetical proposal" and that "One of its elements that trigger suspense and tension is the quasi-absolute silence, or the mixing which we could denominate delicate, minimalist, where certain sound layers are only sublimated instead of highlighted, as it would be usual in other films." This is very unusual, and it is important to notice that Burwell's score consists of only sixteen minutes of music, they are quite sparse throughout the film.

3.4.2. Who Is the Adapter? Or Rather, Who Are the Adapters? And Why Adapt?

The collaborative aspect of filmmaking that I pursued in the previous chapter is still visible and relevant here in the adaptation section. Asking who the adapter is, Hutcheon (80) assumes that an adaptation is a "collective process." She believes that acknowledging the screenwriter as the adapter is not as easy (and correct) as it seems. What

⁶² The following quotations by Paulo de Tarso were translated from Portuguese by myself.

about the editor? Or the music director or composer? The cast and their performances also give life to the text and many other personnel are involved in the making of a film. The director as an auteur almost always gets more recognition than the others (Hutcheon 82-83) and in the case of the Coen Brothers this issue may be more intriguing, since they participate in the main stages of filmmaking. According to Hutcheon (83), "These various adapters, however, stand at different distances from the adapted text," and most of them adapt, in film at least, the screenplay, not the source text, even though some may resort to it to improve their own participation. All things considered, Hutcheon (83) reports an easy and pragmatic notion by William Goldman who "sees the finished film as the studio's adaptation of the editor's adaptation of the director's adaptation of the actors' adaptation of the screenwriter's adaptation of a novel that might itself be an adaptation of narrative of generic conventions [. . .]."

Adaptation in Hutcheon's terms means interpretation before creation, therefore, the adapted text is never replicated (84). Besides who adapts, Hutcheon asks why adapt. Among several reasons why an artist decides to adapt a previous work, Hutcheon lists "economic lures," claiming that "expensive collaborative art forms like operas, musicals, and films are going to look for safe bets with a ready audience" (87); there are "legal constraints," dictating that "Adaptations are not only *spawned* by the capitalist desire for gain; they are also *controlled* by the same law, for they constitute a threat to the ownership of cultural and intellectual property" (89); "cultural capital" is another motivation, encompassing both respectability in other media and pedagogical practices in order to reach younger audiences and students (91-92); "personal and political motives" are also listed, according to one's tastes and ideological proclivities.

To ask why the Coens adapted McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* may not be an illuminating way to get a bright answer: Nathan (71) recalls that "It was [Scott] Rudin who had offered McCarthy's novel to the brothers, the first Hollywood producer to parlay Coen obscurantism into popular success." Whatever the reasons, the film should be analyzed from other angles. Hutcheon (106-107) mentions the improvement of criticism from W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's notion of the "intentional fallacy" to Barthes's announcement of the "death of the author," followed by Foucault's turn on the subject: "What both the New Critics and the poststructuralists alike were protesting, in

their very different ways, was having recourse to authorial intent as the *sole* arbiter and guarantee of the meaning and value of a work of art." It does not mean, however, that authors do not have intentions, Hutcheon remarks, but seeking intentions and applying value to them while interpreting a work has been considered a capital mistake.

3.4.3. Where and When to Adapt?

Adaptations are a product of a context or, as Hutcheon stresses, "An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum" (142). The Coen Brothers, as I pointed many times above, have always been inclined to work within the past, filling their screenplays with particularities and circumstances: in *The Big Lebowski*, for instance, some characters were leftovers of the 1960s, and their backgrounds reverberate in their personalities. In *NCfOM*, the Coens tackle the year of 1980, trying to depict scenery, cars, clothes, and other props according to that era, with a substantial work of the production designer, art director, set decorator, costume designer, and the makeup department.

Hutcheon's notion of context also comprises "elements of presentation and reception, such as the amount and kind of 'hype' an adaptation gets: its advertisings, press coverage, and reviews. The celebrity status of the director or stars is also important element of its reception context" (143), something that both Joel and Ethan care not a bit. Social and racial issues are also at stake, the portrayal of Mexicans in *NCfOM* is not received the same way by Mexicans and by the ones born in the U.S. In the film, the sequence in which Moss is trying to make the Mexican border is not merely illustrative for the purpose of the story: how easy is it to get to Mexican territory? On the other hand, how difficult is it to cross to United States, especially when you are Mexican? Hutcheon (144), accordingly, declares that "This wider context of creation and reception must therefore be of interest to any theory of adaptation that defines the term as process, as well as product."

In this chapter of her book, Hutcheon presents two sorts of adaptations, the transcultural one and the indigenization. The former

type of adaptation may involve different countries, that is, authors of different nationalities and therefore different cultural backgrounds. Political, racial, and gender agendas may and most probably will differ as well. On the other hand, indigenization has to do with "Local particularities [that] become transplanted to new ground, and something new and hybrid results" (Hutcheon 150). It is hard to say that this latter concept is patent in *NCfOM*, it is more reasonable to find it in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, for instance, since the Southern characters and the places they go and live give another dimension to Homer's *Odyssey*. Moreover, Hutcheon borrows the anthropological term indigenization from Susan Stanford Friedman, which refer to "this kind of intercultural encounter and accommodation" (150).

* * *

No Country for Old Men can be seen as a successful adaptation. Nevertheless, the work Joel and Ethan envisioned and accomplished is good enough not because it follows McCarthy's novel almost thoroughly. Some aspects of the novel were, inevitably, left behind, such as Sheriff Bell's narration which introduces every chapter; if there was a difference of focus, the film gives a chance to the aftermath of Moss and the money, which is eventually returned by Chigurh, to the men who hired him, in the end of the novel. *NCfOM* could be regarded as a variation on a theme, or themes, once it embodies some issues the Coens had already worked with; therefore, the auteurist features remain, and the Coens, not alone, signature other motion picture with merit.

FINAL REMARKS: AUTEUR GRIT

Auteur criticism or, as if one prefers, auterism as a practice, as a critical tool which can be used to identify and study auteurs is far from being forsaken. Reviewers, critics, theoreticians, and film lovers have been resorting to this sort of approach for about sixty years now and its tenets have fortunately improved. However, one must ask: what and who an auteur in cinema is? Or, as Bazin inquired, auteur of what? Throughout my work I dealt with these issues, regarding some film collaborators as auteurs and focusing on the Coen Brothers' oeuvre. From this perspective, a film should never be seen as made by one individual and even an auteur alone, and because of this that Bazin's question "what of?" is so convenient. Roger Deakins, for instance, as the Coens's longtime cinematographer, is a professional and an artist whose talents and skills are demanded by Joel and Ethan, but his inputs can be highly auteurist on their own right. Whether a collaborator has the artistic freedom to pursue and achieve her or his insights, auteurist marks may be more visible.

By choosing and playing with the title of *No Country for Old Men* turning it into *No Country for Old Auteurs* is to claim that the auteur is not exactly "dead," but it is to state that the old and prevailing notions of the auteur are dead, or that the notion that film directors themselves, always and uniquely, are auteurs.⁶³ To proclaim the death of the author or the auteur or, to a less dramatic effect, her or his disappearance is not news: the pseudonym *Alan Smithee*, for instance, was coined in 1968 and was used by several directors who wanted to discredit their names due to dissatisfaction with the final product. Moreover, one of the "Vows of Chastity," i.e. the rules, the tenets of the *Dogme 95*—a Danish avant-garde movement in cinema in the 1990s—was that the director must simply not be credited. These are, probably, the best known cases in the history of cinema in which the figure of the director (not always an auteur) "disappeared" or "played dead."

⁶³ Besides the notion of the author (and "work" and "text") scrutinized in poststructuralism, other approaches, such as psychoanalysis, cultural studies, feminism, and queer studies, can be quite helpful in order to problematize auterism to the fullest.

Now there comes the moment again when one might ask: what an auteur is, after all? Is it a very good director who employ *mise-en-scène*? Yet, if *mise-en-scène* is roughly the same thing as direction plus the overall preparation of sequences and scenes, do not all films have it? Therefore, how can one tell when a *mise-en-scène* is good or bad? Is the auteur someone who succeeds artistically in a film? Still, what is it to "succeed artistically" in a film? Pauline Kael and her critique towards the anti-art aspect of auteurism is quite understandable, and so are her concerns about Andrew Sarris's premises, especially about technique. Auteur critics do not get away with subjectivity and they can hardly hide their positioning. And this is far from being a compromising statement. All sorts of criticism, as well as films, should be analyzed and revisited, because just like anything else in the arts, they may fail to comprehend certain artists and movements. Comprehend may not be the most preferable word, to assess perhaps is.

Who is the critic? Where does he or she come from? Film criticism has long been white and male, besides being often blamed as bourgeois. Race, gender, and class are at least the main concerns regarding art assessment, or should be. Jean Rouch, for example, was highly praised by the critics at *Cahiers* and the director also influenced them when they became film directors. Would the same happen if Rouch were a black director? This is not a race concern in the sense as if I were saying that the staff of *Cahiers* were racist, but in the sense that would a black director from Africa have the same privilege and opportunities as a Parisian like Rouch? These issues matter when it comes to auteurism and academic works ought to focus on how some identity categories may establish their priorities and criticisms towards cinema.

Moreover, James Naremore (21) remarks that "French auteurism as a historical movement may be dead (its great influence lasted roughly two decades), but so are the tedious debates about the death of the author." How can one take sides? According to Naremore, however, "The residual 'auteur theory' in its various manifestations still affects our view of film history and still has lessons to teach us." *Cahiers'* lists of best films of the year, for instance, present films by directors of the so-called *cinéma d'auteur* every year and *Film Comment* is still a supporter of that kind of criticism. These lessons that Naremore mentions are three: 1) authors (or rather, auteurs) exist in a certain environment, conducted by "a series of historical, social, and cultural determinants" (a

Bazinian critique of the solitary genius); 2) auteurism makes possible a differentiation of auteurs inserted in complex and seemingly homogeneous structures, such as Hollywood, genres, etc.; 3) "it is very important indeed for us to know who is speaking. Readers or viewers always decode messages by positing a source, even if only an imaginary or unconscious one, and the source has a political message." Naremore's third point seems to ratify what I was saying about race, gender, and class in the paragraph above.

Naremore's three observations are quite salutary. The context of auteurs are never the same, whether they are in Hollywood or in Europe, in Latin America or in China. Cinematic modes of production are vastly different over the world and the efforts and talents of a film crew can be overwhelming. Distribution is another major issue, since the success or relevance of an auteur will be slightly determined by this factor. Is Hou Hsiao-Hsien an auteur? Most viewers, be it critics or moviegoers, who know his work would answer positively, but how well-known his oeuvre is around the globe? On the other hand, even if artists are in the same environment, their possibilities do not match: for instance, in Hollywood, the treatment given to artists would be different depending on the studio (and their status, be it directors, screenwriters, or producers, or all of them all at once), and over the years they would never settle in only one (e.g. John Ford, who directed 140 films from 1917 to 1966, worked most of his time for Universal and Fox, but also for RKO and MGM).

Genres also have a say in the game. While I compared the Coen Brothers to Howard Hawks in the first chapter, due to their ability to work in different genres, their contexts are not the same, however. The comparison may be viable at times, but some precautions, needless to say, have to be taken: Hawks made his venture in Hollywood facing a system with strict rules, working under the zenith of the star system, but still managing to be independent by producing and writing his screenplays, whereas the Coens have rather been independent filmmakers whose choices were to a certain extent taken with more autonomy. Furthermore, Naremore's third remark, which says that it is important to know who is speaking, is reasonably relevant, especially for our times, when the black, feminist, and queer communities are more present than ever in the film business. Their voices reverberate through different auteurist stamps and the academia should be more concerned about its own and their agendas. Film history, it could be argued, has

been rewritten by their efforts and artistic endeavors. There should be more politics into the *politique des auteurs*. Auteurism should also be analyzed through the lens of certain film genres and the notion of "cult films," what makes filmmakers, such as John Waters and John Carpenter, so "auteuristically" special?

In the second and the third chapters I delved into the Coen Brothers' themes and direction style, besides characterization, the use of sound, and editing. These filmic steps are coefficients by which Joel and Ethan Coen can be identified as auteurs. Accordingly, whether an auteur is a creative artist who works with and have a distinguishable artistic vision, could the Coen Brothers be qualified as auteurs? If so, how come? Their oeuvre and their process of creation owe a great deal to their collaborators: the importance of applying collective authorship, or auteurship, should be aimed in order to not undermine the roles of, for instance, cinematographers, who contribute a lot to artistic and meaning construction. The work of Karl Freund, for example, in the German Expressionism, has had a paramount influence on European and American directors of the Classical Hollywood. The rise of the *Nouvelle Vague* and its filmmakers owns a lot to Raoul Coutard, whose talents marked aesthetically the movement with his use of hand-held camera and natural lighting. Imagine also what can be possibly said about Garrett Brown, the cinematographer who invented the *Steadicam*, among other devices.

Furthermore, film composers also inscribe a singular and intrinsic textual input in films. How can one not make auteurist remarks about Bernard Herrmann or Ennio Morricone, for instance? There are also seemingly lesser important figures, such as camera operators (could we assign the status of auteur to Irmin Roberts, who invented the legendary "zoom out and dolly in" shot used in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*?); storyboard and other drawing artists (e.g. Jean Giraud, Saul Bass); costume and set designers (e.g. H. R. Giger); makeup artists (e.g. Stan Winston; Dick Smith, known as "The Godfather of Make-up"); and visual and special effects artists (e.g. Douglas Trumbull). All these filmic participants contribute artistically in film productions, some of them seem to fit quite rightly in the definition of *écrivains-on-scène*, contributing in (and out) the momentum of a performance. The term *écrivains-on-scène* advocates for the plural and it is less totalitarian than the notion of the auteur, it is as well interested in the process, it respects intertextuality (and adaptation) by any means.

Auteurism has had many faces and nuances, and critics have attributed many criteria to their assessments as well. Style and themes are two of the most easily identifiable aspects of auteur criticism: would it be daring to say that the Coen Brothers succeed at being auteurs much more because of themes than style? Or, one might ask, once more, are Joel and Ethan Coen auteurs whatsoever? Moreover, the schematization of style (or form) and themes, be it by importance or occurrence, is a cacth-22 logic, or a "chicken or the egg" dilemma. Both of them are quite important in order to evaluate someone's work, though. Ian Nathan's final remarks in his book *Masters of Cinema: Ethan and Joel Coen*, summarize that:

The Coens represent something impossible: a directorial career entirely of their own design, where they have retained final cut, creating a hermetically sealed world in which they can foster their own muse, untempered by fashion, market forces or studio pressure. Somewhere that reconstructs tradition, but whose motive is unclear. Come triumph or turkey, they have not wavered. After twenty-nine [now thirty-two years] and fifteen feature films [now seventeen], they have become an institution. Their legion of fans are unconcerned by what they choose to do next, only in the result. All we seek is the next intricate Coenesque palace of dreams and violence populated with fast-talking dames and faster-talking heels flat out of luck, where emotion eternally struggles with ironic gesture and black comedy, where meaning and truth will slip from our grasp like catching smoke; films that will tempt us to unpick their knotted puzzles.

It is the questions that are important. Writing, directing, producing and editing their films, the Coens come close as any filmmakers to fulfilling *auteur* theory, albeit one conjoined across two minds. However, a final definition of Coenesque remains elusive. And that is as it should be. The brothers themselves may not know what it is. They reconfigure myth as a means of revelation. And through their stylization, so tiered with references and built from recurrent themes and devices, a shared DNA, they have discovered

an America not found anywhere else — this dark, funny and peculiar map of the human predicament. All their irony and cleverness are not reductive, they are born out of this spirit of enquiry, and enquiry into the fabric of storytelling itself. Within that, there is a self-analysis. From dreams to songs to myths, to their own medium — film: here they display their knowledge and impart something of themselves. These fifteen films are also a map of Joel and Ethan Coen. (96-97)

Coenesque is an amalgam of dark humor and violence, discretion in *mise-en-scène* but a highly stylized concept when the moment demands. Witty screenplays and solid dialogues, the presence of an expectedly known cast that can deliver what Coenesque is all about. The Coen Brothers are most likely the greatest Minnesotans in arts after F. Scott Fitzgerald in literature and Bob Dylan in music, and all of them found in New York City their home, and the city made an impression on them, as well as their hometown and memories.

If a Coen Brothers film displays so many idiosyncratic characters and somewhat flabbergasting and wacky plots, it is maybe because their suburban Minnesotan lives were not that exciting. Cultural elements across the United States are all over their oeuvre, with different people and their social environments, their looks and accents, something that should be more explored and studied. The work of the Coens should also be addressed politically, with their implicit and sarcastic nuances, ranging from their comedies to their neo-noirs. Historical backdrops are also richly written, as I emphasized their proclivities to place their characters and plots somewhere in the past.

What does it take to be regarded as an auteur? To write and direct your own stories? But what about adaptations? Are you working for Hollywood, in a major studio, or are you venturing as an independent filmmaker? Do you have final cut privilege? If so, did you edit your own film? That said, what if you were not the screenwriter or the director? Are you the producer, or the cinematographer, or just the editor with strict notes about the shots and the storyboards? How can you become an auteur? Could you be acting or designing the costumes

or the sets, responsible for the makeup or visual effects in the postproduction? It takes some grit to be acknowledged as an auteur, for filmmaking (and film criticism too, it is important to emphasize) is never about one person only. Are you dealing with people and with money knowing that what you will accomplish might probably be not good enough? Auteur criticism is not the easiest way to get around either, for there is no country for sciolistic critics or reviewers; it works just like the Dude's life, with "strikes and gutters, ups and downs," or like the Stranger's final words about the Dude's story, it works "to beat the band. Parts anyway."

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