ET TU, DUDE? HUMOR AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE MOVIES OF JOEL AND ETHAN COEN

A Report of a Senior Study

by

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Abstract

This is a two-part senior thesis revolving around the works of the film writer/directors Joel and Ethan Coen. The first seven chapters deal with the humor and philosophy of the Coens according to formal theories of humor and deep explication of their cross-film themes. Though references are made to most of their films in the study, the five films studied most in-depth are *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Burn After Reading*, and *A Serious Man*. The study looks at common structures across both the Coens’ comedies and dramas and also how certain techniques make people laugh. Above all, this is a study on the production of humor through the lens of two very funny writers. This is also a launching pad for a prospective creative screenplay, and that is the focus of Chapter 8. In that chapter, there is a full treatment of a planned script as well as a significant portion of written script up until the first major plot point.
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INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, there were several distinct phrases that would almost always produce laughter in adults who heard them, or so I thought. The phrase “yada yada yada” when telling a story was both a signifier of an abbreviated tale and a reference to the television show *Seinfeld*. *Seinfeld* was popular enough by this point to have impacted the American lexicon so much that everyone understood what the phrase signified, but not everyone was as a diehard a *Seinfeld* fan as certain members of my family. When they, and later I, heard “yadda yadda yadda” or “he’s doing x only for the jokes!” or “it’s a Junior Mint” or “obviously, you’re not a golfer,” we immediately were amused, our lips curled upwards, and, sometimes, we even displayed teeth and gums, produced guffaws, bent over, slapped our knees.

What I never understood was how these combinations of words, meaningless without context, produced this condition. They were open-air passwords to likability. As soon as I was able to use them, I’d be able to make people laugh, get them to like me, become part of the community. Quotes from *Seinfeld* were my earliest introduction to this language, and my whole family could have whole conversations using nothing but language from the show. It was another form of communication, part of English but with its own rules and technique.

As I grew older, I began to notice that this diction was not limited to *Seinfeld*. Sure, there was the occasional *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* quote here or *Pulp*
Fiction quote there, but I began to watch other films and television and realize that the stuff that really got repeated ad nauseum came from three sources: Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David (of both Seinfeld and Curb Your Enthusiasm), and the brotherly duo of Joel and Ethan Coen. At first, I wondered why four late twentieth-century Jewish men had such an influence on my family’s sense of humor. My mother’s side of the family is Jewish, but my immediate family never practiced any form of Judaism—in fact, my father was a practicing Catholic for most of my childhood. Even odder, it wasn’t the Jewish side of my family that I overheard quoting Seinfeld, David, and the Coens—it was the Catholic side.

I began to realize, too, that it wasn’t only the language that brought these films together. The films, movies, and television shows of Seinfeld, David, and the Coens share a common philosophy, a common outlook on life. The quotability and language of these artists produced humor, too, but the more I watched them, the more I realized I was laughing at a specific view of the world that their media asserted: that there’s no understanding why things happen, bad things will constantly happen in random patterns for no true moral reasons, God is not the source of an answer for these problems, and the only way to prevent constant depression is to laugh at this misfortune. If the language was the surface-level reason for Seinfeld, David, and the Coens producing humor, then this philosophy was the deep-seated reason.

That’s not to say that I am the first one to essay this opinion. For years, all of the artists mentioned have been accused of being nihilists (Miley 1), amoral (McIver 3), offering a very depressing view on life (Knight 1), and misanthropic (Gelgud 1). Seinfeld, famously, has been described as being “a show about nothing” (Thiessen 2). Popular
opinion is divided among those that view the immorality of the world and the flaccidity of the human condition as either features or bugs of the human system, especially opinion on the Coens’ films. There are reviewers who praise their dramas for realism (Kerns 1) and reviewers who criticize their films for being “meaningless” (Anthony 1). Of the three artists (counting the Coens as a singular entity), the Coens have received the most criticism and commentary; Seinfeld and David’s shows are the source of near-universal acclaim.

It is for this reason that I am choosing the works of Joel and Ethan Coen to analyze. I have claimed that there are language and writing techniques that they use to produce humor; I intend to show how this is so. I have claimed that there is a philosophy that they use to produce humor on a deeper level; I intend to show this. In this thesis, I will try to answer one singular question: why are the Coens’ movies funny? I will split this up into two parts, with each exploration constituting a chapter: the surface-level reasons for their humor, identified as language and technical writing patterns, and the deeper-level reasons, identified as philosophy. In the first chapter, I will discuss their philosophy, the history of it, how it came to be, other authors and artists that operate using similar ideas, how it produces humor in their movies, and the popular and critical reception of it--and how some of that reception is wrong, in my view. In the second chapter, I will analyze specific writing techniques they use and how they relate to different theories of humor--are there things that I, as a budding writer, could learn, similar to the way one learns a new language?

Finally, in the eighth chapter, I will draft a summary of a screenplay along with an excerpt that draws on the inspiration gained from the scholarship during the earlier
sections of the thesis. This will not be a simple aping of the Coens or fan fiction. Instead, this will be a wholly original creative work that shows how I can use some of the methods of these brilliant and highly successful filmmakers. The plot, in the briefest of terms, can be described thus: a pizza delivery driver goes missing and claims that aliens captured him and his dog. The dog is still missing, so he and his two friends investigate the disappearance. Hopefully, hilarity ensues. As you will learn in the first chapter, the main character will not ultimately find anything or any meaning. I can only hope that this worldview doesn’t similarly affect my work, so here goes.

A quick note on formatting quotations from the Coens and others’ movies/television shows: it is very hard to track down accurate scripts for films, and there is often heavy change from the script to the finished product. As I am dealing with the finished products, I will be referencing their movies rather than their scripts. As such, all quotations quoted hereafter were transcribed by me in the course of study. Any stage directions or descriptive movements in italics are my best attempts to express what is happening on the screen. Standard MLA instructions for quoting plays have been used to save space.
CHAPTER I

THE PATTERN RECOGNITION THEORY OF HUMOR IN BURN AFTER READING

Explanation and Examples of Pattern Recognition Theory

The Pattern Recognition Theory of Humor (hereafter intermittently referred to as PRT), proposed by British philosopher Alistair Clarke, asserts that all humor is derived from the brain recognizing a pattern (Clarke 18). Clarke writes that “in all circumstances, it is the recognition of simple repetition that is being rewarded in [humor], not any form of anomaly, aberration or deviation. It is the recognition of this pattern in increasingly difficult or unlikely circumstances, despite any altered context or associated problems of perception, which is valuable to the individual” (Pyrrhic House, Clark Clarifies, 1). This theory “is not interchangeable with [other theories of humor] at point of analysis,” Clarke writes. Instead, “the stimuli must be reassessed in full, in detail, and individually” (17). In other words, this theory is meant to encompass all expressions of comedy. To do this, he separates out all humor into eight broad “patterns” of humor in which all expressions of amusement fall into (33). Clarke argues that the ability to see these patterns was evolutionally beneficial, that the ability to recognize patterns in nature “provides a remarkable survival advantage...[including] the recognition of environmental and climatic trends, [behavioral] patterns in predators, prey and competing species...providing an insight into information that would produce significant survival advantages” (Pyrrhic House, Clark Clarifies, 1).
In PRT, the eight broad patterns mentioned supra are divided into “two lots of four, comprising patterns of fidelity and patterns of magnitude” (33). Fidelity is defined as “the similarity between two or more units” (34) and magnitude as “the same unit repeated in multiple contexts” (65). Since this is all fairly wonkish stuff¹, I have attempted to put together a list that summarizes Clarke’s categorization in simpler examples than he uses. I think that this would be most helpful in describing the eight patterns while maintaining the whole brevity thing:

1) Patterns of fidelity

   a) Positive Repetition—this can be seeing six different² birds³ standing side-by-side next to each other (40).

   b) Division—this can be seeing two birds, one alive and healthy and whole and the other one divided into wings/beak/legs/eyes/etc⁴ (51).

   c) Completion—this can be seeing a bird and then imagining a flock of birds—“blanks presented in the first unit are completed in the second” (55).

¹ The book is 200+ pages and very, very chart-heavy.

² Philosophically, this could be the same species of bird depending on whether or not you treat a sparrow as a particular sparrow or just a sparrow. If you’re comparing David the Sparrow with five other named sparrows, it’s fidelity. If you’re comparing a sparrow against five other sparrows, it’s probably magnitude (same unit, different instances).

³ “Bird” in this case is a simple substitute for the word “unit.” I hope it’s easier to explain with real life examples like this. Clarke uses the architectural column as an example. I think his example is more confusing.

⁴ The column example seems less grisly but bear with me.
d) Translation—seeing a bird and then seeing the word “bird” on a page—
“comparing analogous units in different media” (59).

2) Patterns of magnitude

a) Opposition—seeing a bird flying left and then seeing a bird flying right—
“the unit (the shared ground) must be exhibited in contrary contexts
(opposing views)” (70).

b) Application—eating a bird for dinner or taking a bird to the taxidermist—
this concerns “the application of a unit/object for a certain use” (77).

c) Qualification—seeing a bird with a mustache but still recognizing the
bird as a *bird* and not, for example, a *moustachedbird* of its own
species/genus, and also (in qualification’s other form) seeing someone
trying to catch a bird with a plastic grocery bag and then imagining

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5 This could also extend to hearing the word “bird” and then seeing the letters B, I, R, and D on a
piece of paper, for example.

6 Again, Clarke uses the example of a mirror image and a man running left and then right, so let’s
stick with birds here*.

*If this is funny to you, Clarke would explain my repeated footnote-to-explain-why-I’m-
replacing-everything-with-birds-footnotes as application via magnitude—I’m switching from the earlier
concept of footnote-as-serious-explanation to footnote-as-breaking-the-fourth-wall-and-explaining-prior-
footnotes, but the concept that’s being patterned here is the Platonic ideal of a footnote.

7 Also sub-divided into *applicative, interpretative, locational, and orientational* (79-80), but those
are mostly superfluous to our discussion and redundant—locational meaning “the application of a unit to a
different location” (80), orientational meaning “its application to different alignments” (80), etc.

8 Also possessing two sub-forms (83), *qualitative* and *executive*, the difference in which amounts to
an object changing versus an action changing (83-89).
someone properly catching a bird with a net/tranquilizer gun. It’s “the qualification of a unit without the loss of its identity in which the persistent unit [the bird] is repeated provide [us] with multiple contexts between which magnitude may be assessed [the bird normally/the bird with a moustache]” (83).

d) Scale—seeing a normal-sized bird outside your window and then seeing the same bird as 1,000-foot-tall behemoth attacking New York City. This is “the repetition of a unit in varying dimensions of extents and apply to properties and actions as much as to entities” (90).

Recognition of these patterns, though, does not necessarily produce humor (135). Clarke lists six further conditions for humor beyond them (135-139). Again, a list will be handy in describing them:

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9 If you chuckled at this description—and I hope you did—you are laughing at what Clarke would describe in terms of 2-C, Magnitude Qualification. Here, you are still interpreting my example in terms of your conception of an example, but here specifically as too specific of an example, if that makes any sense. In other words, you’re laughing at my changing of the pattern of bird examples while still maintaining a bird example.

10 I will note here that the explanation as for what constitutes a unit can get a little tricky. Clarke gives an example of differing blood pressure between two people and says that the blood pressure is the unit, not the people (90). In other words, blood pressure is the thing that is getting compared across two contexts (91) and thus interpreted. Stuff like an elephant and a mouse side-by-side, he writes, is a recontextualization of the idea of the physical form, not a recontextualization of a mouse or elephant (91). We’re comparing the idea of the physical form across two disparate examples of it, but still as a “pattern” among two physical forms.
1) “The individual must not be adversely affected by contrary neurophysiological states” (135). In other words, you can’t expect people to laugh when under too much stress/danger/depression/etc.

2) “The recognitions of patterns must be unconscious” (135). Since we notice all patterns unconsciously, the humor comes unconsciously as well. Clarke notes that “thinking that occurs while a person is attempting to get a joke involves the deciphering of information, which subsequently facilitates unconscious recognition” (136).

3) “The patterns that are recognized must exhibit significance” (136). Minor similarities or recontextualizations may not form a strong pattern to us (136). Clarke points out that mispronunciations, for example) are actually very significant, as we’ve been trained to hear words a certain way and it is thus very significant when we hear them incorrectly (136-137).

4) “The recognition must involve the apprehension of at least two stages in discrete recognition for a true pattern to occur” (137). Basically, it takes at least two concepts/units/objects to make a pattern.

5) “The recognition of a pattern must be surprising and engaging” (137). Clarke writes that “surprise continues until the brain deems us to have absorbed all relevant information from the event as it occurs, even if this requires many instances of exposure”(137) and “even a novel experience will fail to surprise

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11 This could help explain why explaining why a joke is funny often “kills” the humor. We don’t consciously recognize the patterns that produce humor, so asking us to consciously explain by definition can’t explain why we find it funny. That’s just my hypothesis, though.
the individual in a significant manner if they are not engaged by the matter at hand” (138). In other words, we need to be paying attention, and we need to still be processing new information about the event.\(^\text{12}\)

6) “Staggered or disjointed conditions will not evoke humor” (138). In other words, a pattern must be a pattern to exist. Depending on how familiar we are with a topic, we may either see or not see patterns in the material. Clarke uses the example of a music fan (139). “To an outsider the music of a group may sound the same in every song, but to a fan who has absorbed every nuance they may appear wildly different” (139). Pattern recognition is thus

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\(^\text{12}\) Clarke uses the example of a non-bird watcher being nonplussed at seeing multiple instances of the same rare bird. The non-bird watcher “deems all the relevant details to have been absorbed from the information already” (138), whereas the bird watcher will be rapt—what’s the bird doing? Where is the bird going? How often does it clean itself, etc. With respect to the watchability of the *The Big Lebowski*, for example, we’re both surprised—we can’t remember all the details of the movie and are slightly surprised by some of the reality of it—and we’re still engaged with questions—why is The Dude sitting like that? What’s Donny doing during the scene where Walter threatens Smokey? Etc.

\(^\text{13}\) This explanation explains why non-rap* fans may mock rap as “sounding all the same.” They are seeing a pattern and getting humor from it. The rap fan, who can tell you the difference between Jay-Z and Lil Wayne and the RZA and Jurassic 5, does not see the pattern and therefore can’t derive humor from it. But he may derive humor from certain elements that would only be discovered if someone had listened to the different groups over and over—maybe there’s a similar synth sound.

*Note that this could be any musical genre but rap is arguably the most topical so we’ll go with that.
inherently subjective, and it’s up to the individual whether he receives\(^\text{14}\) the pattern or not.

The television show *Seinfeld* has a notable example of pattern recognition in a recurring greeting between the characters Newman and Jerry. Consider this exchange from the episode “The Non-Fat Yogurt” from *Seinfeld*:

JERRY. Hello, Newman.

NEWMAN. Hello, Jerry.

This specific repartee of words by the same actors with the same emphasis (*hello* for Jerry and *Jerry* for Newman) occurs fifteen times over the course of the series (IMDB 4). It is even repeated by Jerry’s on-screen mother Helen, with the actress Liz Sheridan placing the exact same emphasis as her on-screen son, a distinct “HEL-lo, Newman” (“The Raincoats”). Clarke places this in the category of *catch phrase*, and writes that “establishing and perpetuating a catch phrase exhibits clear positive repetition from one instance to the next, and predictive confirmation usually underpins its occurrence” (182).

When the viewer sees Newman and Jerry in the initial context, we expect\(^\text{15}\) them to perform their usual back-and-forth. They almost always do, and we notice a pattern. The interaction passes the six additional conditions listed *supra* and thus produces humor. When Jerry’s mother Helen does the “Hello, Newman,” we still laugh, as Clarke points

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\(^{14}\) I keep getting tempted to use “see” as the verb, but I’m trying to keep with the philosophy here. “See” suggests an active participation in recognizing pattern, whereas Clarke argues that it’s all passive.

\(^{15}\) This assumes we’ve seen multiple episodes, of course. The fidelity here occurs between an earlier instance of the interaction and the present one that we’re watching in “The Non-Fat Yogurt” episode.
out that *catch phrase* humor can be “recontextualized in some minor fashion to compound its recognition” (182).

In theory, this exchange can get funnier the more times one sees the interaction. By the thirteenth or fourteenth time we see the repartee, we are comparing it to all previous instances that we’ve seen between Jerry and Newman, so we have more of a basis on which to form a pattern. My family has held a longstanding hypothesis that one of the characteristics of Coenesque comedy is that the films and shows get better with repeated viewings—a sentiment definitely applied by critics to the works of the Coens (Olear 2) (Sheffield 10). *The Big Lebowski* in particular gets funnier every time I watch it. PRT would explain it thus: the first instance of a pattern would not be funny because we have nothing to compare it to. When we see the film/show again, we have a frame of reference for which to compare the first instance to, and it’s an added moment of comedy. For films as self-referential as *Burn After Reading* and *The Big Lebowski*, specifically, these can add up to a lot of extra bits of humor just on that basis alone. Consider how the comedic beats would work in the first scene of *Burn After Reading* to a first-time viewer. Let’s focus on two patterns: Osbourne’s incredulousness at being accused of having a drinking problem and Osbourne’s incredulousness at Olson being in the meeting:

PALMER. Oz, things are not going well. As you know.

PECK. You have a drinking problem

*Stunned silence. Ozzie turns to look at Peck.*

*At length:*

OSBOURNE. I have a drinking problem? (*Burn After Reading*)
And then later:

OSBOURNE (*quietly*). This is an assault.

PECK. Come on, Ozzie.

OSBOURNE. This is an assault. I have a drinking problem? Fuck you, Peck, you’re a mormon!

PECK. Ozzie——

OSBOURNE. Next you you we all have a drinking problem! Fuck you guys! Whose ass didn’t’ I kiss? Let’s be honest! (*Burn*)

And then even later in the scene:

*Osbourne storms out the door.*

OSBOURNE. …I have a drinking problem! (*Burn*)

Upon a first viewing of the scene, the comedic beats that produce laughter are the second, third, fourth, and fifth times Osbourne comments on his “drinking problem,” and it’s especially repetitive that Osbourne repeats the specific phrase “I have a drinking problem.” Upon a second or third or fourth or xth viewing, the viewer (if he or she remembers the scene) recognizes the first utterance of “drinking problem” as a pattern reminiscent of the last time they watched the movie. We don’t need to wait for the movie to construct its own self-contained patterns via the second-fifth repetitions, though they’re still funny! In addition, first-time viewers have no idea about the depths of Osbourne’s actual drinking problem. As the movie progresses, we see more and more of Osbourne’s alcoholism, and we recognize more and more of a pattern. We veer into PRT’s theory of magnitude (the recontextualization of a single unit) as we recontextualize the “unit”—in this case Ozzie’s alcoholism—through the processes of both qualification
and scale. For qualification, his drinking problem is shown in different contexts—at a party, passed out on his chair, stealing all the liquor out of his house, etc. For scale, the concept of his problem gets larger—his life is falling apart and he can’t stop drinking. Presented in the right light, without emotional quandary, these become funnier the more times it is referenced.

Often, this pattern recognition does not even need to be explicitly verbally stated like in the scene quoted above. As mentioned, scenes in which Osbourne’s drinking problem is referenced visually as opposed to linguistically still cause the same positive repetition or recontextualization as patterns expressed purely visually or linguistically. Another pair of scenes from *Burn After Reading* can demonstrate this. One of the tics of Harry, a United States Marshal played by George Clooney, is that he particularly enjoys post-coital physical exercise. In his words, he likes to “get a run in” (*Burn After Reading*). The first instance of this pattern occurs after he has sex with Katie Cox, played by Tilda Swinton. Katie is getting dressed and Harry remarks, “I should try to get a run in.” The scene ends with that comment—the comment is not inherently humorous according to PRT yet. Later, though, we see Katie and Harry getting into a car, and, in the next scene, Katie dropping Harry off in his exercise clothes. Consider the following two scenes (these occur one after another):

> *Chad is sucking the dregs of his Jamba Juice up a straw when a noise brings his look around:*

> *The door to the townhouse is opening. Katie emerges, in a change of clothes. Harry follows in sweats.*

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16 This is assuming we are a first time viewer.
They get into her car. It pulls out. (Burn)

And:

KATIE. For fuck’s sake, Harry, it’s five miles. Five point two.

HARRY. Okay, fine—I gotta do at least five. Five and a deuce is okay.

KATIE. I’m surprised you have any energy left.

HARRY. You kiddin’—pull around the corner and we’ll do it again in back!

KATIE. You are very coarse.

HARRY. No, back of the car. I didn’t mean a rear-entry, uh--

KATIE. Ach. I’m late—

The car squeals away, leaving Harry on the shoulder. (Burn)

If Clooney had repeated the phrase “I should try to get a run in,” it would produce humor in the same way that Osbourne’s repetition of “drinking problem” produces humor, but the same effect is actually heightened in PRT due to the difficulty of the connection when the repetition is one of magnitude—again for clarity, the same unit in different contexts. As Clarke writes in The Eight Patterns of Humor, “…[We] wish the fidelity or similarity of the units to be the greatest for the greatest impact, and in the latter we wish the distance between the contexts (the magnitude) to be the greatest for the same result” (65) and “the greater the magnitude the stronger the pattern and the more amusing, all other factors remaining equal, the [humor] will be found” (65). Instead of simple linguistic repetition, we see Clooney in running gear and Katie in business attire, similar to what we saw earlier in the movie. At this point, we recognize the pattern and
laugh. We are at Katie’s house instead of the houseboat earlier, and we have a visual cue instead of a verbal cue to indicate Clooney’s desire for post-coital exercise.

The second scene quoted above is both an example of the exercise-after-sex pattern and also another example of recontextualization. Note the wordplay between Katie and Harry after Katie says “I’m surprised you have any energy left.” Harry, misinterpreting the remark, tries to tell Katie that they should have sex in the back of the car, and Katie then misinterprets this misinterpretation and parses that she is being courted to have anal sex. PRT refers to this about a linguistic error, defined as “[featuring] a further pattern of executive recontextualization in the magnitude of the language between the intention and the manifestation…” (203). In this case, the phrase “in back” as uttered by Clooney is recontextualized by the viewer to create a pattern between two of the possible definitions of the term—“in back” as referring to Katie’s anus and “in back” as referring to the rear seat of Katie’s car.

Efficacy Of Pattern Recognition And How it Could Help Me As A Writer

Overall, this theory is very effective at explaining why certain parts of the Coens’ movies are funny. Simple positive repetition and simple recontextualization occur so often in their movies and in films/shows like Seinfeld, Louie, Arrested Development, Curb Your Enthusiasm, etc. that a reference guide like Clarke’s theory is a huge step forward in organizing a system upon which to analyze patterns and how they create humor. That said, as philosophically interesting and engaging as the theory is, I don’t know if it describes well enough how humor is produced on a psychological level. I don’t think Clarke properly demonstrated why some patterns are funny and some are not. There
is a clear difference between the “drinking problem” scene above and repeating, say, the word “bicycle” a bunch of times in different contexts, and the reason why the former is funny and the latter isn’t has to do with more than just magnitude of difference or fidelity of sameness. It has to do with what is psychologically effective, too. This is something that will be addressed in the next three chapters, so further discussion on the psychology of humor will continue there.

As for how this will help me write, well, I’m clearer on that. PRT is excellent at describing the Coens’ production of humor through pattern-making, and it’s a theory that I believe has great predictive power. The creation of patterns is clearly humorous, be they verbal or linguistic, and it’s also just good writing—the scenes in *Burn After Reading* in which Harry is wearing his workout clothes after he’s had sex are great examples of “showing” as opposed to “telling,” and they’re good examples of letting the image tell the story as well. This is important in literature but even more so in filmmaking.

Now, a problem could arise if the writer attempts to draw attention to a pattern outside of the movie. *Family Guy*, the animated television sitcom, is notorious for this. A lot of viewers don’t understand many of the references, so they can’t make patterns in their head, so they don’t find the show funny. This doesn’t make for a lasting impression, either, as the pop culture references will slowly have fewer and fewer people familiar with them and thus fewer and fewer people will find the reference funny. It’s like a millennial hearing a joke about William Randolph Hearst. We would have a frame of reference to compare Hearst with in our minds if we knew who Hearst was, but I would

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17 There’s not really a way to prove this considering the show averages something like nine pop-culture references a second but I believe it to be true.
be willing to bet that most of my generation doesn’t know him. In other words, we can’t make the pattern and compare the joke version of Hearst to our internalized view of him—we can’t recontextualize the unit, in PRT terms.

Instead, the better way to make a pattern would be to create patterns that are completely self-contained in the movie itself. Humor that derives from pattern repetition from outside sources inherently relies on familiarity with an outside source, as mentioned before, so it would be better to make patterns that only rely on patterns created in the movie. Though *Fargo* was not a point of analysis of this chapter, a useful example of this can be found in the dual descriptions of Carl Showalter, played by Steve Buscemi, as a “funny looking guy” (Coen, *Fargo*). When questioned by police, both a young blonde prostitute and an old, very Minnesotan bartender both describe Carl’s physical appearance as being “funny looking, in a general kind of way” (Coen, *Fargo*). The scenes from *The Big Lebowski* explored above are a veritable case study in this self-contained pattern recognition. Just about everything in the movie relies on a pattern that is diegetic to the movie.

PRT asserts that these eight processes listed at the beginning of the chapter are the key to understanding all the cognitive pathways to humor, but Clarke writes that they could be pared down to three main categories (98). All of fidelity could be pared down to simple positive repetition, as in every instance “comparative context is repeated” (97). Two subcategories of magnitude, application and opposition, could be combined, as they both “involve a reorientation, a reapplication to opposing alignments” (98). The other subcategories, qualification and scale, could also be combined, since they are both recontextualizations of form (98). Left with these three broad categories, it is easy and
helpful to me as a writer to be able to look at the comedy that I’m trying to write and ask myself which category it fits into and when/where the Coens have been successful using a similar technique. In addition, this pattern-based explanation provides a good method to think about characterization and setting. What is characterization and cultural setting but the patterns and habits of either a single or large group of people? In all five movies explored in this project—*Burn After Reading, Fargo, No Country for Old Men, A Serious Man*, and *The Big Lebowski*—they characterize and set their movies so well that the viewer feels like they’ve visited the place. The world becomes very believable, even if we haven’t been to Minnesota in the 60s or 80s, Texas in 1980, Los Angeles in the early 90s, or present-day Washington. This attention to setting and characterization comes in large part from the Coens attentiveness to the patterns in human behavior that make these places distinct cultures. This is extremely helpful as a writer, and it will be explored further in Chapter 4 when I discuss Mechanical Theory.
CHAPTER II

BENIGN VIOLATION THEORY IN THE BIG LEBOWSKI
AND NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

Explanation and Examples of Benign Violation Theory

Perhaps no theory of humor can explain the differing reception to the Coens’ movies than Benign Violation Theory (BVT for short). BVT is a relatively recent theory created primarily by Peter McGraw¹, a professor of Marketing and Psychology at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Drawing on the work of Aristotle, Freud, and numerous psychologists, McGraw asserts that “three conditions are jointly necessary and sufficient for eliciting humor: [a] situation must be appraised as a violation, a situation must be appraised as benign, and these two appraisals must occur simultaneously” (McGraw and Warren 1142). A ‘violation,’ in this case, “is anything that threatens the way you believe the world ought to be” (Colorado Leeds School of Business). As further evidence for his theory, McGraw cites research that suggests "humor is aroused by displays of aggression, hostility, and disparagement” (1142) and "apparent threats, breaches of norms, or taboo content" (1142). For McGraw, BVT is supposed to encompass all of humor: “it integrates existing humor theories to predict that humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied” (Colorado Leeds School of

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¹ With help from Caleb Warren.
Business). He also draws on research that suggests “humor occurs in contexts perceived to be safe, playful, nonserious, or, in other words, benign” (1142). Benignness, to McGraw, is defined as possessing three characteristics. It will be handy to explore these characteristics one at a time.

1) “[A] salient norm suggests that something is wrong but another salient norm suggests that it is acceptable” (1142).

This characteristic is explained by McGraw via an experiment he conducted comparing people’s responses to a story in which a man rubs his genitals on a kitten (1144-45). In the experiment, McGraw asked participants to rate whether or not the story was amusing, but he related a different story to half of the participants (1144). One of the groups read a story in which the kitten purrs and seems to “enjoy” the contact, and the other read a story in which the kitten whined and didn’t seem to “enjoy” the contact (1144). The participants who read the “enjoy” story were much more likely to find the anecdote amusing than the participants who read the “not enjoy” story. McGraw asserts that this difference relies on the “enjoy” story seeming benign, and this benignness is produced by the conflict between an unacceptable norm—bestiality—and an acceptable norm—the kitten “enjoying” human contact (1144). If the kitten doesn’t enjoy the contact, the theory goes, then both norms are unacceptable and the contact isn’t benign, as there’s real harm occurring.

2) “[One] is weakly committed to the violated norm" (1142).

This condition was tested via an experiment McGraw performed in which he had people read a news story about a church "[raffling] off a Hummer SUV as part of a

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2 Harming a kitten in this case is assumed to be very unacceptable.
promotion for its members” (1145). Those that had high commitment to the church—churchgoers/religious types—were less likely to be amused by the story than those who didn’t attend church that often. In other words, the people who were more strongly committed to the norm of churches-are-sacred-places were less likely, under the explanation of BVT, to find the story benign and thus capable to be laughed at.

3) “[The] violation is psychologically distant” (1142).

This condition is probably the most difficult to understand and the one with which I have the most issues (this will be discussed later in the section). It was the subject of a follow up paper by McGraw, Warren, Lawrence E. Williams, and Bridget Leonard entitled "Too Close for Comfort, or Too Far to Care? Finding Humor in Distant Tragedies and Close Mishaps” in 2012 (1). In this second article, McGraw and his co-authors state that psychological distance can occur in four broad ways:

a. Spatial distance—“e.g., a mile is more distant than a foot” (1).
b. Social distance—“e.g., a stranger is more distant than a friend.” (2).
c. Temporal distance—“e.g., a year is more distant than a day” (2).
d. Hypothetical distance—“e.g., an imagined event is more distant than a real event” (2).

Furthering this thought, McGraw asserts that there’s a difference between the ‘distant tragedies’ and ‘close mishaps’ mentioned above (1). The experiments they did in the second study indicate “that psychological distance increases the humor perceived in more aversive, severe

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3 He also tested the commitment to a credit union, but that's only really relevant for the experiment itself, not the results.
violation (i.e., tragedies), but that closeness increases the humor perceived in less
aversive, mild violations (i.e., mishaps)” (7). As an example from one of the experiments
they performed, stubbing one’s toe is funnier when it occurred recently rather than far in
the past, but getting hit by a car is funnier if it happened in the past rather than when it
occurred recently (6).

Let’s look at some examples. In The Big Lebowski, in the very first scene in
which we see The Dude, the protagonist of the movie, he is shopping at a supermarket in
Los Angeles. There are two visual benign violations in fig. 1:

![Figure 1](image_url)

Figure 1. The Big Lebowski. Jeff Bridges, scene still. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen.
Polygram Films International, 1998. DVD.

In fig. 1, there are violations of social norms present in both The Dude’s attire and
The Dude’s actions. This is our introduction to the character, but we don’t need a lot of
context to consider this image funny. Though our society has pretty broad standards for
acceptable dress outside of the house, these standards generally don’t include bathrobes⁴. The Dude’s attire is therefore a violation of our culture’s norms for public dress, but it’s benign because we aren't that strongly committed to the norm (condition #2 for benignness listed above) of not-wearing-bathrobes-outside-the-house. If The Dude had been dressed in a t-shirt that read, for example, "FUCK YAHWEH,” it would have most likely been funny to those not offended by religious japes against Judaism, less funny to those partially offended, and probably least funny (if at all) to a Hasidim. The bathrobe, on the other hand, is funny to everyone with the exception of people who yearn for the days in which men were socially pressured to wear suits or dress clothes outside the house—thankfully a small number for the bathrobe-enthusiasts among us.

Similarly, there’s a sight gag as The Dude checks the half-and-half by smelling it and, we infer, drinking a sample. See fig. 2:

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⁴ Anecdotally speaking, we have probably become more and more accepting over time, though we can still stigmatize people who don’t live up to our standards of public decency—see PeopleOfWalmart.com, for example.
As the voiceover continues, humor is produced from the violation of a different norm—our norm against taste-testing creamer. I will note here that these norms don’t have to be defined in any legalistic/religious way like "Thou shalt not kill" (*King James Bible, Exod. 20.13*) or "Within the special maritime and territorial jurisdiction of the United States, whoever is guilty of murder shall be punished by death or by imprisonment for life…" (18 USC 1111, 2013). As McGraw stated in his video explanation of BVT, a violation occurs when “something feels wrong about the situation” (Colorado Leeds). It is enough to know that something shouldn’t be done. While opening up a sealed container of half-and-half and tasting it prior to purchase is probably theft in the technical definition of the law, the violation is more basic than that. One doesn’t potentially waste a carton of half-and-half prior to one’s purchase. And The Dude knows the norm—he looks around before he drinks it.
Fig. 2 finishes the creamer gag (The Dude has a milk mustache) and starts another
one. We see The Dude hunched over the counter and it cuts to fig. 3:

![Image of a check]

Figure 3. The Big Lebowski. Jeff Bridges, scene still. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen.
Polygram Films International, 1998. DVD.

I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that we have a norm for what constitutes an appropriate
purchase with a check. I don’t know how much one has to spend, but it’s definitely more
than sixty-nine cents for a single carton of creamer. Again, we have this norm, but
nobody (with the exception of maybe pathologically-disgruntled cashiers, maybe) is
committed enough to this norm to not consider it benign.

This discussion of benignness can get pretty meta when we look at the scene in
Lebowski in which Walter—played by John Goodman, The Dude’s good friend and
teammate bowler—threatens a fellow bowler, Smokey, with a gun during a league game.
To the viewer, the situation is terribly funny (if also terribly serious to Smokey, but we’ll
get into that issue in a bit). To Walter, the situation is anything but benign, inspiring him
to load his gun and cock it at poor Smokey, who committed the foul of stepping over the line during his shot. See fig 4:


Walter is definitely more seriously committed to the rule than we are (again discounting the extreme bowling sticklers among us), so he doesn’t find the situation funny at all. Interestingly, as The Dude attempts to calm Walter down, he makes the case that the situation is benign enough not to be serious, but he doesn’t make the point that it is comical, just harmless:

Walter: Over the line, Smokey! I’m sorry. That’s a foul.

Smokey: Bullshit. Eight, Dude.

Walter: Excuse me! Mark it zero. Next frame.

Smokey: Bullshit. Walter!

Walter: This is not Nam. This is bowling. There are rules.
The Dude: Come on Walter, it’s just—it’s Smokey. So his toe slipped over a little, it’s just a game.

Walter: This is a league game. This determines who enters the next round-robin, am I wrong? (The Big Lebowski)

According to BVT, this scene is funny to us for multiple reasons. For one, Walter’s admonition of Smokey for thinking that the league was “Nam” is a conflict between an acceptable norm and an unacceptable norm—referencing the Vietnam War in relation to a bowling game is unacceptable while arguing for a correct call in a sports match is acceptable. For two, Walter’s justification for his actions center on the fact that this is a league game, a distinction that he repeats after Smokey relents and marks his turn a zero. As said above, this is a serious violation for Walter—he’s seriously committed to league games being sacred in some way. We aren’t committed to their bowling league, so the whole situation seems comical to us.

Efficacy of Benign Violation Theory at Describing Humor and How It Could Help Me as a Writer

Consider, though, the basic facts of the situation listed above: a man is threatening to shoot another man over a bowling match. If we were actually witnesses to this in real life—if we were there—we wouldn’t find it nearly as funny as we do it real life. In BVT, this phenomenon is called hypothetical distance (McGraw, “Too Close For Comfort,” 2). It is the difference between a situation actually occurring and a situation. In McGraw’s research, he found that people found gruesome images to be funnier if they didn’t believe
that they were real (7). Thinking that an image is fake, the theory goes, is a way to make it seem less threatening and therefore more benign and thus funnier.

To me, though, this theory doesn’t explain one of the fundamental ways in which the Coens/Seinfeld/Curb Your Enthusiasm produce humor. They make us laugh expressly through serious violations. The Coens have a gift for making these types of violations seem funny to the viewer. Serious violations occur all the time in their movies, but something about the way that they present them produces humor not in the way McGraw would predict. In other words, there are plenty of instances in the Coens’ movies in which benignness is not a condition for the production of humor—malignness, its opposite, is a condition. Some of the funnier scenes in No Country for Old Men are scenes in which one or more of the characters are in great danger. For example, scenes of bullies tormenting helpless victims with the very real threat of violence are almost never funny. Think of the 1985 teen comedy The Breakfast Club, in which John Bender, played by Judd Nelson bullies Brian Johnson, played by Anthony Michael Hall—Bender makes fun of the lunch Johnson’s mother has packed for him, and it’s not funny at all. Or consider the scenes in The Shawshank Redemption in which the prison gang, the Sisters, torment Andy Dufresne, the movie’s protagonist and hero—those scenes are similarly not funny despite being full of serious violations. The Coens, however, have plenty of scenes that carry the same emotional weight and have made them extremely comic. To me, that their scenes are purely hypothetical does not make them emotionally distant and thus

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5 We can include most of the scripted comedy shows of Louis C.K. and Ricky Gervais here, too, e.g. Louie, The Office (American and British), Life’s Too Short, etc.
benign. If something being hypothetical was a condition for humor, then the scenes listed above of bullying would be as funny as the following scene.

In *No Country for Old Men*, the following exchange between Anton Chigurh, the film’s antagonist, played by Javier Bardem, and the proprietor of a gas station that Chigurh patronizes helps elucidate this combination of malignness and violation producing comedy. At this point, viewers have already seen Chigurh brutally murder a police officer, a motorist, and two criminals. We are fully aware that any interaction with Chigurh could bring death for the person near him. For example, earlier in the film, he arrives at the scene of a botched drug deal with two men that appear to be his business associates. He asks one of the men for a gun and then shoots them both in cold blood. The point being, by this point, most of the time Chigurh meets someone, he kills them. So we are very scared for the proprietor from the moment he begins the conversation with this psychopath:

*Chigurh stands chewing cashews, staring while the old man works the register and puts change on the counter.*

PROPRIETOR. …Will there be somethin’ else?

CHIGURH. I don’t know. Will there?

*A beat.*

*The proprietor turns and coughs. Chigurh stares.*

PROPRIETOR. Is something’ wrong?

CHIGURH. With what?

PROPRIETOR. With anything?
CHIGURH. Is that what you’re asking me? Is there something wrong with anything?

*The proprietor looks at him, uncomfortable, looks away.*

PROPRIETOR. Will there be anything else?

CHIGURH. You already asked me that. (*No Country for Old Men*)

When Chigurh says “I don’t know. Will there?” it is definitely a comic moment, but the real humor-producing line in this excerpt is the final one, “You already asked me that.” BVT fails to explain why this moment would be funny. There is a violation present—the implied threat to the proprietor’s person—but the situation is anything but benign. He is clearly in danger here, and Chigurh appears to be toying with him, just like in the scene from *The Breakfast Club* referenced earlier. And again:

*Chigurh chews.*

CHIRGURH. …What time do you go to bed?

PROPRIETOR. Sir?

CHIGURH. You’re a bit deaf, aren’t you? I said what time do you go to bed (*No Country)*?

The last line is another comedic moment, but the scene is still extremely serious. As the above excerpt continues, we get to the funniest moment of the scene:

*A pause.*

PROPRIETOR. …I’d say around nine-thirty, somewhere around nine-thirty.

CHIRGURH. I could come back then.

PROPRIETOR. Why would you be comin’ back? We’ll be closed. (*No
Country

The third line in this repartee, “Why would you be comin’ back? We’ll be closed” has produced laughter every time I’ve watched the movie, no matter who I watch it with. The audience in the theater that I originally saw No Country in cackled at this part of the movie, even though it was filled with the exact type of person that would sympathize with the character in the movie—a very male, very white, very older audience. This sympathy would preclude the second condition for benigness—weak commitment to the violated norm—because the audience should have sympathy for a character that’s very much like themselves. The norm of “don’t bully hard-working salt-of-the-earth older white guys” is something very dear to them, presumably.

Nor is there a conflict between two norms with one indicating that the behavior is acceptable and the other isn’t as theorized in condition one. This condition could explain why Americans would laugh if, say, Osama bin Laden was being bullied, but it doesn’t explain why we laugh when it happens to the proprietor. In the bin Laden example, the situation could be benign because the two conflicting norms are “bin Laden deserves to be punished/hurt” and “bullying is wrong.” With the proprietor, though, no one with the exception of, well, bin Laden would believe that this simple shopkeeper deserves to be tormented like he is.

So I don’t one hundred percent buy the idea as espoused by Mel Brooks that “tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open manhole and

6 Just as churchgoers found the hummer-giveaway story less funny than non-churchgoers, older white male audiences should be expected to find this moment less funny than if a younger white guy, for example, were to be bullied. They still find the scene funny, though.
die” (Dowd 1). Sometimes the man walking into the manhole is funny, like in this scene from *No Country*, but sometimes it’s not, like in *The Shawshank Redemption*. The main argument, according to BVT, for why we laugh at this scene comes from us having a supposed psychological distance from the action. But almost all art that involves a story and characters involves an imploration by the author(s) to identify with many of the characters, especially the ones portrayed as “good.” We are meant to empathize with the proprietor and place ourselves in his proverbial shoes, yet there still is comedy that comes from it.

Still, though, the theory is helpful in explaining why humor is produced in certain situations in the movies of the Coens but not in others. Recall the scene in *No Country* in which Chigurh chases Llewellyn Moss, played by Josh Brolin, through the streets of a Texas town and compare it with the scene from *The Big Lebowski* in which the nihilists attack The Dude, Walter, and Donny. The scenes are extremely similar: an attacker, or group of attackers, assaults the person or persons that the attackers believe to be holding the money that they want. In other words, both contain violations of body in the form of physical attack. In *No Country*, the scene isn’t funny. The violence comes from a serious and threatening source who earlier in the movie, as noted, has brutally murdered multiple people. We as viewers genuinely fear for Moss’s safety. In *The Big Lebowski*, though, the violence comes from a group of leather-bound German nihilists. One of the nihilists is wielding a sword, and all of them have assaulted The Dude earlier in the movie by unleashing a ferret in the bathtub where The Dude was relaxing and smoking pot. The nihilists are not serious aggressors, not even in the same universe as Chigurh. As such, we don’t legitimately fear for The Dude, Walter, and Donny’s safety, because we
wouldn’t fear for our own safety in that situation. Even though Donny, played by Steve Buscemi, suffers a heart attack and dies from the assault, the situation comes across as a lot more benign.

So, while this humor can help explain certain elements of the Coens’ production of humor, I don’t think it can explain all of it, as McGraw asserts (1142). As a writer, BVT can be invaluable shorthand in examining why certain scenes are funny and certain scenes aren’t. If one of the critiques of PRT was a lack of focus on the psychological issues that cause a joke to be funny or not, then one of the biggest positives of BVT is that it helps clear up why certain things are funny and certain things are not. It is common sense to figure that people who go to church are less likely to find jokes about church funny, but having this information codified is very useful. The Coens, as shown in the scenes shown above from *The Big Lebowski*, are in particular very good at getting viewers to laugh at benign violations of social norms.

This theory is especially useful, too, when exploring the characters’ reactions in very similar situations. In *Lebowski*, the characters are mostly laid back and not threatened by the situations they get themselves into—The Dude is legitimately worried about Bunny Lebowski getting killed by the supposed kidnappers and legitimately worried about the nihilists cutting off his penis, but he’s not nearly as worried as the characters in *No Country* are about Anton Chigurh and the other antagonists of the film. In other words, benignness appears to be producible from the characters’ reactions in addition to the characters’ situation.

That said, getting a viewer to laugh at a situation that they would normally consider serious rather than benign is a hard thing to do. Quentin Tarantino,
writer/director of *Pulp Fiction*, is a master at doing this, and he has remarked on the difficulty, saying “One of the things that I am trying to do [in my movies] is I’m trying to get you to laugh at things that aren’t funny” (GoMolo 1). This quote is a perfect way to describe the Coens and Tarantino’s method of getting viewers to laugh at malign violations. To me, the process of constructing humor via these malign violations is inherently dialectic. The film should be having a conversation, in a way, with the viewer as the film challenges the reader to explore the absurdity and humor in really dark situations. Whether or not a situation is benign can explain why a particular scene is dramatic instead of comedic, but the Coens have the gift of making a scene dramatic and comedic at the same time. Comedy can be tragic and uncomfortable, as the scene with Chigurh and the proprietor from *No Country* shows. The two can be mixed, although doing so requires great judgment and great care not to make it seem like one is being simply misanthropic, as will be discussed in the next section.
CHAPTER III

SUPERIORITY THEORY IN *BURN AFTER READING*, *THE BIG LEBOWSKI*,
AND *A SERIOUS MAN*

Explanation and Examples of Superiority Theory

The discussion of bullying referenced in the prior section on Benign Violation Theory is helpful in understanding the next theory of humor by which I will analyze the Coens’ films: Superiority Theory (hereafter also referred to as SPT). “The oldest,” philosopher John Morreall writes, “and probably still most widespread theory of laughter is that laughter is an expression of a person’s feelings of superiority over other people” (4). This theory has its roots in Plato, who described laughter in this manner and then condemned it, calling it a “pain in the soul” (4). In his book *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall traces this lineage from the aforementioned Plato, then Aristotle, up to Hobbes, all the way to Anthony Ludovici and other contemporary philosophers (5-14). Thomas Hobbes in particular is one of the more well-known adherents to this theory, writing that “the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or

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1 Ironically, “Hobbes” would later be the name of the pet tiger from the eponymous *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip by Bill Watterston, a strip that would teach me about humor from a very early age. A lot of Hobbes-the-Tiger’s humor in the strip is SPT stuff, actually, as he often acts as a straight man to Calvin’s rebellious, anti-social ranting.
with our own formerly” (Smuts 1). The previous sentence is indicative of Hobbes and others’ views of Superiority Theory as—similar to PRT and BVT—an exclusionary theory, a theory that encompasses all humor. Aristotle, too, believed that humor formed a purpose in helping produce social conformity “because people do not like to be laughed at, [and] laughter can serve as a social corrective to get wrongdoers back into line” (Moreall 5).

For proponents of this theory, humor can best be described as derisively laughing at others because we feel that we’re better than them—in his discussion of how Benign Violation Theory can replace Superiority Theory, Peter McGraw defines SPT and its relatives and writes that these theories “suggest that disparagement is funny when it victimizes someone else or a past self, but not one’s current self (“Too Close for Comfort” 2). This theory is the simplest to understand out of the four that I will discuss, so we will not spend a significant amount of time explaining it. The most important parts of the theory are discussed in the previous paragraph, but I will add that caveats similar to the ones discussed in the last chapter exist in SPT, too. In other words, supporters of SPT have found that something is less humorous when directed at the group one belongs to, and it gets less humorous the stronger someone feels about their social group (Ferguson and Ford 289). In particular, jokes that esteem one group at the expense of its opposite—firefighters liking jokes that show firefighters are stronger than cops, for example—were far more effective at producing humor within the esteemed group (289).

Can SPT explain the humor in the Coens’ movies? Let’s look at some examples In *A Serious Man*, Arthur Gopnik, brother of protagonist Larry Gopnik, has a cyst on his neck that requires near constant draining (Coen and Coen, *A Serious Man*). Medical
technology is not that advanced in the sixties, so it’s a very slow process with a very large and ugly looking machine. Consider figures 5 and 6:

Figure 5. *A Serious Man*. Richard Kind, scene still. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Relativity Media, 2009. DVD.

Everything about this shot could be interpreted as the Coens making fun of Arthur and creating feelings of Superiority in the viewer. Arthur is working on the *Mentaculus*, a book of quasi-religious writings and formulas that he later tries to use as a gambling aid. The machine is a dull and ugly yellow with a clear container that contains a lot of splotchy, foggy grayish human matter. And when Larry asks Arthur if he has had any luck finding his own apartment, Arthur doesn’t break concentration from his work and only utters an airy “no.” According to SPT, the Coens are appealing to viewers’ opinion of themselves in comparison to their suspected opinion of Arthur, and poor sap Arthur is just an outlet for us to feel better via laughter.

Still, though, SPT can help explain some of the trickier parts of humor analysis discussed in previous chapters. How superior we feel towards different characters in the Coens’ movies can affect how much we laugh at them. In BVT terms, the degree to
which we feel psychologically close or far away from the subject has a lot to do with how superior we feel to them. A hardworking, honest, earnest, John-Q.-Public man getting into a car crash on the way from his 9-to-5 job to his daughter’s softball game isn’t funny, even if he distracted himself while driving—let’s say he dropped his phone while trying to send a text and tried to retrieve it without thinking about it. That could happen to any of us. As good as we all supposedly are with respect to our driving behavior, just about everyone among us does stuff like that, and it’s no fun to see a car crash because of it, even if it happens to someone else. Well, almost always. SPT is a good explainer of why we laugh when The Dude gets into a car crash in *Lebowski*. It’s hilarious—see figure 7:

![The Dude in Lebowski](image)

**Figure 7.** *The Big Lebowski*. Jeff Bridges, scene still. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen.
Polygram Films International, 1998. DVD.

The Dude wrecks in this case because, as we see in fig. 7, he tries to flick the remnants of a still-lit joint out the window of his car. It then lands in his lap and he panics, pouring beer all over his crotch and crashing into a dumpster, all because he spotted a man tailing him in his rearview mirror and got distracted. Compare this with our John-Q.-Public.
Even though he’s not imbibing all the different substances in our example, we still don’t find it funny to see him wreck unless we feel superior to him, the theory goes. It’s an emotional release of “I told you so,” because we know all the bad driving habits The Dude is doing are dangerous. The effect could actually be magnified if our John-Q.-Public is wearing a seatbelt, doing the legal speed limit, driving a moderately priced car chosen for its safety, hands at 10-and-2, etc. We at least, in theory, could feel superior to our imagined man if we don’t ever get distracted while driving (or at least not to the degree that he does in our example). If he’s doing all the right things, we no longer feel superior to him, and we don’t find as much humor in the situation.

Efficacy of Superiority Theory and How It Could Help Me as a Writer

The relative idiocy or not of the characters has much to do with whether or not the actors themselves view the film as a comedy. Tilda Swinton, one of the stars of Burn After Reading, said about that movie, “All of us are monsters—like, true monsters. It’s ridiculous. It’s much lighter than No Country for Old Men” (Foley 1). John Malkovich, a fellow star of Burn After Reading, similarly said:

“Osbourne is a sad and deluded character. But most of the things we pursue in America, whether in New York, L.A., or Washington, are deluded. He is not alone in that. I hope the film is touching on some level. What is amazing is that he isn’t the dumbest of the characters. They all are a bit thick” (Wloszczyna 2).

Joel Coen related an anecdote about George Clooney and his views on the characters the Coens create for him. “It’s funny, on the last day of shooting on the movie we just did,
Ethan said, ‘that’s a wrap!’” Joel said, “And George [Clooney] said, ‘Okay, I’ve played my last idiot’ (Foley 2)! In the special features of the *Burn After Reading* DVD, Clooney expanded on this thought, saying, “It’s a comedy—I think—about some tragically dumb people,” and “[The characters are] all dopes, there’s no doubt about it” (*Burn After Reading*). If the actors playing the roles can be conflicted about whether or not it’s a comedy, audiences certainly can, too, so this is something to be aware of.

I would critique this theory both logically and based on the quotes above. I do not buy the idea of Aristotle and Hobbes that this is an all-encompassing theory of humor. Anybody reading this can probably think of a joke that doesn’t involve feelings of superiority towards the subject (i.e. a joke that’s not intended to shame someone into changing their behavior). Here’s an example:

PERSON A. Knock knock.

PERSON B. Who’s there?

PERSON A. An interrupting cow.

PERSON B. An interrupting cow wh-

PERSON A. MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

In this example, none of the amusement is derived from SPT, unless the people are laughing at the person telling the joke as opposed to the joke—maybe they are at a comedy club and astounded that someone would tell this joke as part of a professional show. But supposes this is from a normal, non-professional-in-a-comedy-club person. In that case, we are neither laughing at Persons A or B (or the cow) but something else entirely. Another example:

PERSON A. How many Jewish mothers does it take to screw in a
lightbulb?

PERSON B. I don’t know, how many?

PERSON A. None, I’ll sit in the dark! [“dark” here pronounced with a very thick New York accent as in “dahhk,” rhyming with “block” or “rock”]

This joke is playing on the stereotype of Jewish mothers being both guilt-inducing and self-sacrificing, a trope that’s explored in *Seinfeld*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and many other movies/shows in the genre. When we joke about this, though, we aren’t feeling necessarily superior to the mothers, especially if their motives are portrayed as extremely martyr-like. The laughter is at a particular part of their behavior, true, but the emotion that comes with that laughter is affection, not superiority. Specifically, this type of laughter is akin to a wife laughing at her husband for particular quirks of his personality—that he only buys one kind of orange juice or that he drools on his pillow when he sleeps. The wife doesn’t feel like she’s better than her husband—or that the behavior is inherently bad—so how can SPT explain this?

Well, it doesn’t. To explain that, we have to look at modified version of the Mechanical Theory of Humor, but that will be in the next section. How can Superiority Theory help with writing, then? I think that there is a valid point under all of this—that how superior we feel to certain characters affects whether or not something is funny—but this method/explanation is limited if used by itself. Designing a character the audience is meant to be superior to can produce humor, but I agree with Plato and Aristotle in that it’s a one-sided, mean humor. In *A Serious Man*, the audience’s empathy for Arthur is limited because he appears to be buffoonish. His plot arc and what he does are both sad
and comical, but audiences should never lose empathy for a character and for what they’re trying to do. There’s a fine line in displaying certain parts of a character and displaying those parts to make fun of him. Sometimes, it feels like Arthur’s use of the draining machine is purely critical, and I don’t think the movie is stronger for it. It’s a dangerous proposition, too, depending on how many people associate with the thing a writer is making fun of from an SPT perspective. Viewers can have three reactions to this type of humor: a) that we’re superior to him, but he’s worthy of empathy that we feel bad and like we’re making fun of him, b) that we’re superior to him and it’s funny that he’s suffering, or c) that we’re not superior to him and the Coens are making fun of us because we’re on his level. Both A) and C) can inhibit humor, so one ought to be very careful when including scenes derived from SPT in one’s writing.
CHAPTER IV
MECHANICAL THEORY IN FARGO, THE BIG LEBOWSKI, AND BURN AFTER READING

Explanation and Criticism

I think the scenes with Arthur and other scenes where the superiority feels a bit mean are the source of a lot of critical grief against the Coens. One of the big successes that the Coens achieved in Fargo and The Big Lebowski is that the setting, as constructed through the flavor of the mannerisms of the local culture, adds to both the realism and the comedy of the movie. This was discussed in Chapter 1 as a way to create humor through patterns, but it’s apropos here in a discussion of the fourth and last theory of humor that I will analyze for this project—Mechanical Theory. Both Fargo and The Big Lebowski are portrayals of local culture (the Coens’ native middle-class Minnesota and lower-class Los Angeles, respectively) and both treat their characters with a mixture of good-natured prodding and honest reverence. We never get the feeling that these characters exist entirely for the purpose of being made fun of. They exist because they exist, and they have hopes and fears and successes and failures as they try and honestly navigate life. To me, the predominant humor expressed in these two movies is most closely associated with the deep underlying philosophy behind the Coens’ films, so I’m consciously choosing this theory as the last section of formal humor analysis—hopefully readers of Chapter 5 (the chapter that deals with that deep philosophy) will be better informed by a recall of the information and analysis presented here.
Mechanical Theory, or MCT, was actually created as an offshoot of Superiority Theory by the French philosopher Henri Bergson in 1980 (Smuts 6). It contains “elements of superiority and incongruity theories,” and helps us “[recognize] our superiority over the subhuman” (6). Like SPT, it “serves as a social corrective, helping people recognize the behaviors that are inhospitable to human flourishing” (6). In Mechanical Theory, the production of humor relies on “mechanical elasticity” (Bergson 5), which is defined as “a certain rigidity of thought or habit [which] exposes one to errors of behavior or mishaps” (Bardon 470). For Bergson, “the difference between a toymaker and a comic playwright is therefore minimal: both are in the business of making arrangements that give us ‘in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement’” (Laine 2). Because of this mechanical and inflexible nature, we viewers feel superior to the character—“[it] is a kind of corrective to ways of thinking and acting detrimental to the greater good” (Badon 470). His or her behavior is something to be mocked and changed via humiliation. We ought not to have sympathy for the characters—laughter is incompatible with sympathy. In this sense, MCT contains elements from both Superiority Theory and Patten Recognition Theory.

The word “mechanical” is itself a clue to understanding this. “Mechanical” implies a constructed view of the world. In the Coens’ worlds, any system we construct cannot be the all-encompassing answer to life’s ethical and personal naggers. In *A Serious Man*, Larry Gopnik looks to many different institutions in his search for meaning—his physics background, his lawyer, the three rabbis, etc.—but doesn’t find it. None of these institutions are capable of answering the questions, the Coens implicitly argue, because the idea of a mechanical savior is flawed from the get-go. This much can
be described accurately by MCT. But MCT would then say that this humor serves a socially corrective role because the behavior being laughed at is idiotic or bad. Should we therefore think of Larry as an idiot or sympathize with his plight?

In other words, what makes someone’s earnest fight funny or not? Because this question is the most interesting issue that arises from looking at the Coens’ films through the lens of MCT, I will be adding my criticism and thoughts to the examples that follow rather than including them in the following section. MCT, if followed through to its philosophical end as a tool of social corrective, would have no room for, say, a civil rights activist who spends his or her life fighting against what he or she sees as racism in society. It doesn’t seem right that a mechanical nature like that ought to be corrected because it’s inelastic and machinelike. Nor do I believe that we laugh at people only when we view their behavior as absurd and worthy of humiliation, as I pointed out in Chapter 4 in my critique of Superiority Theory.

It is therefore impossible to discuss the Coens’ films in relation to MCT without criticizing Bergson’s assertion that audiences must not have sympathy for the characters. The difference in audience reception between Fargo and Burn After Reading is a good illustration of what can happen when the characters in a movie aren’t treated with the reverence and kindness mentioned in the first paragraph of the chapter. The characters in the former are treated far more lovingly than the characters in the latter, and Fargo is funnier on the whole because of it. Consider figures 8 and 9 as an example of the different ways that the Coens have portrayed television hosts:
Figure 8. *Fargo*. Steve Edelman and Sharon Anderson, scene still. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Polygramed Filmed Entertainment, 1996. DVD.

Figure 9. *Burn After Reading*. Matt Walton, scene still. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Relativity Media, 2008. DVD.
In *Fargo*, the hosts are based on real people—the male host is played by Steve Edelman, a real-life former daytime talk show host in Minnesota ("Steve Edelman")—and they are successful at entertaining Jean Lundegaard. In *Burn After*, the hosts are portrayed as incompetent; they are distorted and exaggerated versions of daytime emcees—they cut away from Sandy Pfarrer, played by Elizabeth Marvel, prematurely to spend time with the “Sultan of Salad,” and it’s clear that we’re meant to look down upon them, not accept them for part of the local pastiche as we do in *Fargo*.

Laughter can be mean spirited, but I believe that audience and critical reception has been far more positive when it celebrates the mechanical nature of humans more than criticizing it. Satirizing the man who struggles to keep his morals one hundred percent of the time, for example, is implicitly critical of that man and that behavior, but it doesn’t have to be implicitly critical of the decision to seek order in one’s life. To find sanity, the characters can either renge on their morals a bit or keep on tilting at windmills, so to speak. MCT is an attack on a personal philosophy that would have one be inelastic and struggling in the face of infinitely changing circumstance, but proper humor requires a celebration of that inelasticity as well—the repeated habits are the stuff that make Tennessee Tennessee and Minnesota Minnesota, in other words. Taken like this, MCT could be modified to be different than Superiority Theory, which posits that life does have an order and that you just have to be careful not to do it *like those guys*. My

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1. In addition, real-life television talk-show host Sharon Anderson is playing a character called Katie Carlson ("Sharon Anderson"), a reference to the strong Scandinavian cultural presence in Minnesota (Yuen 1) and from which the personality stereotype “Minnesota Nice” is thought to have derived from (1). It’s the little touches like these that add to the reality of the movie.

2. Distorted even past the already near-ridiculousness of actual daytime hosts.
“improved” version of MCT switches the detachment of empathy for empathy-as-essential-ingredient. The version I would argue for implies a shared experience of struggling to keep our morals and act ethically even if our expressions of what constitutes a “correct” life are different, whereas SPT implies that only certain expressions of human behavior are wrong and deserving of mockery.

Looking at some examples in which the Coens succeed at being reverent towards the mechanical nature of their characters would be prudent. There is a clear difference between Fargo and Burn After Reading, but the credit sequence of The Big Lebowski is their most unabashed love affair towards their environment. See figure 10:


This shot, along with the rest of the credit tracks, are celebrations of the quixotic nature of bowling culture. None of the visuals in this sequence are mean-spirited or ‘above’ the characters of the movie. The Coens are transplanting us into this culture and showing us the particular quirks and kinks that make it hilarious to be a part of. It’s equivalent to
episodes of *Seinfeld* in which Jerry struggles to stresslessly interact with his mother and father. He clearly loves his parents, but he’s satirizing some of the elements that make his parents his parents. It’s akin to the scene in *Good Will Hunting* in which Sean Maguire, played by Robin Williams, talks with Will Hunting, played by Matt Damon, about how much he misses his wife’s unintentional flatulence in her sleep. By itself, the activity isn’t pleasing—Maguire wouldn’t it as funny if he didn’t have empathy for and love his wife. Anyone who’s ever had a serious relationship can point to little things that their significant other does that would be annoyances in others. We do not feel superior to our partners—nor they to us—when we do these things, nor do we try to humiliate them if we laugh at them for these little malfeasances. My dad has an ongoing habit of getting extremely irate at technical support people on the phone, a habit that’s so hilarious to my brother Matt that he’s thought about releasing an audio tape series of some of his greatest hits. In the moment, he’s irate and angry and struggling and repeating the same catchphrases, but Matt (nor the rest of his audience) does not feel superior to him, nor do we want to change his behavior via the humiliation of our laughter. It’s funny because I have empathy for him.

**How Mechanical Theory Could Help Me as a Writer**

As with Superiority Theory, one has to be careful in how one portrays humor via Mechanical Theory. To me, the ability of something to be funny through MCT is

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3 If we want to maintain a healthy relationship.

4 And my brother Ty and me and my mom and anyone who’s ever heard it, but it was Matt’s idea.

5 Sample lingo: “I’ve lived in New Jersey, Philadelphia, Massachusetts, New York…you would never get away with this up there.”
dependent on how serious or nonserious we view the struggle—hence why a dispute over the board game *Risk* can be funny in *Seinfeld* (“The Label Maker”), but the prior example of the struggling civil rights activist is not a source of comedy. I disagree with Bergson and don’t think that we are making fun of the “subhuman” in comedy (Smuts 6). That doesn’t get at the heart of what makes the Coens’ movies the funniest. The reason the *Risk* example is so funny in *Seinfeld* is because we are empathizing with the characters playing the game. I’ve played enough games of *Risk* over the years to laugh at the way Kramer and Newman get so into the game—I’m laughing and saying “yes, that’s how it is!” rather than saying “look at these robotic saps.”

In this sense, the humor produced by this moment can better be explained by Pattern Recognition Theory rather than Mechanical Theory. In fact, I think that PRT is a much better explainer of the Coens’ humor than MCT, but MCT still has its uses in preparing me for a life of screenwriting. Pattern Recognition has its definite strengths in predicting humor and explaining the power of repetition, but my ‘improved’ MCT is very useful at predicting why some of those patterns will be funnier and how one ought to avoid humor that comes across as too mean. Having little empathy for the characters and cultures in my prospective movies will not yield as much success as celebrating those characters and cultures while prodding their quirks. It’s why the Coens are in “[a] sophomoric snarky mode” (McCarthy 1) when they made *Burn After Reading* but *Fargo* is a “smartly constructed, wickedly executed black comedy about the inherent weirdness of people” (Henderson 2).

More than anything, though, the philosophical bent behind MCT is extremely helpful in figuring out the philosophy of the Coens. This will be explored in detail in the
next chapter, but Bergson’s description of humans as possessing “mechanical
inelasticity” (5) is great for thinking about the deep underlying reasons for why the
Coens’ characters are funny. They are all characters struggling to create order in a world
that’s openly hostile to ordered systems. But the Coens do not ascribe to this being a
meaningless fight. For the Coens, the few times that one can create meaning and order
are the appropriate times to celebrate and be joyful—it’s a huge achievement to succeed,
even if most of the time you don’t. Marge Gunderson in Fargo and The Dude in The Big
Lebowski ought to be ridiculed according to MCT. Instead, they are very clearly
portrayed as heroes, as they both enjoy a bit of respite and happiness at the end of the
film. Both they and the cultures and places that produced them are celebrated in this
moment, not ridiculed.
CHAPTER V

HUMAN AGENCY IN FARGO AND NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

There is a deeper logic behind the humor of the Coens, though. I posited at the beginning of this study that there is a common philosophical structure to the Coens’ movies, one that supersedes discussions of genre or classification. Though they have made several movies that fit into categories like “romantic comedy” or “western” or “gangster film,” they have no loyalties to the particular conventions of the genre in a deep structural sense. No Country for Old Men bears little resemblance to The Searchers or Once Upon a Time in the West or any other Western film just as Burn After Reading bears little resemblance to Dr. No or Quantum of Solace or The Bourne Identity.

Their common philosophy is present in nearly all of their movies since their debut, spanning all genres in which they have worked, but it is especially present in their films Fargo, The Big Lebowski, No Country for Old Men, Burn After Reading, and A Serious Man. The aforementioned films have been classically categorized as “outright comedy” (Vincent 2) to “dramedy” (Day 1) to “drama” (Bradshaw 1), yet, upon close examination, all share a common thread that makes their movies almost impossible to categorize in modern terms. They are operating so far out to the side of mainstream American cinema that it feels weird that they compete for awards and accolades with other American movies. One could argue that they’d be better served competing in the “Best Foreign Film” category at the Oscars.
Put simply, they are outliers. In the five movies listed *supra*, along with other films excluded from this thesis like *Inside Llewyn Davis* and *Barton Fink*, exist three broad global conditions:

1. Humans ultimately have very little agency over their fates.
2. There’s no moral force overseeing the world.
3. The only way to arrive at some degree of limited happiness are those that either accept or ignore the first two maxims.

Academic and popular critics alike have been referring to the Coens as “nihilists” (Stevens 2) “godless” (Chagollan 1) and “misanthropic” (Gelgud 1) for years based on these three ideas. To label them in such abasing terms, however, is both unfair and wrong. The Coens aren’t nihilists any more than they are, say, national socialists. While the first two worldly conditions present in the Coens’ movies are depressing at face, several of their characters eventually become at peace with their lives, as will be discussed in Chapter 7. For now, though, consider that first tenet: Humans ultimately have very little agency over their fates.

In the manner in which I’m using it, “agency” is a synonym for “control,” basically. Screenwriting, according to Aaron Sorkin, is as simple a thing as a character saying “I want $x$” while something prevents that character from having $x$. Since movies became a legitimate mainstream art in America, the general plot structure has included conflict resolution. The superhero movie, the most culturally relevant form of moviemaking at the time of this writing, is one zenith of this trend, along with action movies in the 80s and Westerns of the 40s and 50s. Rare is the American film that provides as little resolution as, say, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Contempt*. With the Coens,
though, it is rare for one of their movies to have resolution. *Miller’s Crossing* is just about the only one that stands out, and even then it’s not a clear resolution.

The point that I’m attempting to make by talking about superhero movies is that the genre shows a particularly strong emphasis on protagonist-driven resolution. How could it not? When we see a Superman movie, we know that Superman is going to use his (literal) super powers to take control of the situation, exercise his ultimate agency, and save the day, just as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone did in the 1980s, and just as John Wayne did in the 40s and 50s. This superhuman agency is missing in the Coens’ movies. Characters routinely attempt to control their own fate with elaborately and carefully laid plans, and it all comes crashing down upon them almost every time.

Consider *Fargo*. Upon first glance, it may be seen as having a fairly conventional plotline—a person does a bad thing, it leads to bad consequences, then a cop investigates the case, then solves it, then arrests the bad guy. Broadly, this is not different than *Die Hard* or *Raw Deal*. But that’s assuming that the murder that the cop is investigating is the single most important thing in *Fargo*—in this case, the murder of a state trooper and a couple of accidental witnesses that’s investigated by Marge Gunderson.

I would argue that the murder is not the only central plot line in *Fargo*. Just as important, if not more so, is the arc of Jerry Lundegaard, played by William H. Macy. The movie, if you’ll remember, opens up with Jerry meeting Carl Showalter and Gaear Grimsrud at a bar so that they can go over a plan to kidnap his wife. At this point, Jerry has a number of plans that develop over the course of the next few scenes. He’s trying to kidnap his wife so that his father-in-law will pay ransom (which he’ll split with the kidnappers), he’s trying to sell cars, and he’s trying to talk his father-in-law into loaning
him money so that he can build a parking lot. In each of the three plans, he’s shown to be ineffectual and incapable. First, he gets criticized by Carl and Gaear about his punctuality:

   CARL. Shep said you’d be here at 7:30. What gives, man?
   JERRY. Shep said 8:30.
   CARL. We been sitting here an hour. I’ve peed three times already.
   JERRY. I’m sure sorry. I--Shep told me 8:30. It was a mix-up, I guess.  
   (Fargo)

Jerry then gets criticized about the logic of the deal

   CARL. I’m not going to sit here and debate. I will say this, though: what Shep told us didn’t make a whole lot of sense.
   JERRY. Oh, no, it’s real sound. It’s all worked out.
   CARL. You want your own wife kidnapped?
   JERRY. Yah.
   Carl stares. Jerry looks blankly back.

Carl stares. Jerry looks blankly back.

   CARL. You--my point is, you pay the ransom--what, eighty thousand bucks? I mean, you give us half the ransom, forty thousand, you keep half. It’s like robbing Peter to pay Paul, it doesn’t make any--
   JERRY. Okay, it’s--see, it’s not me payin’ the ransom. The thing is, my wife, she’s wealthy--her dad, he’s real well off. Now, I’m in a bit of trouble--  (Fargo)

And finally, he’s criticized about his wife:

   JERRY. Well, that’s, that’s, I’m not gonna go inta, inta--see, I just need
the money. Now, her dad’s real wealthy--

CARL. So why don’t you just ask him for the money?

_Grimsrud, the dour man who has not yet spoken, now softly puts in with a_ Swedish-accented voice.

GRIMSRUD. Or your fucking wife, you know.

CARL. Or your fucking wife, Jerry. _(Fargo)_

Jerry clearly desires to be the main provider for his wife and child, but is competing with his father-in-law, Wade, as implied in the next scene. Jerry hints at some “trouble” that he’s in in this first scene with Carl and Gaear, but his motivation stems instead from wanting to be the “man of the house,” so to speak, in place of his father-in-law. When Jerry tries to convince his father-in-law Wade to look at the deal as opposed to Stan Grossman, his father-in-law’s miser assistant, the scene ends on this exchange:

    JERRY. Well, you know Stan’ll say no dice. That’s why you pay him. I’m asking you here, Wade. This could work out real good for me and Jean and Scotty--

    WADE. Jean and Scotty never have to worry _(Fargo)_

And then Jerry continues his ineffectuality shortly after when he tries to sell a man and his wife a car. Jerry had apparently promised them “this car, these options, WITHOUT THE SEALANT” _(Fargo)_ for “nine-teen-five” _(Fargo)_ , and then called them over saying that the he was “ready to make delivery” _(Fargo)_ . They argue, and then Jerry goes to talk to his manager. When he comes back, he’s berated by the couple. One gets the sense that Jerry’s taking a ton of abuse relative to what he’s being paid:

    CUSTOMER. One hundred!? You lied to me, Mr. Lundegaard. You’re a
bald-face liar.

*Jerry sits staring at his lap.*

CUSTOMER. A fucking liar--

WIFE. Bucky, please! *(Fargo)*

As the movie progresses, the best-laid plans of Jerry Lundegaard come crashing down in all three areas: his job as a car salesman gets in jeopardy because he intentionally smudged documents on a loan, his father-in-law only wants to pay him a “finder’s fee” on the property that Jerry finds, and the kidnapping goes horribly wrong, leading to both his wife’s death and his arrest.

In terms of protagonists, Jerry Lundegaard is the norm, rather than the exception, in the Coens’ movies. Along with *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Burn After Reading*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *A Serious Man* all contain at least one protagonist whose largest thematic importance is the inability to control their environment. Jerry is not alone, especially when one looks at *No Country for Old Men*, a remarkably similar movie to *Fargo*. Both have police protagonists that openly ponder the lack of a moral overseer in the world and are chasing another protagonist that wants to keep a satchel full of money. It doesn’t go well for the latter. There are no superhero-driven resolutions here.

*Batman Begins*, for example, has been lauded as one of the definitive superhero movies of the 2000s-present resurgence (“10 BEST”), and the movie is chock full of agency and clear consequences from actions. The hero of the movie, Bruce Wayne is followed over a number of years in his journey to fight crime in fictional Gotham. He chooses to use bat imagery because he was afraid of bats as a child. He wants to save Gotham because his parents were shot and killed during the time that they attempted to
“save” the city, too. He is fed up with the rampant corruption and general lack of morality in Gotham, so he dons a bat costume and takes matters into his own hand, vigilante-style. In order to stop an international group of political terrorists, he beats up countless bad guys while organizing an effort to prevent the terrorist’s scheme of poisoning the city’s water supply with chemicals that make people violent and insane. Batman/Bruce Wayne is, in short, a superman who lets the viewer live out fantasies of having complete personal control over the situation. It’s extremely comforting to live in a world that’s full of resolution and the good guys winning.

In *Fargo* and *No Country for Old Men*, though, the protagonists can’t take control of the situation and can’t provide resolution. *No Country for Old Men* hammers this point home over a number of scenes. Throughout the movie, the movie shows meticulous planning and would-be agency by the three main chasers of the satchel of money: Llewellyn Moss (Josh Brolin), Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson), and Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem). If this were a traditional movie, Moss would use the techniques and tools that he learned as a hunter and Vietnam veteran to make him and his wife safe from the bad guys. Instead, what we get is a lot of planning and scheming that, ultimately, leads to nothing. When we first see Moss, he is hunting antelope. A few stills of the movie could help us understand the thematic importance of the shot and the outcome of his initial hunt:
Figure 11. *No Country for Old Men*. Scene still. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Paramount Vantage, 2007. DVD.

Figure 12. *No Country for Old Men*. Josh Brolin, scene still. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Paramount Vantage, 2007. DVD.
These three stills are a visual synecdoche for the meaning of Moss’s story in the movie. In figure 11, he sees his prey through hard work and a bit of luck—as anyone who’s ever been hunting knows, it’s always somewhat lucky to come across such fertile shooting grounds, but he’s also chosen a good spot to wait for them and set up his tools appropriately. He has his gun resting on a protective cover to prevent it from getting damage from the wood, and he picks up his shell casing after he fires his shot. But before this, in figure 12, we see more evidence of planning and meticulous attempts to control his fate. He’s adjusting his scope to give himself the maximum chance of hitting the target. Just as he does this with the antelope, though, Moss does this same planning when he gets lucky and finds the satchel full of money. And just as with the antelope, Moss misses his shot. He can’t keep control of the money and he can’t kill the antelope.
Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson), too, has a scene that explains his presence in the film. Wells is a confident, wise-cracking, capable bounty hunter. He’s the best talker in every scene that he’s in, he’s able to track the money down without using the transponder hidden in the satchel, and he’s able to find the satchel when Moss hides it. It’s even implied that he convinced Moss to deal with him, as Moss calls him in his hotel room after Wells visits Moss. Of course, Chigurh was already there and had already killed him in a scene in which Wells is completely unable to convince Moss of anything. He’s not able to make a deal at all--his best asset, his ability to make a deal, is reduced to uselessness against Chigurh.

By doing this, the Coens are not trying to show that either Moss or Wells are losers or unskilled or not-quite-superhero-material. In fact, the Coens do a wonderful job of deconstructing the superhero ideal by making their superhero succumb to the same lack of agency as the rest of the characters. Chigurh is reminiscent of some of the archetypical “unstopable forces,” both heroic and villainous, in movies of the last forty years. He kills easily and indiscriminately, and he’s always in control of whatever scene that he’s in. He’s as close to a fictional all-powerful person as anybody in the Coens’ movies. But he, too, is shown to be a victim of the same arbitrarily violent and brutal world as the rest of the characters. Chigurh does not ever find the money—the Mexican gang does. And, in the most critical scene for this interpretation, Chigurh gets t-boned by another car as he’s driving in the Texas suburbs after having killed Moss’s widow. In his final scene, Chigurh buys a shirt off of a boy for money to make a splint for his arm. He is shown walking down the street with a bone sticking out of his arm, just another victim.
of the same capricious world, no matter how much power he has, no matter how much he planned.
CHAPTER VI

THE LACK OF MORAL OVERSIGHT IN BURN AFTER READING, THE BIG LEBOWSKI, AND A SERIOUS MAN

If Jerry Lundegaard and Moss/Wells/Chigurh represent the inability of man to control his own fate in Fargo and No Country for Old Men, respectively, then Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) and Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) represent the existentialist distress that forms the second part of the meaning of those movies. In Fargo and No Country, Marge and Ed Tom are small-town police who struggle to come to grips with the seemingly random and unjust violence that grips their community. They are confused, worried, and upset that the events in their lives follow no system of justice, and they can’t really find a cause for it, either. This idea is very foreign to American movies and the superhero/action genre, specifically. Just as the heroes are able to exercise control over the situation, the bad guys also always lose because the universe that they inhabit doesn’t allow for bad guys to win. In the Coens’ universes, though, no one is judged by an omnipresent morality of the universe. Sometimes people get things that they want and sometimes they don’t.

In other words, there is no moral force overseeing who succeeds and who doesn’t. This is theme that is consistent across the Coens’ filmography and is present in all five of the movies studied in this thesis. In Fargo and No Country, as noted, the sheriffs despair
at this arbitrary and seemingly unjust world. In *The Big Lebowski* and *Burn After Reading*, this is portrayed mostly as comic and without consequence. There’s no ‘justice’ for any of the characters that do bad things in *The Big Lebowski*, and the only casualty is conflict-allergic Donny (Steve Buscemi), who has a heart attack when the main protagonists are attacked by sword-wielding nihilists. In *Burn After Reading*, too, both Chad (Brad Pitt) and Ted (Richard Jenkins) die rather gruesome deaths despite being almost wholly benign characters. Chad is a gym trainer attempting to help Linda Litzky sell her stolen documents, but he is harmless. He gets shot in the face when Harry (George Clooney) opens a closet door and sees him hiding--Chad had been there to try and steal more documents from the house Clooney was in. Similarly, Ted also tries to steal documents for Linda, but is confronted by Osbourne (John Malkovich), shot in the chest, and hacked to death with a hatchet in the middle of the street. But it’s all portrayed as light fare and not subject to any type of questioning.

When the protagonists do start to question this lack of justice, though, things get darker. There’s an underlying current of darkness in the ‘comedies’ of the Coens, but the tone of their movies gets a whole lot darker when there is a protagonist aware enough to realize just how arbitrary and without justice the world really is. As I noted supra, the sheriffs in both *No Country for Old Men* and *Fargo* openly question the order of their universes. Just as important, though, is Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg) of *A Serious Man*. He is the absolute focus of that movie, even moreso than Ed Tom and Marge are in their films, and his search for meaning, justice, order, and God is ongoing and fruitless throughout the entire movie.
*A Serious Man* provides the best example of this lack of moral force. In perhaps the funniest scene of the movie, Rabbi Nachtner (George Wyner) relates a story to Larry about another templegoer’s search for direction from God. Paraphrased, the story goes like this: Doctor Sussman, a local dentist, discovers some Hebrew letters etched into a non-Jewish patient’s teeth after Sussman makes a mold for corrective dental work. The letters spell out, in Hebrew, “help me, save me.” Sussman wonders if this is a “sign from Hashem.” He checks all the molds of his other patients to see if he had missed other messages, but can’t find any. He gets extremely puzzled and confused about what this means. “Can Sussman eat? Sussman can’t eat. Can Sussman sleep? Sussman can’t sleep,” Rabbi Nachtner says (*A Serious Man*). In certain Jewish literature, every Hebrew letter has an numeric equivalent, so he deciphers the seven numbers and calls it, figuring it to be a phone number. It turns out to be the number of a Red Owl, an Upper Midwest grocery chain. There is no connection to Sussman’s patient or anything else in particular. He goes to Rabbi Nachtner and relates all of this. Nachtner, in the present, recounts what Sussman told him:

RABBI NACHTNER¹. What does it mean, Rabbi? Is it a sign from Hashem—“help me?” I, Sussman, should be doing something to help this goy? Doing what? The teeth don’t say. Or maybe I’m supposed to help people generally--lead a more righteous life. Is the answer in the Kabbalah? The Torah? Or is there even a question? Tell me, Rabbi...what can such a sign mean? (*A Serious Man*)

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¹ He is quoting Sussman here.
After Rabbi Nachtner relates this, he chuckles to himself and sips his tea. Larry, though, isn’t satisfied with this.

   LARRY. So, what did you tell him?

   RABBI NACHTNER. Sussman?

   LARRY. Yes!

   RABBI NACHTNER. Is it...relevant?

   LARRY. Well isn’t that why you’re telling me?

   RABBI NACHTNER. Ok. Nachtner says, “Look--the teeth? We don’t know. Sign from Hashem? Don’t know. Helping others? Couldn’t hurt.” (*A Serious Man*)

This scene is absurdly funny, but also absurdly dark when viewed in the context of the movie. Larry is desperately searching for meaning and religious guidance, but it doesn’t exist, at least not in any form that he can understand. The theology espoused by the Jewish rabbis in *A Serious Man* is one of divine inscrutability. As film critic Roger Ebert says, the scene is a very long retelling of the very old joke where Job goes up onto the hill to ask God something and gets no response (“*A Serious Man*” 2). The Jews in the movie believe that there is an agent overseeing things, but the agent hasn’t told mankind what they are really supposed to do other than worship him. “Hashem doesn’t owe us anything,” Rabbi Nachtner tells Larry, “the obligation runs the other way.”

And this isn’t the first rabbi that Larry sees or attempts to see while his life is falling apart. His brother is seemingly crazy and depressed, his kids don’t respect him, his wife is leaving him, he’s up for academic tenure as a physics professor while someone has been writing “elegant” (*A Serious Man*) letters against his bid, he’s waiting on
medical news, his neighbors are trying to increase their property line at his expense, and a student is trying to bribe him for a better grade. Point being: his life is in need of some guidance. But any system that Larry looks to is unable to offer him some sort of guide or system of how to live. He is dissatisfied by the first two rabbis he sees and can’t get into see the most respected third rabbi. In fact, his son is the only one in the movie that gets to talk to the third rabbi, and, when he does, his son is high on marijuana, and the only thing the third rabbi does is quote lyrics from a Jefferson Airplane song and say “be a good boy,” suggesting that Larry wouldn’t get anything from the third rabbi that he didn’t get with the first two. Nor does Larry get answers from his dreams—they are scatterbrained and slapstick—or his lawyers—his divorce attorney is professional and incapable of handling Larry’s emotional needs, while his property lawyer drops dead before he can say anything.

This man-struggling-against-all-things plotline is so typical of the Coens’ movies, and it’s honestly not that surprising that people call them nihilists, fatalistic, or atheist. A.O. Scott of the New York Times, reviewing the movie, writes that

“The vein of fatalistic, skeptical humor that runs through so many of their movies has frequently had a Jewish inflection, both cultural and metaphysical. Here [in A Serious Man], that inheritance, glancingly present in movies like “Barton Fink” and “The Big Lebowski,” is, so to speak, the whole megillah.”

Danielle Berrin of the Jewish Journal asks, “Are the Coens using the film to make a case for atheism?” The movie “blends quantum physics and nihilistic dread,” says Neil Fauerso of the Iowa Source. Still, though, accusations of atheism, nihilism, and fatalism
are missing the point. In my mind, this misunderstanding is a result from critics not understanding the culture that the Coens were dramatically influenced by. They aren’t saying that life is devoid of meaning because there isn’t a unifying moral force. In fact, they’re saying that life is full of meaning, and that happiness can coexist with non-resolution and uncertainty. Their cultural Judaism is the genesis of this belief. Or, as Dana Stevens of Slate says, “The Coen brothers' films have always been funny, cerebral, hermetic, sardonic to the point of nihilism, and preoccupied with human suffering but allergic to sentimentality. In short, they've always been Jewish.”
CHAPTER VII

ATTAINING LIMITED HAPPINESS THROUGH ACCEPTANCE AND/OR IGNORANCE OF LIFE’S CAPRICIOUSNESS

This struggle of their characters to understand the lack of human agency and the lack of worldly morality makes the actual physical movings of the plot resemble MacGuffins more than important events. In other words, as I posited before specifically with *Fargo*, the Coens’ protagonists’ underlying philosophical confrontation with this randomness and capriciousness takes precedence over the actual machinations of the characters. Consider the endings of the five movies in this study. They end in varying degrees of plot resolution, but the philosophical and emotional questions of meaning are never resolved. *A Serious Man, No Country for Old Men,* and *Burn After Reading* end with characters pondering and despairing the meaning of the amoral and seemingly random events they’ve experienced. *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* end similarly unresolved, but the characters either accept or ignore the implications of the events they’ve witnessed.

This difference of tone in the endings of *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* compared with *A Serious Man, No Country for Old Men,* and *Burn After Reading* comprises the third consistent theme in the Coens’ movies: that the only way to arrive at some degree of limited happiness is to either accept or ignore the lack of human agency and lack of moral
oversight. In the *A Serious Man* scene with Rabbi Nachtner and Larry referenced above, this belief is expressed by the Rabbi. After Nachtner tells Larry of his answer to Sussman--Nachtner can’t explain the teeth or the possible sign from Hashem, but says that helping others “couldn’t hurt”--Larry is still unsatisfied with the lack of an answer:

LARRY. No, no! But--who put it [the letters on the teeth] there? Was it for him, Sussman? Or for whoever found it? Or for just--for, for--

RABBI NACHTNER. We can’t know everything.

LARRY. It sounds like you don’t know anything! (*A Serious Man*)

A few moments later, Larry asks what happened to Sussman. Was he ever able to get an answer, Larry wonders, or is he likewise unsatisfied and confused?

LARRY. What happened to Sussman?

RABBI NACHTNER. What would happen? Not much, he went back to work. For awhile, he checked every patient’s teeth for new messages. He didn’t find any. In time, he found he stopped checking. He returned to life. These questions that are bothering you, Larry--maybe they’re like a toothache. We feel them for awhile, then they go away.

LARRY. I don’t want it to go away. I want an answer! (*A Serious Man*)

Larry is exasperated. His inability to accept that there will be no expression of moral oversight or human agency will leave him unfulfilled and unhappy at the end of the movie, as opposed to Sussman, who accepts the mystery.

* Taken independently, this scene could be construed as the Coens making fun of the Rabbi’s answer. But the way they end their films suggests that they think more like the Rabbi than critics give them credit for. Specifically, I am referring to the propensity
of critics, referenced before, to label the Coens with adjectives like “misanthropic” (Gelgud 1), a propensity that drives me batty. Their characters’ plans consistently come undone, but that does not mean that they view the entirety of humanity as stupid—far from it. Instead, they view the inability to recognize one’s own limitations and the inability to recognize a lack of a guiding morality as the things that are human failings. It is hubris they try to critique rather than earnestness. In fact, two of their characters that are the most “simple” (Heine 1), on the surface, are shown to be the most spiritually content at the ends of their movies.

I am referring to Marge Gunderson from Fargo and The Dude from The Big Lebowski. Marge specifically is portrayed throughout Fargo as being, well, simple. I do not mean simple as in “stupid” or “backward.” I am using simple in this context to refer to a brand of earnest, stay-in-the-present living in which one abstains from fretting too much over big existential questions; it is the kind of life for someone who might live in the same neighborhood as a Jimmy Stewart character. There are several scenes of her and her husband living typical middle-class lives—she eats Arby’s and at “family-style restaurants” (Fargo), she speaks with a heavy Minnesotan accent, her husband paints wildlife for Minnesotan stamps, she has an extremely nice and spunky personality, etc. There are several more scenes that communicate a quiet domestication for her and her husband, and the Coens actually portray this sweetly and tenderly. The argument can be made that they are mocking the culture of Minnesota and North Dakota in other scenes in the movie, but it cannot, in my opinion, be made at all about the scenes between Marge and her husband.
Marge is in fact so trusting and ordinary that her big break in the movie changes once she realizes how manipulative and immoral some people can be right to her face via her encounter with an old schoolmate. To recap: the schoolmate, Mike Yanagita, phones Marge up out of the blue with a desire to meet during Marge’s trip to Minneapolis. They meet, Mike tries rather forcibly to woo Marge, and he eventually breaks down crying, telling Marge that he is lonely since his wife died from leukemia. Later, Marge finds out that none of this is true—Mike is psychologically unstable and lives with his parents. Wondering if she has been deceived by anyone else recently, she returns to Jerry Lundegaard to question him again about the missing car. Jerry flees the scene, Marge confirms her suspicion, and she tracks down the car and captures the kidnapper/murderer Grimsrud.

Despite her simplicity, she is one of the most effective characters in the Coens’ filmography. I believe this is purposeful—having a simple middle-aged pregnant heroine as the character with the most agency is extremely subversive, as is portraying her as one of the few spiritually content protagonists. By the end of the movie, after her encounters with Mike, Jerry, and Grimsrud, she is clearly aware of the lack of moral oversight and lack of complete human agency, as expressed in her penultimate scene. After catching Grimsrud, she rides him back into town and wonders about his actions. Grimsrud is silent the whole time, as Marge lists off the murders:

MARGE. So I guess that was Mrs. Lundegaard on the floor in there? And I guess that was your accomplice in the woodchipper? And those three people in Brainerd. And for what? For a little bit of money. There’s more to life than a little money, you know. Don’t you know that? And
here you are. And it’s a beautiful day. Well...I just don’t understand it.

(Fargo)

Despite this awareness, though, Marge isn’t shown at the end of the movie to be seriously distressed or disturbed by it. Rather than letting the wanton display of unjust and seemingly random violence and chaos get her down, Marge is instead shown to accept it. She understands it, but she accepts that it’s a part of the landscape--hence her calling the bleak landscape a “beautiful day” (Fargo). Whether or not one gets dismayed by life has to do with how one chooses to view one’s surroundings--for Grimsrud, the landscape is a bleak and desolate wasteland. The look on his face is of complete disgust and disregard for the scenery. For Marge, though, it’s a beautiful day. There’s another scene in which Jerry Lundegaard gets captured at a motel, but the movie doesn’t end here. The main plot isn’t only the narrative scheming that Jerry sets in motion. Marge’s emotional state is the other plot, and the movie ends with her and her husband, Norm, in bed, talking like a normal couple. Norm is an artist, and one of his mallard paintings has been selected to be on the Minnesota three-cent stamp. Marge is proud of him and talks contentedly about their future and the child that they are having:

MARGE (referring to the stamps). That's terrific. I'm so proud of ya,

Norm. Heck, Norm, you know we're doin' pretty good.

NORM. I love you, Margie.

MARGE. I love you, Norm.

NORM. Two more months.

MARGE. Two more months. (Fargo)
Marge accepts life’s uncertainty but decides that “heck...we’re doin’ pretty good” (*Fargo*) and continues living her life with earnest optimism, like she does when she says the vast whiteness is “a beautiful day” (*Fargo*).

The ending of *The Big Lebowski* also contains a character at peace with his environment. *The Big Lebowski* famously ends with a monologue by the character The Stranger in part about how the “human comedy keeps perpetuatin’ itself…” (*The Big Lebowski*), but the more interesting part of the scene is how the Dude, ordering a beer from Gary the bartender, makes small-talk with the Stranger:

GARY. Sorry to hear about Donny.

THE DUDE. Yeah. Well, sometimes you eat the bear, and, uh..

“Tumbling Tumbleweeds” comes on the jukebox as the Dude notices the Stranger.

THE STRANGER. Howdy-do, Dude.

THE DUDE. Oh, hey man, how are you? I wondered if I’d see you again.

THE STRANGER. Wouldn’t miss the semis. Hows things been goin’?

THE DUDE. Ahh, you know. Strikes and gutters, ups and downs.

(*The Big Lebowski*)

And later, the Stranger wishes him good-bye:

THE STRANGER. Sure. Take it easy, Dude--I know that you will.

THE DUDE. Yeah man. Well, you know, the Dude abides.

*The Stranger gives his head a shake of appreciation, then looks into the camera.*

THE STRANGER. I don’t know about you, but I take comfort in that. It’s
good knowin’ he’s out there, the Dude, takin’ her easy for all us sinners. *(The Big Lebowski)*

The phrase “the Dude abides” is one of the most popular quotes from the movie and in early twenty-first century American culture. It is on t-shirts (“The Dude Abides”), posters (“Big Lebowski Posters”), and even a self-help book (Benjamin). The dude “abiding,” in this sense, is the Dude living a life in harmony with the natural state of the Coens’ world—a world full of randomness and a lack of human control. Normally, the interpretation of this scene is that the Stranger is wryly calling the rest of us “sinners,” but I actually think there’s a very sincere idea behind that. The Dude “abiding” and “takin’ her easy,” along with his reply of “strikes and gutters, ups and downs” to a question about how his life has been going, is the Dude living as close to a harmonious life as is possible in the Coens’ universe. By not attempting to control his life at the cost of all else, he’s avoiding sin. Most everything bad and very little good in the Coens movies happens because of someone attempting to control things instead of “abiding.”

Finally, contrast *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* with *No Country for Old Men*. In *No Country*, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is similarly confused and upset at this lack of morality. The movie opens up with Bell reminiscing about the old-time sheriffs, saying “you can't help but compare yourself against the old-timers. Can't help but wonder how they'd have operated these times” (*No Country*). “Some of the older sheriffs,” he says, “never even wore a gun” (*No Country*). He compares their environment with the one that he deals with now, saying “The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure. It's not that I'm afraid of it. I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job. But I don't
want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand.” (No Country)

Over the course of the movie, though, as Bell tracks Moss, Chigurh, and the satchel of money, he becomes more and more depressed about the lack of morality in the world and his inability to stop it. Later, near the end of the movie, he goes to see his uncle Ellis. Ellis asks why Bell is retiring. Bell answers, “I don’t know...I feel overmatched. I always figured when I got older that God would sort of come into my life somehow. And he didn’t” (No Country). Ellis chastises Bell and asks if Bell knows how Bell’s Uncle Mac “come to his reward” (No Country)—how Uncle Mac died. Ellis tells Bell of Uncle Mac’s brutal and horrific end, shot to death in the back in his own doorway by some criminals years ago. Ellis then tells Bell that “what you [Bell] got ain’t nothin’ new...this country’s hard on people. You can’t stop what’s coming. It ain’t all waiting up on you...that’s vanity” (No Country). Here, we see another reaffirmation of both life’s capriciousness—”what you got ain’t nothin’ new” (No Country) and ”this country’s hard on people” (No Country)—and the futility of attempting to control life--”you can’t stop what’s coming. It ain’t all waiting up on you. That’s vanity” (No Country).

Bell, though, is scared of these truths. At the end of the movie, he recounts his dreams to his wife and the movie ends on Bell looking apprehensive, scared, and dissatisfied. He is pining for his wife to give him an answer to what the dreams mean. He really wants her to give him some meaning. But she has none to offer, just as Bell’s desire for God to come into his life went unfulfilled. God still hasn’t shown up. The world is still awfully cruel. I am avoiding quoting the dreams here because the content of the dreams, to me, is irrelevant, another Macguffin. Throughout the movie, as I asserted
supra, Bell has been looking for an answer as to why the world is so capricious and cold. His monologue at the beginning of the film poses the question, as he says, “the crime you see now, it’s hard to even take its measure” (No Country), and his whole plot line has to do with trying to answer it. In about half of the scenes Bell is in, there’s some rumination on this theme. He talks with Wendell, his deputy, about a story in the paper about people kidnapping and murdering the elderly for their social security money. He tells Norma Jean Moss a story about a man accidentally maiming himself trying to butcher cattle. He talks with a fellow sheriff about “the dismal tide” (No Country) and why society is going downhill. He asks his wife to explain his seemingly meaningless dreams. And he talks with Ellis, who tells him that the world has always been capricious. The title, Ellis would argue, should be No Country for Any Men instead of No Country for Old Men. Bell cannot make peace with his environment, so he ends up in the same existential-crisis boat with Larry Gopnik from A Serious Man, as opposed to Marge from Fargo and The Dude from The Big Lebowski, who are in harmony with their world.

The Coens’ filmography is marked by recurring superficial and technical motifs and themes. They’ve made excellent use of animals, from the dog in Blood Simple to the ferret in The Big Lebowski to the cat in Inside Llewyn Davis. Their cinematography, done predominantly by Roger Deakins and Barry Sonnenfeld (Ball 1) (VanAirsdale 1), is renowned for its technical wizardry, innovativeness, and creativity (“Exposure — The Coen Brothers” 2). Their hyper-realistic settings and ear for local dialect are consistent even as they dramatically change settings for each movie (Coyle 2). Too often, though, these achievements are what critics pay attention to at the expense of examining the serious moral explorations in their movies. Too often have they been accused of using
“style over substance (Wilson 4) or being consistently sadist (Taylor 1) or unwilling to abandon irony (Ebert, “Intolerable Cruelty” 1).

Criticism like this is, in a word, ridiculous. They do not try for “style over substance” (Wilson 4). Rather, they possess a substance that is most commonly regarded as bleak, depressing, and ironic. Their substance also isn’t seen in the genre-defying ways in which they use it. I have chosen, I think, the five films of theirs that most forcefully assert their philosophy in *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Burn After Reading*, and *A Serious Man*, but the truth is that most, if not all of their movies, from *Blood Simple* to *Inside Llewyn Davis* contain ruminations on this philosophy, restated here:

1. Humans ultimately have very little agency over their fates.

2. There’s no moral force overseeing the world.

3. The only way to arrive at some degree of limited happiness are those that either accept or ignore the first two maxims.

Their “comedies” and “dramas” are not really comedies and dramas. They all contain, more or less, the same philosophy expressed in different ways and dressed in different clothes. *The Big Lebowski* is structurally the same as *No Country for Old Men*, but viewers have vastly different experiences when watching them. Likewise, *A Serious Man* is much more of a comedy than *Fargo*, but *A Serious Man* is far more expressively depressing. The reason they are different has to do with the characters’ outlooks and whether they arrive at some degree of limited happiness by the ends of the movies. We are a resolution-driven society, and we like Batman to get the bad guy, or at least be somewhat happy and resolved by the end of the movie. Feeling that a character is in
harmony with nature makes us think that we, too, could one day have a harmonious relationship with the world. This is the reason that the “nihilist” label has never fit the Coens. The world is a capricious and random place, yes...but as long as you try to be a decent person, understand the risks, and do not fret over what the future will or will not bring, you can lead a happy, harmonious life. Meaning stems from our desire to construct meaning, not anywhere else.
CHAPTER VIII

CREATIVE SECTION: A SCREENPLAY ENTITLED EUGENE’S BEEN TOOK

Introduction

More than anything, the goal of this thesis is to become a better writer. In my mind, there are two big ways to do this: studying how the masters write and writing. I could think of no finer or more consistently powerful writers in Hollywood than the Coens, and the formal analysis of their oeuvre is immensely helpful. Studying both their comedy through the lens of formal theories of humor and their philosophy through deep explication proved immensely helpful as I developed the third part of this thesis—the creative section. Having read each of the Coens’ screenplays multiple times, I feel much more confident in my ability to develop a producible screenplay. As an aspiring professional writer, I cannot stress enough how much of a help it has been.

In addition, the Coens recurrently use numerous other techniques that are extremely helpful to anyone pursuing a career in film. As noted in the section on Mechanical Theory, their use of specific cultures and settings for their stories lend humor, uniqueness, and authenticity to their movies. Their innovative camera techniques are great for writers and others to understand how camerawork can be a part of a script. Using the camera to show as opposed to telling through dialogue is great narrative style and can be a boon for comedic pattern recognition. Lots of their repetitive gags are told through image. There are many more. One day I may make a fuller analysis and turn this study into a book.
For now, though, I am keeping the content limited to a study of their humor and philosophy along with the writing of part of a screenplay that I hope to finish and either film or sell to a production company. Over the first seven chapters, I explained the results of my study on the Coens’ humor and philosophy. In this last chapter, I have included a section of a screenplay entitled *Eugene’s Been Took*. Briefly described, the screenplay is a story about three pizza delivery drivers in East Tennessee searching for a dog that was, they believe, abducted by aliens.

I am going to spoil the story here: the drivers do not find the aliens. I tried not to shamelessly ape the Coens, but I did try to construct my screenplay according to some of the parameters that they have established. On a surface level, I attempt to produce humor like they do: pattern recognition, norm violation, pointing out humanity’s mechanical nature. On a deeper level, I attempt to operate within the same philosophical context that they do—humans have little control, there is no moral oversight, and happiness comes from accepting the former two statements. By placing the film in East Tennessee, a place that I know and where I was raised and attended college, I tried to include some of the specificity of setting that serves the Coens’ movies so well.

Because the act of writing a screenplay is a long, detailed, and arduous process, I am including a “treatment” version of the projected screenplay in this chapter as well as a polished excerpt from the script’s opening scenes. A treatment, in screenwriting terminology, is a long summary of the movie that normally comes in between sketching the movie’s ideas out and writing the first draft of the screenplay (Horowitz 1). Drafting and polishing a screenplay of around twenty-five pages is a more fruitful endeavor for a senior study than drafting and polishing a screenplay of one hundred and twenty pages,
especially when the rest of the study contains substantial analysis. A treatment is also a useful thing to have to show successful, busy, and impatient studio/production executives. Often times, the decision makers delegate the nitty-gritty reading of the script to assistants while they examine the written treatment. The treatment, then, will serve as both a guide as I continue to write this screenplay as a graduate and a potential marketable product in itself.

A quick note before the text begins: in this treatment, I will try to point out the areas where the analysis of the Coens has been most fruitful, but rest assured that their entire worldview has permeated my creative instincts. Now, the treatment:

The movie begins with 50-year-old delivery driver Eugene “Gene” Pounder walking with his pet Chihuahua, Tito, through the woods of the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. Tito runs off ahead of Gene to check something out in a clearing in the woods. Gene sees hears Tito barking, then a yelp, then sees a blue flash of light. Gene scurries up to the clearing, but, when he arrives, all he finds is Tito’s collar. He hears a twig snapping, looks up, and there is another flash of light. The scene cuts to black and the credits start.

As the opening credits roll, 31-year-old delivery driver Kent Thomson brings orders to various residences around the fictional town of Stockholm, Tennessee. These scenes are meant to provide some background context for driving as well as provide an opportunity for some comedic beats. Kent drives a beaten down Saturn SL2. The front window is jammed, so he has to flick his cigarettes out of the front passenger window. He is not a safe driver. He tries to check his cell phone, but something (presumably the
aliens) is interfering with cell service in the town. He stops his car and takes pictures of several vistas; he is an amateur photographer.

Later, during the night, he returns to the store, hoping that the assistant manager will send him home for the night. The assistant manager, 20-year-old Courtney, asks Kent if he has seen or heard from Gene. No one, Kent included, can reach Gene, so the closing shift is down a driver. Courtney needs someone to cover Gene’s shift. Kent is the only one who can do it currently working, so she bribes him with twenty dollars to essentially work a nine a.m. to one a.m shift. Kent receives a text from his 29-year-old ex-wife Muriel asking him to buy her a pizza. It is revealed through the text that Muriel is having a child. Kent declines her request. He decides, though, to stay the rest of the shift and get the extra money.

Kent returns from what he thinks was his final delivery to find out that Courtney has routed him to another order. The order is late. Kent, cursing and rhetorically wondering who orders pizza at midnight, finds out that it is Muriel. He takes the order, but stops in at a gas station to get a sixer of beer. The station’s power flickers, there are blue flashes and whooshing shadows behind him, and there is a general feeling of unease. This is compounded when he goes in the store and tries to buy beer. The clerk acts really strange and reads Keith his horoscope, which says to “beware when Saturn enters the house of Mercury.”

Kent is weirded out by the event but just dismisses it, opening a beer while he drives. He arrives at Muriel’s house. Muriel tells Kent that he needs to pay for the pizza. Kent, flabbergasted but not wanting to cause a scene while Muriel is pregnant, relents and agrees. Kent also finds out that Muriel has complained about poor service to the store,
necessitating another free pizza being sent out. Muriel is one of the few people with cell service, and Courtney calls her to apologize and inform her that another one is being sent out. Kent, hearing this, takes the phone and tells Courtney to tell the other driver to take it slow on the back roads. Frustrated, he leaves, chainsmoking cigarettes. He reaches for another beer in his floorboard, gets it, but right as he pops the top, he sees a pair of headlights an illuminated Mercury logo come flying through the air towards his car. He swerves off the road, drifts, and the back end of the car slams into a tree, accordionning the back half.

During the car wreck, Kent’s open beer can flies from the cupholder and hits him in the face. He scrambles out of the car and thinks his head is bleeding. It is not, but his head is covered in beer. He gets his uniform, the beer, his pizza bags, his sign and cord, and he throws them all into a nearby creek (this is standard operating procedure [excepting the beer] for delivery drivers during a wreck because most/all of their insurance policies do not cover delivering). He lights a cigarette.

Another pizza delivery driver, 26-year-old Tyler Collier, from his store drives up to the site of the wreck. He sees Kent and asks him if he is okay. Kent thanks him profusely for stopping until he realizes that it was Tyler’s car that caused him to veer off the road. He yells at a very regretful Tyler. Tyler offers to drive Kent around until he gets a new car or fixes the very obviously totaled one. As the two drive off in Tyler’s car, Kent notices the tens of pills scattered around Tyler’s floorboard. They turn out to be prescription painkillers that Tyler calls “that soft white.” Tyler admits to having a problem and admits to looking for one when he went over the train tracks.
Suddenly, in the rear view mirror, flashing blue lights start to appear. Thinking it is the cops, Tyler starts to panic and tells Kent to collect all the pills and chuck them out the window. Tyler starts driving erratically, trying to help Kent flush the evidence. He speeds up, trying to lose the lights. There is a brief chase until Tyler veers down an old mine road. They think they have lost the lights, but suddenly they see blue lights all around them and several humanoid shapes scurrying outside of the car. They start screaming and screech out of there. Driving back towards their store, they talk about what they have seen. Kent is shaken up, but Tyler is more relieved that it was not the police. Kent asks Tyler to bring him home instead of back to the store. Tyler does, and Kent falls right asleep.

Waking up, Kent has cell service multiple messages on his phone. Three are from Courtney from last night, yelling at him because he skipped out on closing the store. Kent skips through these until he hears the voice of Ben Schaefer, the 36-year-old general manager of the pizza restaurant. Ben tells Kent to come see Ben when he picks up his pay check that day. Tyler comes to pick up Kent to take him to the restaurant. On the way, there is a big traffic jam in front of the cop station. Kent tells Tyler that not working for a few days will not be that bad, as he can take a few days to go on hikes and take pictures. As traffic starts, Tyler and Kent pull around to rubberneck and see Gene, naked, handcuffed, and covered in mud, being restrained by cops. He is yelling wildly. Seeing Gene, they pull over and attempt to get out of the car. They are ushered along by the police, but Gene sees Tyler and Kent and yells for help, shouting “they took me! They took me!” They get back in their car and continue on to the restaurant. Tyler drops Kent off and tells him that he is going back to check on Gene.
While there, Kent meets Ben in his office. Ben interrogates Kent about his not coming back in to close the previous night. He also informs him that he knows about the car wreck and that Kent should have reported this (he tells Kent he knows because he has contacts on the police force). Ben tells Kent that he is suspended “pending a full Father John’s investigation” that will be concluded by the end of the week. Kent gets pissed off at this—he has always been a loyal worker—and storms out of the restaurant, where Tyler is nowhere to be found. He walks back into the restaurant and asks to use the phone, cell service being down again.

He cannot reach Tyler, so he ends up walking to the police station to find Hartman. He arrives, sweaty, and sees Tyler and Gene, now dressed in a black-and-white striped jail suit, handcuffed and sitting in the jail. He asks the officer at the front desk what happened and is informed that Tyler had some outstanding warrants out on him and was arrested when he came in to ask about Gene. Kent asks to talk with them, and Tyler and Gene both plead with him to bail them out. Nobody has any money—Tyler offers to pay but said all of his money “was tied up in that stash” and Gene says that he is just poor. Kent is not going to bail them out, but Gene implores him by repeatedly saying “they have my dog, Kent.” Tyler gets in on the deal by saying that he is the only one with the car. Kent only has enough in savings to bail one of them out, so he very reluctantly takes a loan out against his camera. He visits a seedy bail bondsman, 47-year-old Abe Long.

After Kent bails Tyler and Gene out, Tyler tells them that he is going to drive them to Willard Crabgrass, a 55-year-old local county employee/”getter” that might be able to help them find the dog. Meanwhile, back at the station, two Tennessee Valley
Authority agents dressed as stereotypical men-in-black show up at the cop station and start asking what happened to Gene. The police interfere with their investigation and are obstinate out due to territorial reasons. One of the dumber deputies accidentally lets loose that Gene is a delivery driver, and the cops leave.

Kent, Gene, and Tyler arrive at Willard’s trailer. Willard agrees to help them out if Tyler provides him with some “soft white.” Tyler claims to not have any, but relents and produces what he swears to Kent is “the bare ass of my stash.” Willard takes some and tells them to follow into the woods, bringing his dog. The TVA agents, meanwhile, go to the restaurant and speak to Ben. Ben gives them all of their information and asks if they can get back the pizza bags and pizza sign that Kent hasn’t returned. The agents promise that they will “look into it.”

As night falls, Kent, Tyler, Gene, Willard, and Willard’s bloodhound, Smokey, venture into the woods where Gene was abducted. Gene leads them to the woods, where Smokey takes over the search. Smokey leads them through the woods to a clearing where a bunch of blue lights and humanoid figures are setting up a makeshift, alien camp. Kent takes pictures. Smokey keeps whining because he smells Tito’s scent down in the camp, eventually breaking free from Willard. Willard runs after him. Kent tells Tyler to take Gene back to the car (Gene is shivering and scared witless at this point) and to meet him on the other side of the park on the skyway. Kent goes in with his camera after Willard. Kent goes down into the camp and sneaks around, trying to take pictures. Eventually, he hears a bunch of barking and Willard yelling “get your damn dirty hands off my dog, get off!” An alarm sounds, the lights start strobing and turning many colors, and Kent takes off running in the direction of the skyway.
Two of the humanoids notice Kent and start to chase him. There is a brief chase scene. Kent hangs the camera bag from a tree and continues to the skyway. After a brief wait, Tyler and Gene show up with the car and speed away. Tyler drops Kent off at Kent’s house. They go eat at a Waffle House and look at the pictures. While they are eating, the bail bondsman overhears Tyler speaking too loudly about the content and the value of the photos and makes a note of it.

They drive back to Kent’s house, but as they pull onto his street, they see tons of unmarked black government cars pulled up to his house. The agents are combing through it, but there are no local cops around. Tyler drives slowly past. Kent recommends that they see if they can stay at Muriel’s house for the night. They go to Muriel’s house. She is having another party. She ridicules them but tells them that they can stay the night.

They wake up, have breakfast, and plan to go retrieve the camera. They want to get the camera and bring it to the local police to clear their names. Unbeknownst to them, the bail bondsman had been following them and staked out Muriel’s house overnight. They go to the woods and try to retrace Kent’s steps with the bondsman sneaking behind them. They find it, but the bondsman pulls a gun on them and takes it. He ties them up around a tree and tells them that he is going to leave them for “the coyotes, the aliens, heck, the alien coyotes, who cares” and laughs, taking the camera with him. He says that he is going to sell the footage to “the highest bidder…maybe Jesse Ventura or that Bigfoot show.”

Kent, Tyler, and Gene start yelling about how they got strapped to the tree when suddenly Smokey comes up to the tree, sniffing. Recognizing the dog, they start calling to him. Puzzled, Smokey looks at the three until suddenly Willard trips and scrambles
onto his back from a clearing. He is covered in blue goo, waving a shotgun around. In haste, he shoots at the tree when he sees them and almost takes Gene’s head off. Willard relaxes a bit when he recognizes the trio.

Willard frees them and tells them of his ordeal over the last two days. “They” took Willard and ran experiments on him “…and I think poor Smokey, too. He took a hit but he’ll be alright.” He tells the trio that there was a larger structure in the center that he could not get into. All the things that took him were wearing some type of suit. “They went down okay, though, I think I blasted like three or four of the fuckin’ devils.” Willard thinks that they are demons bent on taking humanity once and for all. He still has not seen any sign of Tito. Gene theorizes that his dog has got to be in the central structure. They tell Willard how the bondsman stole the pictures. Willard curses the bondsman and tells the trio that he used to be the bondsman’s partner. The bondsman’s real name is apparently “Abe Lepstein.”

Kent, Tyler, and Gene leave Willard, who “doesn’t want any more of this mess.” Meanwhile, Abe is driving, camera in his front seat, laughing and singing along to the radio. He gets stuck behind a church van unloading elderly attendees for bingo night. He starts honking his horn, impatient, and yelling a bunch. The church ladies look at him, horrified, but he keeps yelling. Two huge dudes come out of the church and bolt to his car. They pull him out of the car and start beating him up. They warn him “don’t fu…don’t eff with bingo night.” They take out Kent’s camera and smash it. Bleeding, Abe pulls out his gun and starts shooting at the church dudes. As he goes to finish them off, one of the church ladies shoots him, killing him.
The trio goes back to Muriel’s house. She informs them that the TVA agents had been around, but that she told them that she had not seen any of them in ages. Still, though, she is pissed off and tells them that they have to be gone tonight. Kent thinks they should go to the police even though their evidence is gone, but Tyler does not want to go because of “other shit that they might have forgotten to charge me with” and Gene wants to go back to the clearing because “Tito is all I got, Kent.” Kent reluctantly agrees, but asks Muriel if he can borrow her camera.

Meanwhile, the cops investigating the scene plug in the SD card that they found at the church crime scene to their computer. They are horrified. Back at Muriel’s house, the trio are preparing for their big incursion, wearing dark clothes and bringing gear. In the night, they return to the woods. They sneak through the woods and come upon the camp again, busy with more humanoids. Gene provides a distraction while Tyler and Kent sneak into the camp. Taking more pictures, they make their way to the central structure. Inside, they creep down several hallways. They get to the center of the structure and enter a room that is filled with what looks to be computer servers. They look around at one of the monitors. Records of call logs and text messages flow by on the screen.

Suddenly, a human voice tells them to freeze. Turning around, they see two of the humanoids in the weird suits take off their helmets, revealing human faces. They are holding guns. A voice from a catwalk above congratulates them, telling Kent and Tyler that they have seen more than anyone has yet. The voice is revealed to be Ben, their store manager. He tells them that he is an entrepreneur that is building a data center that intercepts calls and text messages to sell to marketing companies to sell better targeted ads. Ben tells Kent and Tyler that all the alien stuff throws people off the trail. He runs a
small operation, in truth, all anonymous. He laughs when he thinks that he had to tell his own investigators where to look. As Ben is about to shoot the trio, something shoots Ben. He falls over, and the two guards start shooting at the catwalk above. Gene is hit by a stray bullet, falling down. Kent and Tyler duck for cover behind the servers. Willard manages to shoot the other two guards.

Kent and Tyler thank Willard and check on Gene. They hear a ton of commotion outside of the room. Just when they think Gene is not going to make it and they are going to be killed by the other guards, the cops burst in holding Tito. “Gene!” one of the cops says, “We found your dog.” Gene’s spirits noticeably lift. The cops tell the trio how they saw they stuff on the SD card and knew something was up. “Well, that and the fact that the TVA is never as polite as those two fakers.” The trio and Willard return home. In closing, Kent is shown running the pizza store, Tyler is shown signing a book entitled “My Encounter With UFOs,” and Gene is shown relaxing, finally being eligible for full disability. The credits roll.

And that ends the script. Excerpted below is a significant part of it, from the opening until Kent and Tyler’s first encounter with the supposed aliens. Doing this thesis has provided me with a good start on what I feel is a good idea for a script. I have tried to allow the best elements of the Coens to inspire my choice of humor and plot in the films. I plan to add more pattern repetition and pay attention to where benign violations and mechanical recurrence can occur. For example, I plan to repeat the exchange “ex-wife” in response to someone calling Murie asl Kent’s “wife” in accordance with positive repetition (Clarke 40). I sketched the church shootout scene in reference to Peter McGraw’s example of two conflicting norms producing humor (1142). And the southern
dialects and mannerisms endemic to the movie should produce mechanical recurrence.

Philosophically, I tried to keep the seemingly random and capricious nature of the Coens movies, but I did not include a character that ruminated on this random and capricious nature. The characters certainly feel it, but they ignore it. To me, that makes the film more of a black comedy more than a funny drama. And, more than anything, I want to learn to write comedy.
Eugene’s Been Took

An Excerpt
EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Against the backdrop of the conifer forest of the East Tennessee Smoky Mountains, a slightly portly man of 50, GENE, shuffles in the woods with his dog along a narrow unmarked trail.

The dog is sprightly, a Chihuahua. Off-leash, it is darting around its owner and wagging its tail. The man is decidedly less frantic.

GENE

(grimacing, stumbling over a rock)

Oof.

The dog comes running up to a particular spot on the trail and starts sniffing. We hear a twig snap, and suddenly the dog starts barking.

We see Gene running over to the dog, but, right as he gets over the crest of the hill, we see a blinding blue flash. The dog yelps and disappears in the flash.

GENE

Tito? Tito!

Gene shuffles quickly over to the crest. Stooping painfully, Gene sees that all that remains is a small blue leash that says "Tito" in cursive lettering. As he looks at the collar, puzzled, we hear more creaking and twigs snapping in the woods.

As he looks up, his face is the contorted mask of a man who isn't used to fearing something more than chronic Rheumatoid Arthritis. It's illuminated by the blue light.

There's another ghostly screech.

CUT TO BLACK
EXT. ROADS - DAY

As Iron Horse's "Dramamine" plays, KENT, a twenty-nine year old pizza delivery drive, is taking orders to customers in a black 1997 Honda Accord. The car is not in good shape. He's smoking cigarettes with his company hat off, revealing a slightly balding head.

His ash tray is wedged full of what looks to be a hundred cigarettes. He has to flip the ashes out of his passenger-side window, which causes a lot to fall on the hot bag of the pizza that he's delivering.

There is light banter between Kent and the customers. At one of the houses, a tall, thick older man with impeccably groomed white hair is standing in the doorway wearing nothing but a wifebeater, calf-length white socks, and off-white/Robin's Egg blue boxers.

OLD MAN
I suppose you'll be wanting a *tip*.

We see him come up to another door. There's a very sweet older lady wearing a full-length stained yellow muumuu.

OLD LADY
How much is it, sweetie?

KENT
It's, uh, 13.81.

The OLD LADY turns around, revealing that the gown is backless. Kent gets the full view of her unclothed rear.

KENT
Uh...
OLD LADY

Harold, get the pizza boy fifteen dollars!

INT. PIZZA RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Kent is in the store counting his earnings for the day. COURTNEY, a 20-year-old assistant manager, is hiding from the customers' view while she eats Nutella with a spoon.

COURTNEY

Kent, have you heard from Gene today?

KENT

(distracted, counting money)

Why would I have heard from Gene today?

COURTNEY

Well, no one has. I don't get it. He's never late.

KENT

(still moving around)

I don't know. Cell tower is fucky, probably can't call in.

Kent is checking his texts as he says this. He sees one that says "Hey could u pick me and the kid up a pizza?"

COURTNEY

Well we're down a closer.

KENT

Not doing it...
Kent is writing "fuck no" in the reply box on his phone.

COURTNEY

We're down a closer and we need someone who can do the truck.

KENT

I don't care, I'm not doing it. I've been here since nine, Courtney, get one of the new kids.

Kent erases "fuck no" and writes "you can't make anything?"

COURTNEY

Are you kidding? The truck?

KENT

How hard is it to move shit from one spot to another. Here, I'll teach them.

Kent mimes picking up a box and putting it down, making an incredulous face.

COURTNEY

Ha-ha. Seriously, I know you need the money. New kids can't do it. Ben says he'll give you twenty dollars.

KENT

(exasperated, looking at blank box on phone)

Thirty.
COURTNEY

Don't make me talk to him again. He's creepy. He's like a dark-haired Donald Trump.

KENT

Come on, Courtney.

COURTNEY

Pleeeeeeaaaaaassee? Imagine how happy you’ll make him.

Courtney points to Ben’s plaque on the wall that reads “GENERAL MANAGER”.

Kent erases "just eat something else”, writes "no", and sends it.

KENT

(sighing heavily)

Just don't give me shitty routes. No more old ass.

COURTNEY

Yes! But I have no control over the routing. You might be fucked.

EXT. ROADS - NIGHT

Several hours later, Kent is yawning as he drives down a main strip of his town. Neon and tungsten lights reflect his car window as he's driving down the road.

We see a shot of the bank clock. It says "10:23pm" and "God is watching".
Kent sees this and is puzzled, and we see him instinctively reach for his phone to check the time. It says "CLOCK UNAVAILABLE, ACQUIRING NETWORK CONNECTION..."

KENT

(frustrated)

Fucking third-world country.

We fade to the next scene.

EXT. Papa John's - night

We see Kent pulling into the store. As he shuts off his light, yawns, and gets out of his car, Courtney runs up to him as he opens his door.

COURTNEY

Hey, I signed you in and routed you again. Here's the slip and the pizza. I was about to lose CRS.

Sorry, sorry! I know, it's super late, I suck, blahhh, you hate me.

KENT

Are you kidding me? No, I don't hate you, I hate whoever-

Kent reads the name off the slip. It's his ex-wife.

KENT

Muriel Davey--are you fucking kidding me? You're sending me to my ex-wife's house? Come on!
COURTNEY

You have a wife?

KENT

Ex-wife.

COURTNEY

Whatever. Someone was desperate enough to marry you?

Kent looks at her.

EXT. ROADS - NIGHT

We see Kent driving along the main strip again. He picks up the slip of paper that says "Muriel Davey". Shaking his head, he crumples the paper and throws it onto the floorboard with the rest of them.

He pulls into a gas station and take off his work polo. He gets out of his car, takes the illuminated sign off of his roof, and throws it in his trunk.

INT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

We see Kent walk across the gas station parking lot in khakis, a white t-shirt, and sneakers. In the background, we hear wind rushing and a large black shadow blur across the parking lot. The gas station's power flickers and the lights go on and off.

We see Kent looking up, puzzled, and then continue walking into the gas station.

We see Kent put a six-pack of beer on the counter. A grizzled old CLERK is reading a newspaper.
CLERK

(pensive, murmuring)
Odd happenings...technology corrupted...it's happening again.

He sees Kent.

CLERK

Oh! Sorry, sir, didn't see you there. (kindly)
May I see your, uh, identification, sir?

KENT

(fishing it out of his wallet)
Yeah...here.
The CLERK puts on his reading glasses.

CLERK

(holding up the ID to the light, squinting)
Ahh, April 16th. That makes you a Sagittarius, right?

KENT

Sure.

CLERK

Strange time to be a Sagittarius, no?
A beat. Kent still has his wallet out, looking at him puzzled.

KENT

Sure? How much I owe you?
CLERK

(saddened)

Oh, the adult beverages. Yes. Well, let me ring it up.

Kent says nothing.

We see him make a deliberate gesture of getting the laser gun and scanning the beer. As he does it, the power flickers completely off and on. There's another rumbling in the sky above.

CLERK

Ah, dadgummit.

We see the scanner flashing "RESET PROCESSING" on the customer display.

Clerk

(puzzled)

Oh, third time it's done that today. It'll come right back up. Power's been flashing all day...

KENT

Motherfu...third-world country.

CLERK

Third what now?

KENT

Never mind...look, can I just pay for this?
CLERK

No, can't do that. Sorry, sir. Real sorry. Gotta scan it.

Kent lets out a heavy sigh. There's a beat. The room darkens again, the power cuts out, and there's rumbling as the clerk reads Kent's horoscope right through the power going off.

CLERK

Won't do you no good getting upset, sir. Here, let me cheer you up, read you a sign. Sagittarius, right?

"Good tidings! It looks like a great opportunity will be headed your way. Seek the abstract from the normal and pursue the normal from the abstract. One becomes one as three become one, but one won't be one when they day is done. Look out for Mercury."

As he finishes reading, there's a processing sound from the register and it beeps. It reads "4.83".

Clerk

There we go! Four dollars, eighty three cents, please.

EXT. ROADS - NIGHT

We see Kent nursing a tall boy as he drives down the road, shaken from his encounter with the clerk.
We see him go over several roads, including one set of train tracks on a hill. He slows his car gingerly to avoid them.

He pulls down a long gravel driveway. We see a faint pulsating light and faint techno music coming out of the house. There are multiple cars parked in the grass and on the driveway.

EXT. MURIEL'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Kent steps out of the car and gets the pizza. A 29-year-old woman, MURIEL, exits the house and steps out onto the porch holding a red solo cup. She's very pregnant, wearing a tank top, pajamas, and a robe. Kent doesn't notice her as he's walking up.

MURIEL

(yelling at Kent)

What the fuck took you so long?

KENT

(walking the ramp up to the porch)

Nice to see you too, Muriel. What are you doing here, throwing a fucking party? What is this? And please tell me that's not what it looks like.

MURIEL

Relax, Kent. It's water, I'm just having a couple of friends over for the solstice. NBD.

KENT

NBD?
MURIEL
No big fuckin' deal. Don't worry about it. Jesus.
Thanks for getting this, me and the parasite are
starving.

She takes the pizza and opens it.

MURIEL
Ooh, peppers and onions, y'all didn't fuck it up.
Wonderful.

KENT
Aren't you supposed to be eating, I don't know, like
fruits and vegetables or some shit? Fuck.

MURIEL
Since when did you become Gregory Peck? And the
fuck do you care anyway, who says he's yours?

KENT

MURIEL
(picking off a green pepper)
Oh. Maybe he is.

A beat.

MURIEL
I don't gotta pay for this, do I?
KENT

This is why I didn’t answer, of course you do—

Muriel’s phone starts ringing.

KENT

How are you getting cell service?

MURIEL

(talking to phone)


Muriel gives the phone to Kent.

MURIEL

(to Kent)

She says she wants to talk to you.

KENT

What the fuck for?

Kent takes the phone.

KENT

(to phone)

Yeah?

We hear Courtney on the phone.

COURTNEY

Hey what took you so long? I couldn't get a hold of you. They called and complained.
KENT
(to phone)
What? They called and--

KENT
(to Muriel)
You called and complained that I'm fucking late?

Muriel
(whispering)
You are fucking late. I ordered like an hour ago.
Tell her I want it free.

KENT
(to phone)
Courtney, it's my fucking wife-

MURIEL
Ex-wife.

KENT
(to phone)
Ex-wiiiiife! She doesn’t want another—

MURIEL
As far as you know.

KENT
(to Muriel, motioning her to be quiet)
Could you? Please?
KENT

She doesn’t need another pizza didn't need to send
Tyler out here, he's gonna get lost, he doesn't know
the fuckin' roads...Just, ugh, okay. I'm coming back
to the store. She's not paying.

COURTNEY

Okay A, she needs to pay or you do, however you
want to work that out, you know the rules. B, I can't
reach Tyler because cell service is out. And C,
you're going to be a dad? That's so exciting! Oh my
god, me and Trent have been thinking about it for
months, and I know it's a lot of work and a lot of--

KENT

Listen yeah, about those cell problems, they're
coming back again, I can't hear you, gotta go, bye.

Kent hangs up the phone as Courtney is still talking.

KENT

Listen, could you not order again? I do this shit for a living.

MURIEL

(walking back to the door)

Yeah, you said that. Get another job then. Me and the kid gotta eat.
KENT

I can't just--at least let me buy you something decent.

MURIEL

This is what I wanted, it's all good. Make sure and tell the other kid how to get here if you see him. I got a Hawaiian for that one and it tastes like shit cold.

A beat as Kent stares at her.

KENT

I...

MURIEL

(walking back to KENT with the pizza box)

Don't worry. Hey…

Muriel leans up and gets close to Kent’s ear.

MURIEL

Do you have a twenty so I can pay him? I'm out of cash.

EXT. ROADS - NIGHT

The Louvin Brothers' *Knoxville Girl* plays as Kent drives down the gravel road, sipping another beer. He lights another cigarette and continues driving, shaking his head, lost in thought.

Kent sips the beer and flicks the cigarette's ashes out of the passenger-side window.
Somewhere else in the night, there's an early 90s Mercury Capri hauling ass through the same roads as before. The car careens towards the railroad tracks/hump in the road, the engine roaring.

Meanwhile, Kent tilts his beer all the way back and taps the bottom. He finishes it and throws it in his floorboard. He flicks the cigarette out of his window and opens another beer.

The Mercury Capri is still speeding.

Kent cranks the passenger window lever, leaned across his car, not paying attention to the road. He finally gets it up.

Kent finally turns his attention to the road again. Suddenly, he sees a pair of headlights underneath an illuminated pizza sign coming out of the air at him. He squints in confusion, wondering what the hell he is seeing. The realization hits him.

    KENT

        (shocked, eyes getting wide)

        Shit!

Kent slams his brakes and jerks his car to the right. This throws off the car's balance--the back tires make him drift off the road and into a tree. Windows break as the back end of his car slams into a thick tree trunk, causing the airbags to deploy.

The just-opened tallboy flies out of his cupholder and smacks him in the jaw, spilling its contents all over him.

The tape slowly grinds to a halt, going vvvvrrrrwvvw. Kent's head is resting on the wheel's airbag. There's a slight and comfortable blinking sound--somehow the hazard lights have been turned on.
Kent snaps to and inhales sharply. His glasses are askew on his head.

KENT

(panicked)

Huuuihh!

Kent immediately starts almost slapping his head. It's soaked, and he thinks his head is bleeding. His glasses fall off when he does this (he's forgotten he wears them) and he panics. He shoves them back on. One has a spider-web crack near the center of them. He looks around for the source of the lights and sees that the hazards are on.

He punches the hazards off and, realizing his mistake, punches them right back on. He struggles with his seatbelt and the door--it's wedged up near a tree--until he manages to fall/stumble out onto the Tennessee clay dirt, still panicked.

He stumbles up to his feet and look at his car.

KENT

Oh fuck, oh fuck, fuck fuck fuck!

Hands on his head, Kent is having a near panic attack He runs back to the car and rips the still-illuminated hood sign off the car. It jerks from its cord. He looks around and sees a creek. He awkwardly and hastily tosses it in.

He wedges open the rear-seat door and takes two hotbags out, chucking them into the river, too. He does the same with the beer and his uniform/hat. He finally reaches into the car to get his cigarettes. He doesn't throw those.

Hands shaking, he lights a cigarette. As he's lighting it, lights come from the direction of his ex-wife's house. They blind him as the car pulls up to the side of the road where Kent
is standing, white shirt covered in red clay and beer stains. Kent takes a puff off of his cigarette and throws it down.

It's an early 90s Mercury Capri. Out steps a tall, lanky figure wearing loose-fitting khakis and a Papa John's hat and uniform. This is TYLER.

TYLER

(confused)

Kent?

Kent sees him and sighs relief.

KENT

Tyler, thank God you're here. My car is fucked.

Someone, some fuck, some fuckin'...ran me off the road. Ugh, ughhhh, ughhhh.

Kent doubles over, nauseous from all the adrenaline.

TYLER

It's okay. Hey, it's okay. Calm down. You're okay.

You're okay. It's okay.

KENT

I'm okay. I'm okay.

TYLER

Are you okay? Indicate that you're okay.

KENT

I'm okay, I'm fuckin' fine, just sick a little. I'm okay.

I'm not bleeding, am I?
TYLER

No, you are not bleeding.

Tyler sniffs at Kent and gets a sour puss on his face.

TYLER

You kinda smell like piss, though.

Tyler bends down to where Kent is.

TYLER

(whispering)

Is your junk okay?

KENT

Yes. Back up, come on, what's wrong with you? It's beer, man, I think one spilled on me during the wreck.

TYLER

Oh. Well, we all been there.

KENT

(absentminded)

Tell me about it.

Kent stands back up and starts looking at his car.

KENT

Jesus, I don't know what the fuck happened. Thanks for stopping, man. Lucky you showed up. That's my
old--well, formerly--old lady's house you delivered

to. God what a shitty night.

Kent looks in Tyler's front seat. The pizza is still there.

KENT

Wait, did you deliver that--

Kent looks quizzically at Tyler.

KENT

And how did you get here so fa--

Tyler is scratching his neck, nervous.

TYLER

Uhh, Kent, listen, it ain't what it--

KENT

You motherfucker! You're the one who ran me off
the road! What the fuck were you doing going so
fast? You could have killed me! Fuckin' A, man,
why the hell can't you people not fuck me for one
fucking day. Pounder no-shows, Fat fucking
Courtney sends me out here at the end of the
goddamn night, you run me off the fuckin' road,

Jesus fucking Christ, it's every fuckin' minute with
you people. Leave me the fuck alone! Let me take
the pizza shit, get the money shit, bring the money
shit back to the shitty fucking store and go home,

GOD FUCKIN'--

Kent stops and walks off, lighting another cigarette. Tyler still scratches his neck.

TYLER

Look, man...

KENT

I really don't want to hear it.

TYLER

Look, man, I'm really sorry, y'know, I apologize, I,

uh, I feel remorse...

KENT

Tyler, I don't want to hear it.

TYLER

(continuing, talking over Kent)

I'm regretful, it'll never happen again, I wasn't me

when it happened, I couldn't see...I'm sorry...

KENT

Tyler, what is this shit about "it'll never happen

again"? I don't even have a fuckin' car, of course it

won't happen again. I'm fucked.

Tyler

Hey, uh, listen, about that. If we keep this on the D-

L, y'know, uh, I'll drive you around. It's not that
bad. I had to be driven for a year by my dad when I got my DUI.

KENT

No, that's not gonna--(resigned) I don't want to be driven, I want my fucking car.

TYLER

Look man, I'm really sorry, I apologize, I, uh, feel remorse...

KENT

Okay, stop it, I get it. Whatever. Just drive me back to the store.

TYLER

Can we hug it out?

Kent

No.

TYLER

Oh...okay.

EXT. TYLER'S CAR - NIGHT

Tyler and Kent are in Tyler's car. It's a mess--fast food wrappers everywhere, an elaborate metal cross swinging from the rear view mirror, the faint outline of giant gothic lettering spelling out "COLLIER" on the top of the wind shield.
TYLER

It ain't that bad, man. You got your health. Your junk's fine. Yeah, you smell like piss, but that'll wash off, hell--

KENT

Tyler...

TYLER

And it's not like it's hard to find a shitty beater car while you get on your feet, hell, I know this guy named Bobby Ray that's got one he ain't usin' on account of his wife bein' too big for it, he'll probably sell it--

KENT

Tyler, what the fuck are you talking about?

TYLER

Oh, yeah, you don't know Bobby. Yeah, he likes big gals. Nothin' wrong with that. I've been known to enjoy some larger women from time to time, if you know what I mean. Always been drunk, though. Or high on mescal--

KENT

Tyler, what the fuck does this have to do with anything? My car's straight fucked. I got no fuckin'
money. My ex-wife is pregant. I won't be able to pay my rent this month, much less afford a fuckin' car.

TYLER

If you look down at the ground, don't be surprised if you see nothing but ants on your shoes.

KENT

Are you for fuckin' real?

TYLER

What? Man, things will pick up. I'm telling you. Look, I'll drive you wherever to go. Look in the glovebox. There should be about 300 Oxy in there.

KENT

Whoa, whoa, whoa...

TYLER

Now, I was planning on selling them for myself, but I'll give em to you on account of your car situation, no charge. There should be close to a grand in there. That'll get you a beater for the time being.

Tyler leans over Kent and gets the pills out of the glovebox. Pea-sized, they are in a large plastic bag.

KENT

Tyler...
TYLER

Here.

Tyler gives the pills to Kent. Kent opens the bag up to look at it.

KENT

Tyler, are you out of your fucking wig? This is like, felony trafficking.

TYLER

Badass, huh?

KENT

I can't believe you're stupid enough to drive around with this. (getting angrier) Well, never mind, I can. You know, this is the EXACT type of bullshit that's the reason that--

Suddenly, flashing blue light fills up the car.

KENT

—no one in this town ever fuckin--

TYLER

Fuck, 5-0! Put that shit away. Hold on--

Tyler slams on the accelerator. Kent, not wearing a seatbelt and in the middle of a rant, slams into the seat. The bag flies out of his hand, scattering pills out of his car.

KENT

Oh, fuck...
TYLER
FUCK, MAN, WHAT'D YOU DO? WHAT'D YOU DO?

KENT
THE BAG SLIPPED OUT OF MY HAND. FUCK!

TYLER
CLEAN IT UP! CLEAN IT UP--

KENT
THEY'RE NOT MY FUCKIN' PILLS, MAN!

TYLER
YOU THINK THEY'RE GOING TO CARE?

CLEAN IT UP!

KENT
I'M NOT GONNA BE AN ACCESSORY--

TYLER
TAKE THE WHEEL THEN--

Tyler turns around and starts frantically trying to scoop up the pills and throw them out the window. Kent grabs the wheel. The car is still barreling down the road.

KENT
NO, TYLER, DON'T, DON'T, DON'T, TYLER, FUCKIN' DRIVE MAN--

TYLER
FLUSH THE PILLS, MAN, THEY'RE ON US--
KENT
TYLER DRiVe THE FUCKiN' CAR

TYLER
FLuSH THE PiLLS, MAN

KENT
DRiVe THE FUCKiN' CAR

TYLER
FLuSH THE FUCKiN' PiLLS

KENT

Fucking god da--okay, take the wheel, I'll get the pills.

Kent and Tyler switch positions. Kent frantically tries to scoop the pills and throws them out the window while Tyler drives more erratically.

KENT

(hitting his head on the seat after a particularly hard turn)

Watch it!

This continues for a short few beats.

TYLER

I'm gonna try and lose them. Hold on to your nuts!

KENT

Tyler, I don't think that's such a great--ahhhhh!
Tyler pulls the emergency brake and tries to drift onto a small dirt road. Missing the mark, he ends up piloting the car in a full 360 degree turn, knocking over a small white picket fence. He immediately takes off down the small road. Kent looks backwards from the car.

    KENT

    Turn off the lights. Turn 'em off...

Tyler switches the lights off.

    TYLER

    I can't see, man. I can't see shit.

    KENT

    It's okay, I know this road. There's nothing on it.
    Just keep going straight. Keep it slow.

    TYLER

    Okay. Okay.

There are several beats as Kent watches for the lights.

    KENT

    I think we lost them.

    TYLER

    Pfff...holy fuck. I thought we were gonna die.

    KENT

    Just slow down and hold for a second.

There are several anxious beats as Tyler joins Kent and watches behind them.
KENT
Okay. I think we're good. Jesus christ.

TYLER
That was some slick fuckin' driving, though, right?

As Tyler is congratulating himself, something heavy hits the car's hood. Blue lights start strobing all around. There are several inhuman screeches. Several glowing blue humanoids are visible around the car.

TYLER
AAAAHHHH! WHAT THE FUCK--

KENT
DRIVE, TYLER, GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE--

Tyler puts the car in gear and starts making a K-TURN, hitting several of the humanoids. They make loud thumps against the car's body.

TYLER
WHAT THE FUCK ARE THESE THINGS--

KENT
I DON'T KNOW! GO! GET OUT OF HERE!

TYLER
I'M TRYING! YOU'RE NOT TAKING ME TONIGHT YOU BLUE BASTARDS--
Tyler has successfully pulled the car back around. There's one humanoid in the way now between the way they came in and the car. Tyler runs it over and the car speeds off. There are several beats as the lights and the humanoids regroup in the rearview.

KENT

Jesus christ.

TYLER

What the FUCK was that? Was that what was chasing us?

Kent

(in shock)

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I'm so fuckin' confused. I can't even...

There are several beats as Tyler ponders what he has seen.

TYLER

Kent?

A beat.

TYLER

Kent?

KENT

(in shock)

Yeah?

TYLER

I think we MAY or may not have just seen aliens.
KENT
I don't even... I can't even...

TYLER
(looking at Kent)
That was fuckin' cool. Scary, y'know. But cool. I can't wait to tell Gene, he loves this shit.

KENT
I don't even... I need to go to sleep.
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