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**“WHAT MAKES A MAN, MR. LEBOWSKI?”:  
MASCULINITY UNDER (FRIENDLY) FIRE IN ETHAN  
AND JOEL COEN’S *THE BIG LEBOWSKI***

*Jakub Kazecki*

**W**hen Joel and Ethan Coen released their impatiently awaited new movie in 1998, the audience and critics expected to see in the movie an acknowledgment of the artistry of Raymond Chandler, the author of popular detective stories and Hollywood screenplay writer of the late 1940s. This expectation was set by pre-release interviews with the movie creators, in which the Coens openly acknowledged their attraction to Chandler’s novel *The Big Sleep*, to which the new movie alludes in its title. In addition, one of the earlier Coens’ movies, *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), has been described as a tribute to another ‘hard-boiled’ story writer from Los Angeles, Dashiell Hammett, and the Coens did not make a secret of their fascination with American detective fiction and of their plans to continue with the appreciation of their authors in cinematic form. The new movie, *The Big Lebowski*, was supposed to be another ‘film noir.’

Critical reception of the new movie, judging by magazine and newspaper reviews, was not overly enthusiastic. *The Big Lebowski* did not fulfill the expectations of the critics. The fact that the Coens’ previous movie, the acclaimed thriller *Fargo* (1996), had been awarded two Oscars and had won the prize for best director in Cannes (for Joel) also played a role. “*Fargo* suggested that the Coens might be growing up a little, but now they’ve managed to drop back down the evolutionary ladder” wrote Paul Tatar in the CNN review of the movie (Tatar), and a similar tone is repeated in many discussions about the newest ‘failure’ of the talented brothers. Compared to their debut *Blood Simple* (1984), *Fargo* or *Miller’s Crossing*, the story about an aging hippie from L.A. who finds himself involved in a complicated kidnapping plot and mostly induces the audience’s laughter just does not appear sophisticated enough (see the reviews by Jay Carr, James Verniere or Steven Rosen). Quentin Curtis remarks in his review of *The Big Lebowski* that “you have always the feeling in Coens’ films

that the works are not so much thought out, intellectually, as doodled over coffee and doughnuts—pieces of fooling around rather than tracts on human nature [...] Comic genius of the Coens' order is for enjoyment rather than analysis" (Curtis).

One can argue about whether a movie made for the enjoyment of the audience (as an artistic by-product of the apparently childish behaviour of the Coen brothers) and a motion picture that can easily undergo a critical analysis (as would be expected from 'grown up' filmmaker) are really two opposite and exclusive directions along which we have to orient our thoughts about the movie. In this article, I hope to show that *The Big Lebowski* is not so 'analysis-resistant' or 'analysis-proof' as most film critics would like to see it. I want to investigate the subversive effect of humour and laughter on the masculinity models presented in the movie and to demonstrate that the humour challenges the heterosexual gender norm supported and confirmed by popular American film genres and by the star system developed in the 1930s and 1940s in Hollywood's dream factory.

To introduce the term 'masculinity models,' it is necessary to remark that the dominant discourses surrounding gender and sexuality are not only reflected and mediated by film and other cultural forms, but are also directly shaped by these forms. Film especially significantly contributed to the shaping of masculinity and femininity models. The cinema's power lies in its special position between the audience's fantasies and lived experience: it depicts the reality in depersonalized, consumable form, which allows the recognition of the self and identification with the person on the screen, at the same time at which it serves as a projection of a desired, idealized 'self' in an 'other' who serves as a cultural model.

The representational system offered by American film, which developed rapidly from the early 1920s, divided human practices shown on screen into 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics, offering certain cultural models of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' through the actors and actresses in leading roles. The main accents have been, however, put on the male protagonists, around which most American movie plots revolve. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark argue in their essay collection *Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* that movies have always served as one of the primary sites through which the social construction of masculinity has been hidden from view in American culture (3). Masculinity is perceived by the wider film audience as a stable, universal and unchanging essence and not as a construction, as an effect of culture or as a performance.

In American cinema, masculinity has been driven by the classical

Hollywood fiction film, which, according to Frank Krutnik, “tends to pivot around individual characters, their emotions, desires and actions” while they are engaged within and defined through two basic lines of action: the adventure story and the heterosexual love affair (4). The development of film genres can be connected to the changing balance between those two components in different movies. The changes were forced by the wishes of the audience, which wanted to see its hero in more ‘romantic’ situations or to see more ‘adventure’ for the male hero to test his masculinity in different ways. The popularity of certain narrative solutions (manifested in box office results) created an impulse to repeat the formula, the particular combination and articulation of elements that appeared to be successful for specific, historically-situated audiences. As a result, filmmakers developed sets of narrative procedures and stylistic emphases which, along with the reoccurring presence of the same actor types, have been described as film genres. Along with the genres, certain masculinity models have been formed. Genres such as ‘western,’ ‘horror film,’ ‘crime thriller,’ ‘musical’ or ‘romantic comedy,’ to name just a few, have been established in the practices of American cinema. Thomas Sobchack, in his essay “Genre Film: A Classical Experience” notes that “consciously or unconsciously, both the genre filmmaker and the genre audiences are aware of the prior films and the way in which each of these concrete examples is an attempt to embody once again the essence of a well-known story” (103). The awareness of the genre tradition, whether the set of genre characteristics is recognized and systematized or not, is the key to fulfilling the expectations of the audience—or to playing with them. The results of the play, however, may vary.

It seems to me that in the case of *The Big Lebowski*, the Coen brothers get involved in a risky play with film genres well known to the audience. The fact that the movie has not been received very warmly by both moviegoers and critics because of its apparent ‘emptiness’ and ‘narcissism,’ for its being mainly about “its own cleverness” (McCarthy), and the difficulties of categorizing it into one specific film genre, are, in my opinion, worth a detailed investigation. What genres does *The Big Lebowski* jump between, confusing the audience and, through their multiplicity, posing the possibility of multiple and alternative masculinity models?

Before I try to shed some light on the cross-genre character of the movie, I would like to make an observation on the film narrative. The plot of *The Big Lebowski* does not reflect the narrative structure typical of American motion pictures, where the male hero, through his own actions, successfully overcomes the unbalance of the narrative

caused by the initial atrocious deeds of a villain. Roger Ebert in the *Chicago Sun-Times* hits the nail right on the head by noticing that "[s]ome may complain [that] *The Big Lebowski* rushes in all directions and never ends up anywhere. That isn't the film's flaw, but its style" (Ebert 37). The "rushing in all directions" can be noticed already in the first sequences of the movie: against a music background provided by Sons of the Pioneers, the Dude (played by Jeff Bridges), is accompanied by the voiceover—the cowboy-narrator The Stranger (Sam Elliot)—on his way to the supermarket. The narrator, rambling nonsensically and losing his "train of thought" quite often, introduces the Dude in a way that may suggest that his story portrays "a cowboy's opium dream of life at the end of the trail" (Bergan 189). Is the Dude, as a successor of the pioneers, a hero of westerns who has found his quiet place after a troubled life in the West, going to be bothered by evildoers and forced to fight them again? That's what the narrator's introduction, combined with the soundtrack and camera work (long panoramic shots of L.A. at sunset), seems to imply.

Next, the Dude is attacked in his own apartment and his head is repeatedly submerged in the toilet. Even when subjected to brutal violence, the main character retains his laid-back attitude and makes cocky comments which promise the audience a hero who is a strong individualist with an ironic sense of humour, like Chandleresque PIs. This type of male hero is characterized by Frank Krutnik as dominant in the "male suspense thriller," a subcategory of *film noir*. According to Krutnik, the hero emerges from the position of marked inferiority against both the criminals and the police and seeks to restore his secure superior position by solving the mystery (86). This type of male hero can lose everything and not care (and the Dude is introduced as such by the narrator in the opening sequence), but he still keeps his wit and intelligence. The illusion that we will follow the Philip Marlowe of the 1990s (the movie is set at the time of the Gulf War in 1991), and the hope that we will see a modern variation of *The Big Sleep* ends soon, however, after a series of events over which the Dude has no control and—even worse—which remain incomprehensible to him to the very end. His bold assumptions and theories about the kidnapping plot are revealed as false, or at least unexplained, one after another. The closing movie sequence finds the Dude exactly at the same point at which he found himself at the beginning of the story: completely satisfied with his life (unlike the hero in Chandler's stories), because his "aim in life, the goal to which he moves and the hope which sustains him" is not the "unravelling of obscure crimes, the final solution of which affords him little or no satisfaction" (Houseman 161). His repetitious and failed attempts to explain

the complicated plot to his friends, his moments of illusionary glory when he thinks he sees clearly the motives of the other characters involved in the fake kidnapping, and his failures as an enthusiastic but amateurish detective, negate the image of an active hero typical for the *film noir* genre, such as—to follow the Coens' fascination with Chandler—Humphrey Bogart or Robert Mitchum's characters in both main-stream Hollywood adaptations of *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks' film from 1946 and Michael Winner's from 1978). The audience will also never get an answer to the main question of the mystery—who took the million dollars—which remains unresolved, as do so many 'why' questions.

The inconsistencies in the narrative patterns are not accidental, however. According to Joel and Ethan Coen, the idea of the movie was to create the plot as “a Chandler kind of story—how it moves episodically, and deals with the characters trying to unravel a mystery. As well as having a hopelessly complex plot that's ultimately unimportant” (Stone). In another interview about the movie, Ethan Coen expresses his vision of Jeff Bridges' character: “It just seemed interesting to us to thrust that character into the most confusing situation possible, the person, it would seem, on the face of it least equipped to deal with it” (Leyland). The two masculinity models presented in the opening scenes of the movie, the cowboy who gave up his bloody work and the private investigator in the urban jungle, typical for the American western and *film noir*, despite audience's expectations, are just not the measure of the Dude's actions. What the director and writer of the movie judge as “interesting” is the confrontation of the 'masculine' developed and re-produced by the American movies with the male figure in their movie, who, due to external circumstances, happens to be the protagonist and carrier of the narrative. Jeff Lebowski, as a “man of inaction” (Robson 189), is not acting in the sense of the typical male protagonists—he is being acted upon. He is always one step behind his counterparts. And the audience laughs at his belief that he keeps up with them.

The comic effect appears to be the element that is mentioned most repeatedly in reviews of the movie. Although complaining about the genre inconsistency of *The Big Lebowski*, most critics approve of its humorous effect, even if, according to some of them, the laughter does not last for long (Matthew Sweet, Alexander Walker). When looking at Jeff Lebowski, the question of what makes him funny, of what causes the comic effect and what is the relation between the comic and masculinity models in the cinema seem to be legitimate.

Comedy is often developed in situations where both male and female characters do not measure up to cultural expectations for their

gender. In other words, if the physical appearance and the actions of the characters do not comply with the normative image for their gender in the specific circumstances conditioned by the culture, they can induce laughter. In his *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, John Morreall offers a cognitive theory of laughter, in which laughter results from the encounter with many types of incongruous situations (Morreall 188-205). In his view, the human reactions to incongruity can be organized into three different groups. The first group contains negative emotions, like fear, anger, disgust, and sadness, the second puzzlement with the experienced, and the third humorous, pleasurable laughter. The incongruity is a subjectively perceived deviation from the consistency of the world structure. The contrast between our expectations (the understanding of the world needed for physical survival) and the event that does not fit into the 'normal state of things,' can be experienced as dangerous. Negative emotions and puzzlement are reactions that motivate us to resolve aberrations, e.g. through escape, aggression or the adoption of the new occurrence into our knowledge about the world. Humorous laughter, on the other hand, allows us to enjoy situations which do not threaten our physical survival, at the same time stimulating our ability to deal with newness in the future. Thus, laughter has a subversive function: it allows questioning and overthrowing the norm, and adopting the exception in the changed world view. According to Morreall, there is also another situation possible in which we can burst into laughter. When the overwhelming nature of the incongruent situation makes action completely impossible, we can overcome the unpleasurable experience over which we have no influence and turn it into its opposite: a pleasure accessible through the sublimation of the negative impulse—Nietzsche's "slaves' joy at the Saturnalia" (137), when the forces of nature, potentially dangerous, do not cause any harm.

What Morreall understands only in a narrow, biological sense (incongruity allows the human being to deal with the impulses from the outside world and, in consequence, to physically survive), can be also applied to the type of incongruous situations we encounter in *The Big Lebowski*. The 'normal state of things' is created by the Hollywood representational system, with its various film genres. As mentioned before, within the framework of a specific genre, the audience expects certain narrative solutions based on the combination and articulation of story components, stylistic emphases and gender models. The genres as "systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject" (Neale 19) are the structure that constitutes the viewer's secure position. To this position belongs the genre's treatment of the "masculine,"

which reflects broader ideological constructions of gender that inform and often determine certain attitudes and behaviours in society. The constructed character of masculinity is, according to Judith Butler, not recognized as such and hidden from the viewer:

[...] acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. If the 'cause' of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the 'self' of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view. The displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological 'core' precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or of its true identity. (Butler 136)

One of the most important sources of humour in the Coens' comedy is the confrontation between the actions of the male protagonists and the dominant ideological constructions of masculinity, which are marked by numerous allusions to and visual references from movies belonging to different film genres. The audience's—the male audience's—laughter is the laughter at the 'other' visible on the screen, the viewer's gender identity is not directly threatened. Nevertheless, the viewer recognizes that the masculinity models promoted by the representational conventions of American cinema can, and in fact are, subverted by his laughter. The Coens initiate a cognitive process: they present the Dude as the hero of a cowboy saga or a detective in the big city only to later destroy the anticipated narration scheme and aesthetic choices. The laughing viewer goes through the process of acknowledging that the masculinity can be constructed through (re)acting in various historical and social contexts. The cowboy Stranger sitting in the bowling hall in Los Angeles in the early 1990s and talking to the Dude about the ever-changing course of life ("Wal, a wiser fella than m'self once said, sometimes you eat the bar and sometimes the bar, wal, he eats you") looks indeed strange, talks strangely and gives the impression that he originates from a different movie (as a matter of fact, the actor playing the Stranger, Sam Elliot, whose physical type predestines him to play in westerns, asked the Coens on the set of *The Big Lebowski*, "What am I doing in THIS movie?") (Robson 176). His inappropriate presence in the movie surprises the viewer and distorts the narrative flow. His connection to the narrative remains unexplained. His character proves, however, that, if his appearance is rather misplaced, 'borrowed' from another film genre, other male figures can be as strange as he is, if not in this particular movie, then in another. For *The Big Lebowski* there is no advocated masculinity model, for in another time, or in another place



of narration, the 'normal' patterns of behaviour marked as masculine can be questioned, subverted and, eventually, compromised. Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble* that thinking in relative terms about the 'normal' gender behaviour can cause amusement:

The loss of the sense of the normal,' however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal,' 'the original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived. (138-139)

Similarly, the audience laughs at the beaten-up hero, the Dude, and the rambling Stranger, and comprehends that 'being a real man' is performed, is re(acted) after an ideal that is formed through discursive practices, and can be freely taken out of context.

The Stranger fulfills another important function in the movie. Along with the wide-angle lenses, the visual allusions, the soundtrack and the period setting, the character of the cowboy helps to create distance between the viewer and the narrative. His comments frame the events on the screen; he interrupts the course of action and prevents the viewer from emotionally engaging in the unravelling story, stressing the fact that the occasionally dramatic action was just a story told to amuse the viewer, not to make the male hero more popular. "Wal, uh hope you folks enjoyed yourselves," he summarizes the movie, setting up the distance to the viewed picture.

The range of masculinity models presented in *The Big Lebowski* is not limited to the heroes of film noir and western. The Coen brothers describe their work as "in a strange way, kind of a buddy movie" (Lowe 163) and the figure constellation reflects the intention to put the men in the foreground: two main male characters, the Dude and Walter Sobchak (John Goodman), accompanied by Donny (Steve Buscemi). Walter, a war veteran, lives in the reality shaped by the Vietnam conflict. His aggressiveness and the tendency to take command in every social interaction, along with his never-ending references to the long-past war against which he measures every aspect of life, place him in the lineage of the well-built, loud and violent action heroes of war movies. The masculinity model represented by Walter supposedly fits into the specific time and place, in the United States during the Gulf War: as a reference, a speech by George Bush is shown on TV when the Dude passes by, while Walter quotes from official political rhetoric in the course of action ("This aggression will not stand!", "I'm talking about drawing a line in the sand, Dude!"). Walter's manly behaviour is tested, however, in circumstances that have nothing to do with battlefield situations, far from the jungle of 'Nam: he is putting up his gun in the bowling hall, provoked by a minor violation of

game rules by another player, and he calls for constitutional rights to use cuss words in the family diner. His repetitive references to the war and confrontational attitude are out of place (and out of time) in the 1990s. The US has supposedly recovered after the failure in Vietnam; in addition, the character of war has changed: war is now more technological, more impersonal, the war actions are watched mostly on TV, and the war hero has to change, too. Walter's manner of dealing with the world is turned into ridicule. When it eventually comes to a violent conflict between the Dude's bowling team and the 'German nihilists,' and the agon can take place, Walter fights in a way that contradicts martial arts. He throws a bowling ball at one of the opponents, hits another with a portable radio and bites off the ear of a third, in a gesture reminiscent of Mike Tyson and his unsporting violation of box rules in 1997. The style of this final challenge does not meet the engagement rules praised by him on another occasion: "I had an M16, Jacko, not an Abrams fucking tank. Just me and Charlie, man, eyeball to eyeball."

The one casualty of the bloody fight with the 'Germans' is Donny, the best bowler of the three friends. He is not hit or wounded by the aggressors, nor does he hit anyone; he simply does not survive a heart attack caused by panic and fear. However, in his funeral speech, Walter compares Donny's death to the heroic sacrifices of combat:

He died—he died as so many of his generation, before his time. In your wisdom you took him, Lord. As you took so many bright flowering young men, at Khe San and Lan Doc and Hill 364. These young men gave their lives. And Donny too. Donny who... who loved bowling.

The funeral scene is a bitter parody of the celebratory military and police funerals portrayed in mainstream Hollywood war movies, in action movies and in thrillers. Usually, the funeral of the protagonist's close friend constitutes one of the most important points in the narrative, motivating the male hero to take revenge on the villain. In the masculinity models presented by these genres, male grief, anger and memory are usually overcome by direct, assertive action which implies violence and brutality against the other. The Dude and Walter go bowling. And in the last scene of the movie we see the Dude relaxed and thinking only about the finals of the bowling league.

*The Big Lebowski* is often described primarily as a 'movie about bowling.' To categorize the film as a sport movie would be misleading, however. Although reviews of the film evaluate Donny as a 'sportsman,' the term has a different implication for bowling, a "not really physically taxing thing. You can be a slob and do it" (Lowe 164). Bowling, although present in Hollywood movies, has not been evaluated as a big spectacle or a field for the creation of a masculine model in

which physical strength and a sense for tactics and competition play an important role—a direct successor of the ancient hunter. “Bowling is not a sport to feature greatly in movies, but it does have an image as the game for the ‘average Joe,’ “good enough for Homer Simpson, for example” (Bergan 190). The audience reacts with laughter when Maude Lebowski, the millionaire’s daughter, inquires after sex with the Dude for more details from his life, and asks him what he does for fun. “Bowl,” answers the Dude, summarizing his achievements in a very short curriculum vitae. Being a bowler does not require the characteristics needed from a man in the production-oriented modern capitalist society.

The question of achievement appears many times in the movie, mostly in scenes with the Dude’s namesake, Jeffrey Lebowski, called the Big Lebowski, the millionaire from Pasadena. The two characters cannot communicate at all, because they speak two different idiolects. The millionaire despises the Dude’s lifestyle, and stresses the role of achievement in a man’s life. Wealth and successes in the realm of work are the measures of competence in being a man. The figure of the Big Lebowski is an example of a masculinity model in which achievement is equal to work production. The audience finds out much later that the masculine ability “to do the right thing,” “to achieve,” proudly expressed by the disabled millionaire, has to be demystified. He does not have any money; he inherited it through his wife.

From his wife, the Big Lebowski has also ‘inherited’ Maude, a feminist artist (resembling the Fluxus painter and performer Carolee Schneeman), who invites the Dude to her loft and informs him that she is aware of the kidnapping of her stepmother, Bunny. She presents to the guest a film sequence that should convince him of the fake character of Bunny’s abduction and low moral standards. The movie, called *Logjammin*,’ is the Coens’ parody of the porn movie genre. The distinct characteristic of the infamous genre is its emphasis on the visibility of male and female genitals. Being a man in a porn movie (like Karl Hungus, one of the ‘nihilists’) means being able to demonstrate an erect penis and perform a sex act. In this context, Karl Hungus threatens the Dude in the worst possible way, for cutting off his penis would be an attempt to take away his masculinity. The audience identifies with the terrified Dude until Donny asks “What do you need that for, Dude?”—in fact, the Dude does not seem to require his penis to prove anything.

The number of male characters exposed in the movie is much greater than the few most important representatives I have described here. Worth noticing are also the figure of the Dude’s landlord and

Jesus Quintana, the Dude's bowling competitor. The landlord is a passionate modern dancer, although his physical type contradicts the ideal of dancer: in his white body stocking adorned with strategically placed foliage, gracelessly dancing a heroic part on the stage, he is the very incorporation of incongruity. Jesus, a talented bowler, enters the story as a dynamic macho, sexualizing the game (slow-motion shots of him scoring the maximum points are a visual celebration of the male body in motion). Not much later, the viewer hears from Walter that Jesus is a paedophile. His machismo is questioned, his performance at the bowling hall revealed to be just a show.

In all cases, the male characters of the movie are situated in time and place by the music they listen to and by the clothes they are wearing. Joel Coen describes the main idea behind setting up the figure constellation: “[A]ll the characters refer to the culture of thirty years ago, they are its aftermath and its mirror. [...] It's a contemporary movie about what's become of people who were formed and defined by that earlier period.” (Ciment and Niogret 168). Different movie genres with their dominant masculinity models serve as inspiration for Joel and Ethan Coen: the brothers make a satirical comment on the male hero figures developed in American cinema. The viewer enjoys the incongruent confrontation between his expectations, shaped by his knowledge about cinema, and the realization of individual characters in *The Big Lebowski*. Thus, the Coens demonstrate that the masculinity models developed by the Hollywood movie industry are constructions rather than unchanging, coherent instances. This corresponds to what Butler has noted about the performative character of gender:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted over time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 140)

“Well, you know, the Dude abides,” confesses the male protagonist of *The Big Lebowski*, “the man for his time'n place,” and the double meaning of his words best illustrates the arbitrary nature of all assumptions about him, about his masculinity and about all masculinity models in the movie.

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