



## “Entering a World of Pain”: the Function of Dark Humor in Films by the Coen Brothers”

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MA-Thesis North American Studies

## Abstract

In this thesis, I have studied the use of dark humor by the Coen brothers by analyzing four of their films, *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *A Serious Man* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*. In my analysis, I have focused on the social commentary, the common themes, the characterization and the movie genre of each film to determine how they relate to the use of dark humor. For each film, I have chosen two scenes that clearly convey dark humor and used techniques from mise-en-scene and humor theories to explain the dark humor in them. In conclusion, I have debunked the hypothesis that the Coen brothers use dark humor out of cynicism.

## Key Words

Dark Humor – Coen Brothers – Fargo - The Big Lebowski - A Serious Man - Inside Llewyn Davis – Humor Theories – Mise-en-Scene -

Teacher who will receive this document: Prof. dr. Frank Mehring

Title of document: "Entering a World of Pain": the Function of Dark  
Humor in Films by the Coen Brothers

Name of course: Master-Thesis Amerikanistiek

Date of submission:

30 Augustus 2016

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## Acknowledgments

After doing my BA-thesis on dark humor in the literature of Paul Auster, I wanted to continue my analysis of dark humor in my MA-thesis. However, in order to expand upon my knowledge, I wanted to analyze it in an entirely new field for me, namely movies. When I thought about American movies and dark humor, the link with the Coen brothers was not hard to make, as I am a big fan of their movies and their dark sense of humor.

To analyze their films, I will use some of the same questions I asked working on Paul Auster last year, like how and why do they use it. During my BA-thesis, I noticed the link between the dark humor of Auster and Jewish humor, which can also be applied to the Jewish-American Coen brothers. Although I have no affiliation with Judaism myself, nor have I any special interest in it, I have noticed that there are plenty of famous Jewish-American comedians, writers and movie directors. Some famous examples are Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David, Woody Allen, Jon Stewart and Judd Apatow.

Another thing I noticed in the literature of Paul Auster was how he was clearly influenced by postmodern European literature. While I think the movies of the Coen brothers are much more ingrained than Auster's work in American popular culture, especially American music, the timeframe of postmodernism also applies to them and the influence of postmodern writers can be observed and studied within their movies as well. A real connection with Europe seems more difficult to find, as the Coen brothers are known for paying close attention to all the local typicalities of the American cities their movies are set in, like in *Fargo*, which is set in their home state of Minnesota.

I think this is what makes their movies such interesting study cases for me as a student of North American studies, as they give some actual insight into American daily life, from a very personal, darkly humorous point of view. Their typical darkness seems to stem, at least partly, from the high amount of violence in American cinema, which is an ongoing problem in American society. Perhaps the Coen brothers

have grown accustomed to this violence, leading to a cynical worldview. Perhaps if they had grown up in a safer part of North America or in Europe, they would have never developed their typical and unique dark humor. Fortunately for fans of dark humor, they did not, and I would like to find out exactly how their background affected their movies.

I would like to thank my friends and family, as well as other people for inspiring me in discussions about the movies of the Coen brothers with me. I also would like to thank my girlfriend Carolien Heymans for her encouraging words. Lastly, I would like to thank my promoter Prof. Dr. Frank Mehring for his help and his good advice, as well as Prof. Dr. Judith Yaross Lee and Prof. dr. Andre Lardinois for providing me with some good secondary literature.

## A. Introduction

The ultimate goal in this thesis is to investigate how the Coen brothers use dark humor in their films, and why. First I will need to determine what dark humor exactly is, how it developed historically and how it can be used. In short, dark humor is “a humorous way of looking at or treating something that is serious or sad” (“Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus”), like death, violence, pain or disease.

I will also need to establish that there are many examples of dark humor in the films of the Coen brothers and that some of their movies can specifically be labeled as dark comedies. A dark comedy is a genre in film, theatre or literature that is defined as “having gloomy or disturbing elements, especially one in which a character suffers an irreparable loss” (“The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language”). This definition definitely applies to their movies *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *A Serious Man* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Therefore, I have chosen these four films as study cases, since they can be seen as good examples for the Coen brothers' typical use of dark humor. By analyzing these movies, I will also be able to determine in my conclusion how their dark humor has evolved from the nineties, with *Fargo* released in 1996 and *The Big Lebowski* in 1998, up until the last decade, with *A Serious Man* released in 2009, and *Inside Llewyn Davis* in 2013.

It will be very important to study the context in which the Coen brothers make their films, to understand where their dark humor exactly comes from. Within the context of American popular culture and film studies, a comparison can be made with other writers and directors who also employ dark humor, to see how the Coen brothers were influenced by them and how they manage to distinguish themselves from them. Josh Levine claims “For film buffs who know their genres and their directors, the films of the Coen brothers are a feast of clever references” (Levine). The goal of my research will then be to find those references and to see what role dark humor plays in them, to determine how the Coen brothers use dark humor to create their own, unique directing style.

While reviewing the literature about the Coen brothers and their films, a quick glimpse at the titles already show that there is an abundance of darkness in their films. They are referred to by Erica Rowell as “the Brothers Grim” (Rowell), a wordplay on the fairytale writers the Grimm brothers and the grimness of their films or by Ryan P. Doom as “Unique Characters of Violence” (Doom), a reference to the great amount of

violence in their films. Violence is one of many dark subjects that the Coen brothers like to portray in their films with dark humor.

For viewers, a common response to dark subjects in a film is to worry and wonder why they are there. The goal of the director would then be to anticipate these worries and play with them in order to provoke a certain response in their viewers. In the case of the Coen brothers, the goal is often to make their viewers laugh about these dark subjects, which is perhaps counterintuitive. By using dark humor, the Coens try to deconstruct dark subjects, exposing how we traditionally deal with them and how society expects you to respond them, which is usually with seriousness and contemplation. Dark humor removes any seriousness and replaces it with a different response, namely laughter, when done successfully. My research hypothesis is that dark humor plays an important role in how the Coen brothers create this response, which I will try to analyze in this thesis.

Some common misconceptions about the use of dark humor by the Coen brothers, made by some people including movie reviewers, critics and academics, are that they are cruel towards their own characters and that they are somehow cynical or pessimistic about life. For example, after the release of *Fargo*, reviewer Devin McKinney referred to the movie as “a fatuous piece of nonsense, a tall cool drink of witless condescension” (McKinney). Meanwhile, Emanuel Levy stated that the Coen brothers “have always treated their characters with contempt, ruthlessly manipulating and loathing their foolishness” (Levy). Later on, the criticism has evolved into accusations like Mike Miley’s that the Coen brothers themselves “have become the kind of nihilist they mocked in *The Big Lebowski*” (Miley).

These critics seem to believe that, given the high amount of dark humor they use, the Coens are simply mocking everything and that they believe in nothing. This would mean that with each film they are trying to convince their viewers that there is so much darkness in life that ultimately life cannot be understood and that it is meaningless. This critique is perhaps perpetuated by the fact that the Coen brothers are often mysterious about their own films and how they should be interpreted in interviews. As Josh Levine explains in his book about the Coens, “Perhaps it’s because the brothers themselves have always refused to take themselves seriously, declaring that they hold to no film theory, have nothing significant to say, and all that they really want to do is have “fun”” (Levine). However, it is part of an artist’s freedom to leave the interpretation of their art up in the air. It is also entirely possible

that their protagonist in *The Big Lebowski*, the Dude, paraphrases their own reactions to this criticism when he mumbles “That’s just, uhm, like, your opinion, man”(Coen *The Big Lebowski*).

Nonetheless, I believe there is so much deconstruction, social commentary and meticulous attention to detail going on in their films, which is a strong indication that they actually spend a considerable amount of time thinking about their films and that their viewers should probably do the same. This refutes the possibility that the Coen brothers are nihilists, because they portray life in so many aspects and create an intellectual platform for many philosophies and strands of thought for the viewer to consider. Therefore, I will try to debunk the hypothesis in this thesis that the Coen brothers use dark humor to convey any kind of nihilism, cynicism or pessimism in their films.

Granted, there is indeed a lot of suffering in their films, so some viewers might take offense to this or at least question the reasoning behind this. While watching their films, you get the impression that the Coen brothers are in fact extremely moralizing when it comes to the suffering of their characters. If this turns out to be true, then the message to their viewers would probably be to make sure that they do not suffer like the characters in their films often do, but rather to learn from their mistakes.

Often the immorality of their characters seems inevitable, indicating that they are inherently flawed individuals who should perhaps be made fun of. Of course, the ethics behind these kinds of jokes can be questioned. Is it immoral to poke fun at certain behaviors and character traits in the characters that you portray in a film? Noel Carroll nicely summarizes why jokes can be problematic in this way, saying “The listener fills in the elliptical joke structure, and, in order to complete it, the listener must supply an optimal interpretation that is implicated in error. Now in the case of many jokes – such as ethnic, racist, or sexist jokes, for example – those errors often involve morally disturbing stereotypes of the mental, physical, or behavioral attributes of the comic butt who stands for an entire social group” (Carroll). Since the Coen brothers often use stereotyping with the characters in their films, some viewers might refuse to supply the interpretations to jokes about them, if they find them offensive. Especially when those behaviors are quite common in American society or can be seen as inevitable, this becomes most problematic. You can imagine this certainly plays a role in the criticism of superiority and condescension that they often receive.

The question remains how the Coen brothers manage to inject so much dark humor into their films, which is what I will analyze. The humor is often used with recurring themes, such as violence, greed, death, kidnapping and divorce, which have become typical features in their films. The Coen brothers often portray such dark subjects in a ridiculous, over-the-top manner, without the usual seriousness or gravitas that comes with them in real life. So I will analyze in which subjects dark humor returns in each of the films that I have chosen as study cases.

Another way, in which the Coens manage to convey dark humor, is in their writing, with their creation of typical characters and settings that allow for dark humor to dominate their scripts. The Coen brothers tend to portray their characters as a strange mixture of lifelike and stereotyping. Dark humor can be used to expose certain strange behaviors or character traits. In their settings, they often show the world in an absurd way, like a pastiche of society that seems real, but is in fact fictional, because certain dark aspects like greed, violence, and immorality are greatly exaggerated, which adds to the dark humor. As Josh Levine explains, “The Coen Brothers’ films say: these seem like real characters, but look a little closer. Are they? This seems like a real place, but is it?” (Levine). It will be important to find answers to such questions, in order to understand how their dark humor works and what they are trying to accomplish with dark humor in relation to their characters and their settings.

Another subject which often returns in their comedies and which might have influenced their dark humor is Judaism. The Coen brothers are Jewish-Americans themselves and their Jewish background is a possible source for their dark humor, so I will analyze to which extent their heritage has influenced their humor. Judaism is mentioned sporadically in *The Big Lebowski* with the converted Jewish character Walter Sobchak, and it is very much thematized in *A Serious Man*, in which a Jewish physics professor named Larry Gopnik sees his faith tested by a series of unfortunate events. The dark humor lies in the suffering he undergoes and how he tries to deal with his tragic fate using the spiritual guidance of Judaism. Jewish humor typically deals with suffering and other dark subjects, like the persecution of Jewish people and the presence of anti-Semitism throughout history. It will be interesting to do a further examination of Jewish humor and Jewish-American culture in this thesis, to establish how dark humor fits into this culture and how this culture might have influenced the Coen brothers in their dark humor.

Another topic the Coen brothers seem to be obsessed with is crime, as many of their movies are crime stories. For example, *The Big Lebowski* and *Fargo*, two of the Coen Brothers' most iconic movies, are both crime comedies that showcase dark humor focused towards criminality in America. In these movies, the Coen brothers seem to ridicule the dark aspects of American culture related to crime, like the high rate of violence, greed, murder in society. In choosing this genre, the Coen brothers seem to have been influenced by other crime movies and by crime literature. I will analyze why exactly they prefer this genre, which similar writers and directors influenced them and how they managed to stand out from them. Josh Levine hints at a possible autobiographical reason for their affinity for violence from their upbringing in the boring Midwest of America, saying "Joel even pointed to this dullness as an ironic source for the strangeness and violence of their films: "It's to compensate for the fact that our lives were incredibly mundane" (Levine). Especially in the case of *Fargo* and *A Serious Man*, which both take place in the home state of the Coen brothers, Minnesota, their early life experiences seem to have influenced them and their use of dark humor substantially.

Something else that is satirized in many of their films is the immoral pursuit of money in American society. In *Fargo*, car salesman Jerry Lundegaard will do anything to acquire money, including kidnapping his own wife to get a ransom from his rich father-in-law, and gets punished severely for his immorality. *The Big Lebowski* also features a ransom, a typical plot device used by the Coen brothers, although protagonist Jeff "the Dude" Lebowski shows much less interest in money, as he accidentally gets drawn into the immoral pursuit of money by other characters. Both movies show the dangers of pursuing money in different ways, as each of the movies by the Coen brothers has a unique form of social commentary or criticism about a specific negative aspect of American society in them. Perhaps dark humor is a good way to convey this kind of social commentary, so I will analyze how the Coen brothers use dark humor to do this.

In my analysis of their films, I will identify specific scenes that showcase dark humor and explain why they are good examples of this type of humor. In order to expand my analysis, I will look for suitable humor theories that explain the humor in these scenes. For example, I will use the classic Superiority Theories of Humor from Aristotle and Plato, as well as A. Peter McGraw's Benign Violation Theory of Humor and Henri Bergson's Incongruity Theory of Humor.

## B. Literature Review

Before analyzing the movies of the Coen brothers separately, I will first provide the theoretical framework that I will use to understand where their dark humor in their films comes from. First I will determine what dark humor exactly is, how and why it is used and how the use of dark humor has evolved in American popular culture, more specifically in American movies. Apart from this historical evolution of dark humor, I will also examine how dark humor is used and perceived in contemporary society. This will help me contextualize and understand the reception of the films by the Coen brothers. Another things that might help me understand their use of dark humor, is the analysis of Jewish-American culture that the Coens are part of and the typical Jewish humor that might have influenced them.

### Chapter 1: Dark Humor

#### 1.1: Defining Dark Humor

The term dark humor is a synonym for black humor, or black comedy, which is described in the Cambridge dictionary as “a film, play, etc. that looks at the funny side of things that we usually consider to be very serious, like death and illness” (“Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus”). While dark humor can come in many forms, the constant feature is laughing with serious subjects. Because of the seriousness of the subject matter, the audience usually feels discomfort, even while laughing simultaneously. Dark humor can be done both from the perspective of the person who is suffering, or from the perspective of the victimizer to make fun of the victim. In the first case, the audience sympathizes with the victim and laughs. They are forced to laugh about the miserable circumstances of the victim, because it alleviates some of the pain or because they want to see something positive about a hopeless or threatening situation. In this way, dark humor can bring relief to the audience, but this is not always the case. In the second case, dark humor is used to laugh with the victim in his suffering, which is only funny if you are somehow not concerned about the victim. For example, if the audience knows that the victim is fictional or that the threat is not that serious, they will be able to laugh.

The term black humor was coined as a cultural concept by French theoretician Andre Breton in 1945 in his book *Anthology of Black Humor*, in which he catalogued forty-five famous writers who used it in their literature. Breton claims Irish writer Jonathan Swift to be the originator of dark humor, as he used it in his early 18th-

century satirical works *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*. According to Breton, Swift was “a man who grasped things by reason and never by feeling, and who enclosed himself in skepticism” (Breton and Polizzoti). Breton hereby underlines the importance of skepticism and cynicism as sources of laughter in dark humor. Breton also believed black humor often returns in the literature of many European writers like Marquis de Sade, Charles Baudelaire, Lewis Carroll or Franz Kafka, as well as in the works of American poet Edgar Allan Poe.

According to Breton, black humor was also employed by European painters like Picasso or Dali or by philosophers like Nietzsche and Freud. To define the concept further, Breton used an essay by Sigmund Freud from 1927 called *Der Humor*, in which Freud writes “The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure” (Freud). As such, Freud attempts to explain dark humor from a psychological perspective.

So the origin of dark humor as an element of literature and as a philosophical concept lies in Europe. However, American writer Kurt Vonnegut commented on Freud's use of the term, saying “The term was part of the language before Freud wrote an essay on it -- 'gallows humour.' This is middle European humour, a response to hopeless situations. It's what a man says faced with a perfectly hopeless situation and he still manages to say something funny” (Vonnegut). While Vonnegut also relates the term to Central Europe, he gives it another name when it is used in the United States: “It's generally called Jewish humour in this country” (Vonnegut). Vonnegut equates Jewish jokes with this Central European type of humor that originated in the face of many wars and conflicts that occurred on this continent.

## 1.2: Dark Humor in American Popular Culture

While dark humor originally came from European literature and philosophy, it eventually spread towards the United States, manifesting its popularity in the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century. In *Black Humor And The American Comic*, Ryan Standfest explains “The postwar desire to aggressively shape a singular middle class ‘American Dream’ eventually resulted in a new brand of comic subversion in the mid to late 1950's” (Standfest). At the time, there was a strong narrative and counter-

narrative in society, which enhanced the use of so-called 'Sick Humor'. Comedians used this type of humor to joke about how difficult it was to fit into society at the time. This was because of the huge social unrest at the time, in a time of nuclear threat from Russia, widespread paranoia towards a communistic 'other', the Vietnam War and the ongoing struggle of the Civil Rights Movement. Standfest differentiates this 'Sick Humor' with Black Humor, explaining "As it is manifested in popular American examples of literature, cinema and stand-up comedy, Black Humor is a form of expressive revolt that, unlike Sick Humor, speaks to the ills of the world rather than just that of the "sick" individual" (Standfest). While the term 'Sick Humor' was most prominently used in reference to comedians like Lenny Bruce and others in the fifties, the term gradually expanded into 'Black Humor', as the general public became more aware of it in the sixties.

Standfest continues explaining the popularity of dark humor in American popular culture, especially in literature, by referring to Bruce Jay Friedman's anthology titled *Black Humor*, saying "This form of humor rooted in suffering naturally lent itself to an even darker sensibility, which began to manifest itself in American literature in the early 1960's" (Friedman). Around this period, dark humor became a popular feature of postmodern literature, as some of these writers became known as 'black humorists', including American writers Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller and Philip Roth. When the *New Columbia Encyclopedia* defined black humor as "grotesque or morbid humor used to express the absurdity, paradox and cruelty of the modern world" (Luebering), it made a reference to some of these American postmodern writers, as well as film director Stanley Kubrick. As Standfest further explains, "This period is often viewed as a 'golden age' of Black Humor that casts it as a particularly American form of outrage" (Standfest). Since the Coen brothers grew up during this period, this might begin to explain their propensity towards dark humor. In their films, they show many references to literature and were often obviously influenced by literature in the writing of their scripts, for example by using elements from hard-boiled detective literature in *Fargo* and in *The Big Lebowski*.

### 1.3 Dark Humor in Jewish-American Culture

Since Jewish humor often deals with suffering, anti-Semitism, and the persecution of Jewish people throughout history, it makes sense that it shares many characteristics with dark humor. As I mentioned before, postmodern writer Kurt Vonnegut even equates Jewish humor in America with the so-called “gallows humor” in Central Europe. Not coincidentally, his fellow black humorist writers Joseph Heller and Philip Roth are also Jewish-Americans. As Ruth R. Wisse explains, “Estimates of the proportion of Jewish professionals in U.S. comedy sometimes ran as high as 80 percent. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what would remain of American humor in the twentieth century without its Jewish component” (Wisse *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*). The influence of Jewish humor on American comedy is visible all throughout American popular culture, in literature, stand-up comedy and also in movies. The Coen brothers are examples of many famous Jewish-American movie directors who have acclaimed critical success with their style of humor, like Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, as well as their contemporaries and close personal friends Sam Raimi and Barry Sonnenfeld.

However, there is more to Jewish humor than merely black humor. As Avner Ziv explains, “Experts in theology, in Jewish history and tradition, in philosophy and literature, in anthropology and folklore (among others) express a wide variety of views on the essence of Jewish humor” (Ziv). While Jewish humor does have common themes and features, it can be very diverse in range and style. Ruth R. Wisse confirms this in the London Daily Telegraph, saying, “Jewish humor is one of the wonders of the world. No other community can compete with the range and subtlety of Jewish jokes” (Wisse *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*).

One common feature of Jewish humor is mentioned by Sigmund Freud, a devotee to Jewish humor, who wrote, “Most of its aficionados take a positive view of Jewish joking. “Incidentally, I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character” (Wisse *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*). This self-deprecation is very typical of Jewish humor, but Wisse concedes that not everyone enjoys it as much as Freud does. She explained, “What Jews make fun of in their own character reflects to a perilous degree what others object to. Just as inoculations can make you ill if they are too powerful, self-deprecation that is too clever, too constant, too “deep,” may highlight the deformity it

is trying to overcome” (Wisse *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*). Indeed, this type of humor can be close to self-hatred, which some people find problematic, especially in relation to anti-Semitism. For example, Wisse mentions Freud’s Jewish contemporary Arthur Schnitzler, who stated that “what Freud celebrates as creative interdependency, Heinrich deplores as self-contempt” (Wisse *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*). Freud retorted to this that Jewish humor not only contains self-deprecation, but also features elements of self-praise and self-reflection in general.

Nonetheless, anti-Semitism is one of the aspects of Jewish life and Jewish religion that is often dealt with in Jewish humor. Wisse further explains, “This book demonstrates how the benefits of Jewish humor are reaped from the paradoxes of Jewish life, so that Jewish humor at its best carries the scars of the convulsions that brought it into being” (Wisse *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*). Since Jewish humor draws from Jewish life, Jewish-American humor typically draws from the life of Jews in America, where people can relate to it inasmuch as they can joke about their own lives. Wisse believes that Americans have taken up the same addiction of joking with life, as is exemplified by the fact that news programs in the United States have a tendency towards comedy, explaining “We are told that most young people take their news straight—straight from the comedians. When did news get to be an excuse for comedy? Or rather, when did Americans begin to deal with the news by laughing at its absurdities and their own attempts to solve the problems of the world?” (Wisse *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*). According to Wisse, the Coen brothers have played a part in the integration of Jewish humor in the American psyche, using the example of Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski*. About this character, she stated “Humor is all about incongruity, and integration in the United States had gone so far that a Polish Catholic – once a paradigm of the anti-Semite – could be portrayed as the conscience of his adopted religion” (Wisse *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*). While the portrayal of Walter Sobchak by the Coen brothers as a converted Jew can be seen as an ironic joke, viewers have still embraced him as a defender of Jewish traditions like Shomer Shabbos. So the Coen brothers manage to poke fun at Jewishness, while at the same time conforming to the ideal self-reflection of Jewish humor. This proves the many possibilities that Jewish humor allows itself to be portrayed in and adapted into.

## 1.4: Dark Humor in American Cinema

In these paragraphs, I will analyze in which movie genres from American cinema dark humor often occurs, since they might have influenced the Coen brothers in their own choices of movie genres for their films. I will also investigate regarding which themes dark humor is often used in American popular movies, to establish whether the Coen brothers deviate in their choice of themes.

### 1.4.1: Dark Humor in American Movie Genres

The use of dark humor spread throughout popular culture, including movies with Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and *The Loved One* as notable examples, while Alfred Hitchcock has also claimed that "*Psycho* was meant to be a dark comedy" (Radnedge). However, Standfest explains that the label Black Humor is problematic in film, saying, "There is some debate as to whether the parameters are clear enough to make it a genre, and indeed when one attempts a definition, the very contrary nature of Black Humor itself tends to muddy categorization" (Standfest). Wes D. Gehring did a study about this in 1996, in which he theorizes dark humor in American films, called *American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire*. In this study, he identifies "three core interrelated themes that seem to recur: "man as beast, the absurdity of the world, and the omnipresence of death" (Gehring *American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire*). Particularly, this fascination with death and presenting it in a comical way sets the genre of dark comedy apart from others. This definition also definitely applies to many movies by the Coen brothers.

Aside from its use in dark comedies, dark humor has also been used in other traditional film styles and genres like film noir and neo-noir, as well as in screwball comedy. Greg Tuck is one writer who discusses this use, claiming, "Indeed, there seems little in the way of suffering and death that cannot be presented in a dark comic way. It is in this shared potential for darkness that we might be able to identify the interface of crossover between 'black' comedy and film 'noir'" (Tuck). While the 'noir' in film noir refers to the black-and-white visual style of these films, they often share dark, melodramatic themes and a pessimistic outlook that dark humor also often has. Therefore, Tuck claims that the potential for dark humor is there in film noir, although the focus still lies mostly on drama.

Nonetheless, some of the comedies by the Coen brothers like *Fargo* and *the Big Lebowski* may be defined as neo-noirs. Thomas S. Hibbs explains the differences between film noir and neo-noir, saying, “Because it is so often characterized by self-conscious deployment of the techniques of classic noir, neo-noir evinces a strong inclination toward pastiche and the satiric. This makes comic themes more at home in the world of neo-noir than they were in the founding era of noir” (Hibbs). Because of this, dark humor lends itself more to the genre of neo-noir than it does to classic film noir.

Hibbs further explains the genre of classic noir, saying “Classic noir has deeply democratic instincts: no one wins because the unforgiving laws of the human condition apply universally to every individual” (Hibbs). This moral ambiguity is typical for the genre, which avoids moral lessons and leaves little room for well-adjusted, virtuous Americans. However, this is perhaps where the Coen brothers set themselves apart from this genre, since they often appear to take a moral stance in their film. The characters in film noir are typically anti-heroes who are forced to make choices out of desperation. In this way, the Coen brothers definitely conform to the genre. Because of this, a grim pessimism is typical for film noir. Yet, Hibbs claims film noir can still be categorized as comical, because of “the depiction of characters in a labyrinth who are at the mercy of a hostile fate can transform the tone of the action from the gravely tragic to the absurdly comic” (Hibbs). This is often the case in films by the Coen brothers, for example in *A Serious Man*, in which Larry Gopnik has so much bad luck that his tragic fate reaches comical proportions. Hibbs explains this phenomenon by saying that “Angst and fear can only be sustained for so long; endless and pointless terror becomes predictable and laughable” (Hibbs). So many bad things occur in the movie that the world becomes absurd to the viewers and to the characters, which is one of the common themes of dark comedies.

The genre of screwball comedy also has elements that often recur in films by the Coen brothers, including *A Serious Man*, *Raising Arizona* and *Intolerable Cruelty*. Screwball comedies typically deal with a comic battle of the sexes, where the female challenges the masculinity of the male character. For example, in *A Serious Man*, this occurs when Larry’s wife Judith wants a divorce, so she can be with the more masculine Sy. This emasculates Larry, whose humiliation is complete when Sy dies and Judith asks him to pay for her lover’s funeral. Another way in which this film is typical for the screwball comedy, is with Larry’s profession as professor, as Wes D.

Gehring explains, “Bergson has all but said the absentminded professor, a central figure in screwball comedy, is equally central to his theory of superiority” (Gehring *Romantic Vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*).

#### 1.4.2 Dark humor in American Movie Themes

Within movie genres, dark comedies have become a popular genre on their own in recent years. This genre includes popular contemporary American movie directors like Paul Thomas Anderson, Quentin Tarantino and Terry Gilliam, as well as the Coen brothers. What all of these directors have in common, is that they make light of difficult topics like death, violence, crime, religion, poverty and disease, using dark humor. As previously mentioned, an early example of dark humor in American film is Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*. The movie is about nuclear war and laughs with the concept of mutual assured destruction. In this way, dark comedies often deal with issues that worry many people in society. Because of this, the themes that are dealt with in dark comedies can take on very serious issues that are usually portrayed in horror or drama films.

Not only nuclear war, but also other difficult topics are dealt with in contemporary dark comedies, such as the end of the world in *This is The End*, the Vietnam War in *Tropic Thunder* or drugs and addiction in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Quentin Tarantino even used dark humor while dealing with themes of slavery and the holocaust, in *Django Unchained* and *Inglorious Basterds* respectively. All of these subjects that were formerly deemed taboo to laugh about, have become suitable topics for dark humor. In the current state of dark humor, nothing has become off-limits and even the most recent tragedies can be shown with dark humor, including current difficult topics, like racial issues in the 2014 film *Dear White People*, or political tensions with North Korea in the 2014 film *The Interview*.

#### 1.5 Dark Humor in American Media

In this chapter, I will analyze the way dark humor functions in American media, which plays an important role in the contextualization, the interpretation and also in the response to the films by the Coen brothers.

### 1.5.1 Dark Humor in Post-9/11 America

Another perspective from which dark humor can be analyzed is its use in the contemporary American media landscape. As Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene explain, “Today humor, satire, interpretation, bias, entertainment, journalism, and activism blend together in increasingly active media practices. The contemporary social and media climate, in the United States at least, is largely defined by the movement towards convergence that is fundamentally changing the way in which we think about politics and everyday life” (Gornelios and Greene). So they believe that politics and everyday life in the United States are coming closer together because of the new media and because of this, “Humor, satire, and irony are important concepts through which we can understand the post-9/11 world because their popularity in the public sphere is directly connected to their ability to impact audiences” (Gornelios and Greene).

This helps explain how dark humor has gained traction in politics and in the public debate in the United States, for example when president Barack Obama used dark humor during the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, joking that “It’s no wonder people keep pointing out how the presidency has aged me... John Boehner’s already invited Netanyahu to speak at my funeral” (Alter). With the use of dark humor, difficult subjects like violence, death, racism, the strong political divide in the United States, and their international political relations can be joked about in the public realm. Some comedians rely on shock value to make dark jokes about these topics as soon as possible. For example, news show hosts like Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert use dark humor to try to come up with jokes about tragic events in the daily news that help the viewer in processing these issues.

However, it should be noted that some people still react to these dark jokes in shock and find them offensive, which can sometimes lead to censorship, demands for apologies and comedians falling from grace.

### 1.5.2 Dark Humor vs. Political Correctness

This possible censorship leads to a debate about dark humor in relation to political correctness, which is an ongoing discussion in American media. As dark humor tends to deal with controversial issues head-on, you could say that dark humor

goes against political correctness. While the term political correctness was first used pejoratively in terms of communism and the application of Stalinist doctrine in the Soviet Union, it later became broader. In its modern form, the debate about political correctness began somewhere in the 1990s. In 1991, Robert D. McFadden wondered in the *New York Times*, “What has come to be called "political correctness," a term that began to gain currency at the start of the academic year last fall, has spread in recent months and has become the focus of an angry national debate, mainly on campuses, but also in the larger arenas of American life” (McFadden). In the same year, president George H. W. Bush also talked about the term, saying “The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudice with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expression off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits” (Bush).

Political correctness can be defined as trying to reduce animosity, to make sure people do not get offended or alienated. It is typically used with sensitive topics like religion, race and gender, since a lot of people find these important personal values and take pride in them. However, some directors try to go against the grain of political correctness and want to reduce limitations, to make sure that nothing is off-limits or taboo, as they attempt to set new boundaries for their viewers. Within this context of setting new boundaries, dark humor has become a popular feature in American popular culture.

Norman M. Cohen discusses the theme of political correctness in relation to dark humor and the Coen brothers in his review of *A Serious Man*, in which he writes “Contemporary culture’s shifting boundaries about political correctness revives the discussion about blatant stereotypes, their purpose in satire, and their lasting influence and effect on bigotry and prejudice. The Coen brothers are renowned for the use of such images in most, if not all, of their films” (Cohen). While Cohen mentions that the use of stereotypes is popular in satire, he also shows how problematic this is, as stereotypes can lead to bigotry and prejudice. If you want to avoid controversy, it is better to be careful when laughing with stereotypes. The Coen brothers clearly refuse to do this, according to Cohen, which has led to criticism, like accusations of being condescending towards their characters.

## 1.6 Humor Theories

In this chapter, I will present some humor theories that will help me in my analysis of my study cases. Humor theories are theories that explain why certain things are humorous, proposed by philosophers from many different eras who analyzed the subject of humor. These theories were then further discussed and perfected by thinkers who commented on them or opposed them, partly or fully. While I will not use specific theories on dark humor, I will use general humor theories that can be applied to any kind of humor, including dark humor. Since there is no real distinction between dark humor and other types of humor, apart from the subject matter, these theories should also be capable of explaining the instances of dark humor in the scenes I will analyze. With every instance of dark humor in each scene, I should be able to explain why they are funny by the use of these humor theories.

### 1.6.1 The Superiority Theory of Humor

I have already mentioned in my introduction that in their criticism of the Coen brothers, some reviewers believe that the directors are condescending towards their characters and feel superior to them. If this is true, then the dark humor in their films could be explained with the classic superiority theory of humor by Aristotle and Plato, as well as the more recent theory of comic superiority by philosopher Henri Bergson.

This superiority theory generally states that “a person laughs about misfortunes of others (so called *schadenfreude*), because these misfortunes assert the person's superiority on the background of shortcomings of others” (Mulder and Nijholt). This is reminiscent of dark humor, as dark humor also makes light of the misfortune of people. However, according to this theory, people make fun of the misfortune of others in order to feel better about themselves, which is not necessarily, and not always, the case with dark humor.

According to Aristotle's classic theory of superiority, he believes “we laugh at inferior or ugly individuals, because we feel a joy at feeling superior to them” (Aristotle). Plato had a similar superiority theory where people laugh with ridiculous characters, saying “the ridiculous was characterized by a display of self-ignorance” (Plato). In ancient Greek tragedies, many characters often had personal flaws that lead

to their own downfall, which Aristotle refers to as 'hamartia', describing tragic characters as "the character between these two extremes - that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty" (Aristotle). In the case of the Coen brothers, their characters can often be defined by such a fatal error, or 'hamartia', which leads to their downfall, so perhaps they were influenced by ancient Greek literature.

Henri Bergson also created a theory of comic superiority, describing humor as, "the process of laughter, used in particular by comics and clowns, as caricature of the mechanistic nature of humans (habits, automatic acts, etc.), one of the two tendencies of life (degradation towards inert matter and mechanism, and continual creation of new forms)." (Fagot-Largeau) So on the one hand, Bergson saw humor as inherent to the nature of humans and part of the tendencies of life, as we laugh with our own habits and caricature them. On the other hand, he also warned people that humor can be dangerous because the "criterion of what should be laughed at is not a moral criterion and that it can in fact cause serious damage to a person's self-esteem" (Bergson). This is indeed what critics of the Coen brothers warn people for, as their dark humor can be found offensive if the viewer sympathizes with certain characters and are then hurt in their self-esteem when the characters have to endure dark humor.

Wes D. Gehring contextualizes this theory by Bergson within the genre of screwball comedy, "Bergson's theory of comic superiority, based in "mechanical inelasticity", can best be related to the screwball genre by examining the effects on character development of its two primary components: (1) "absentmindedness", and (2) "inversion" or "topsy-turvydom"- where character roles are switched" (Gehring *Romantic Vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*). The Coens often use elements from the genre of screwball comedy in their films, including in their character development. According to Bergson, comedy can be found in these two character traits, since the viewer feels a sense of superiority if they manage to avoid those two things in their own life. Bergson further claims "Comedy is a game-a game that imitates life" (Sypher). This means in order to laugh with something, people need to be able to recognize it as lifelike, but also as merely an imitation of life. The Coen brothers manage to do this by using techniques of pastiche and satire.

Wylie Sypher mentions another similar theory on humor by George Meredith, saying "in writing the introduction to *The Egoist*, Meredith thinks of this game as dealing with human nature in the drawing room where we have no dust of the

struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes” (Sypher). So Sypher claims that comedy can be found by examining human nature in the drawing room, so at the basis of character development. Sypher further explains that “Indeed, to appreciate Bergson and Meredith we must see them both in a new perspective, now that we have lived amid the "dust and crashes" of the twentieth century and have learned how the direst calamities that befall man seem to prove that human life at its depths is inherently absurd. The comic and the tragic views of life no longer exclude each other” (Sypher). So Sypher argues that after the twentieth century, we no longer laugh to feel better about ourselves in opposition to other inferior people, but rather laugh with the inherently absurd condition of all humans, which is both sad and funny at the same time. This would be a great defense for the Coen brothers in their accusations of moral superiority, since it proves that laughing with people simply constitutes recognition of the human condition, instead of Plato’s idea of ‘self-ignorance’.

#### 1.6.2 The Incongruity Theory of Humor

The incongruity theory generally states that “humor is perceived at the moment of realization of incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept” (Mulder and Nijholt). In other words, there is often an unexpected, sudden shift in perspective in humor, which can be explained by the incongruity theory of humor.

Noel Carroll also explained this kind of humor, saying, “For incongruity has as its root some form of *contrast* such that a relatively specifiable normative alternative – whether cognitive, or moral, or prudential – stands as the background against which the incongruous behavior, or saying, or whatever, is compared (generally in terms of some form of structured opposition)” (Carroll). So the theory explains that things are funny when they are incongruous or when they appear to be in contrast with a normative alternative. The viewer expects something else and therefore the incongruous alternative seems out of place and comical.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant created perhaps the most famous version of the incongruity theory of humor, claiming that “the comic is the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Morreall). The viewer expects a certain thing to happen, creating a strained expectation, but surprisingly it does not happen, so the viewer laughs away their expectations.

Mark T. Conrad explains that in *The Big Lebowski* “comic incongruity arises from the theme of the wrong man and from the repeated presence of the Dude in settings where he clearly does not belong, what the Coens call the anachronism of incompatibility” (Conrad). This character of the ‘wrong man’ definitely creates humor in this film that can be explained by the incongruity theory of humor. This character was a popular staple in film noir, as Jeffrey Adams explains, saying “Indeed, noir protagonists are often weak and powerless anti-heroes, either the ‘dupe’ who is manipulated and betrayed by a deceitful femme fatale, or the ‘wrong man’, an innocent victim of circumstances beyond his control” (Adams). The ‘wrong man’ can only be considered as an example of dark humor if it leads to painful misunderstandings or violence.

### 1.6.3 The Relief Theory of Humor

Another popular theory on humor is the relief theory proposed by Sigmund Freud. John Morreall explained this saying “In his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud analyzes three laughter situations: *der Witz*, “the comic,” and “humor.” In all three, laughter releases nervous energy that was summoned for a psychological task, but then became superfluous as that task was abandoned” (Morreall). This means that Freud’s theory not only applies to humor, but also to laughter in general. Since my thesis is on dark humor, I will focus on how the relief theory applies to dark humor. Morreall specified this, saying “In *der Witz*, that superfluous energy is energy used to repress feelings; in the comic it is energy used to think, and in humor it is the energy of feeling emotions” (Morreall). So in humor, the relief theory states that the audience is relieved of the energy of feeling emotions. In the case of dark humor, this would be the relief of negative emotions, since dark humor always evokes such feelings.

Mulder and Nijholt further explain Freud’s relief theory, stating, “that this “psychic energy” in our body is built as an aid for suppressing feelings in taboo areas, like sex or death. When this energy is released we experience laughter, not only because of the release of this energy, but also because these taboo thoughts are being entertained” (Mulder and Nijholt). This adds an interesting notion to the debate about dark humor in relation to political correctness. The relief theory explains how humor creates laughter by entertaining taboo thoughts, which can be the case when dark

humor is used with politically incorrect subjects.

Mulder and Nijholt also mention how the relief theory and the incongruity theory of humor are today considered to be the most conventional humor theories, as opposed to the superiority theory, which has lost some of its relevance. They explain “Further weakening the dominance of the Superiority Theory in the 18th century were two new accounts of laughter which are now called the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory. Neither even mentions feelings of superiority” (Mulder and Nijholt).

#### 1.6.4 The Benign Violation Theory of Humor

Another, less conventional explanation for humor is the benign violation theory by A. Peter McGraw, which states that “tragedies (which feature severe violations) are more humorous when temporally, socially, hypothetically, or spatially distant, but that mishaps (which feature mild violations) are more humorous when psychologically close” (McGraw, Warren and Williams). So these are two different explanations for how the viewer can laugh with tragic events, as is common with the use of dark humor. First of all, the viewer can laugh with a tragedy if there is enough psychological distance, preventing the viewer to feel concern for the victim, but rather laugh with his unfortunate fate. This is definitely the case with dark humor, which makes people laugh with tragedies. Secondly, the viewer can laugh when they relate to a person after a mild violation or a mishap, like stumbling or falling over. This is not as suitable with dark humor, since it tends to laugh with serious issues and not mild ones. However, the benign violation theory can be expanded to mean that any situation that threatens people's sense of how the world "ought to be" is humorous, including social miscues that threaten your personal dignity or malapropisms that threaten your linguistic norms, as long as they are benign threats. This theory fits perfectly with dark humor and it being used to explain many instances of dark humor in the films by the Coen brothers.

## Chapter 2: Dark Humor and the Coen Brothers

### 2.1: Literary Influences of the Coen Brothers

The influence of the novels of Raymond Chandler, James Cain and Dashiell Hammett on the Coen brothers, as is mentioned by Josh Levine, among others. Levine explains that “In deciding what kind of film to write, the brothers didn’t draw so much on their film knowledge as on their liking of popular fiction. A trio of crime writers has hovered over their own imaginations like guardian angels from the very beginning: Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. Hard-boiled writers, each of them could write cutting, witty, street-smart dialogue and could surprise the reader with their plot machinations” (Levine).

Paul Coughlin also mentions the influence of Cain, saying “*The Man Who Wasn’t There* is concerned with transgressing many of *film noir*’s most important conventions, summarily problematizing its connection to James Cain, a chief inspiration for the entire *noir* movement” (Coughlin).

### 2.2: Common Themes of the Coen Brothers

Since dark humor is humor about painful subjects, it would be useful to determine which subjects the Coen brothers deal with when they use dark humor. The Coen brothers are known for the social commentary in their films, as they often satirize certain aspects of American culture, thereby questioning them. This includes criminality and violence, the perception of Judaism in American society, the morality of capitalism and perhaps morality in American society at large.

Other issues that are thematized are passivity versus competitiveness in society in *The Big Lebowski*, where the slacker culture of the Dude is being placed against a hyper-competitive, money-chasing upper class of his namesake Jeffrey Lebowski. In *Burn After Reading*, the idea of opportunism is thematized, also within the same competitive money-driven society, in which even secret agencies like the CIA can be a target in the quest for money of regular people.

The idea of dependence versus independence is heavily thematized in *Inside Llewyn Davis*, as the protagonist Llewyn Davis is unsuccessful as a solo act after his musical partner killed himself, while he is very much dependent on friends and other people in life. A possible reason why the Coen brothers want to explore this theme of

independence is because they both have strong personalities themselves, but are ultimately dependent on one another while making movies.

Another issue that is dealt with in this movie is the problem of integrity or the contrast between personal values and the values of society at large, as Llewyn is very wary of commercial success and prefers being true to his own values and traditional values of folk music, but he fails to provide for himself because of this. In many of their movies, the Coen brothers question whether money is the right motivation for people and show the immorality of it, but here they also show the problem of not being driven by money. This idea of integrity is also thematized in *A Serious Man*, as Larry is tested in his spiritual beliefs from his religious Jewish faith and also in his integrity as a professor by a blackmailing student and in his integrity as a man, since his wife wants to divorce him.

The notion of crime is heavily thematized in *Fargo*, in *No Country For Old Men* and in their first film *Blood Simple*, as well as playing some role in *O Brother Where Art Thou* and *The Big Lebowski*. *Fargo* and *Blood Simple* can even be described as crime films, since many of the main or side characters in these films are criminals or killers who murder people for money without much remorse.

Elements of crime and violence are often portrayed comically in their movies, so perhaps this can be seen as commentary on the omnipresence of violence in American society. For example, the criminals in *Fargo*, *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and *The Big Lebowski* are portrayed as bumbling and chaotic men who are blinded by their own immorality and because of this, they find themselves in increasingly difficult situations, mostly ending in their own demise. The message here seems to be that crime ultimately does not pay off and that the Coen brothers perhaps prefer the pacifist nature of their protagonist in *The Big Lebowski*. However, in their most successful film *No Country For Old Mean*, which won them four Academy Awards including Best Picture, the protagonist Anton Chigurh is both a ruthless killer and highly professional and careful. This is in contrast with their other movies, perhaps because it was not actually written by the Coen brothers themselves, but based on a Cormac McCarthy novel.

### 2.3: Directing Style of the Coen Brothers

Nonetheless, violence is something that returns very often in classic American cinema, like the gratuitous violence in traditional Westerns, where cowboys are

glorified for their skills with a gun or other weapons. This also seems to have influenced the Coen brothers, who have made a remake of a Western movie with *True Grit*, while *No Country for Old Men* also contains elements of the Western. The Coen brothers seem to go along with this American tradition of glorifying violence in movies, like for instance in the famous wood chipper scene from *Fargo* or in other violent deaths in *Burn After Reading* and *No Country For Old Men*. Other contemporary American filmmakers agree with this entertaining side of violence, with Quentin Tarantino once quipping in an interview, in which he was asked if the excessive violence in his movies was really necessary, he replied that it definitely was, because it is so much fun.

While the Coen brothers might not openly advocate violence in films like Tarantino does, they refuse to shy away from using violence in their films either. However, while Tarantino often portrays killers with a clear and overt motive to kill people, like in *Kill Bill*, *Inglorious Basterds* and in *Django Unchained*, the Coen brothers seem to prefer killers without any clear motivation, except perhaps money. For example, this is clear in *No Country For Old Men*, when Anton Chigurh asks a potential victim to pick the side of a coin that ultimately decides his fate. The Coen brothers seem to say that the decision of life and death is a mere flip of a coin to criminals, as coincidence or fate are more important factors than actual motivation.

As Ryan P. Doom notes about *Fargo*, “In all crime stories, motivation always surfaces as the primary focus, yet here, there’s little reason to reveal that information” (Doom). More than other directors, the Coen brothers like to combine the theme of violence with themes of fate, circumstance and conscience, which they also examine in *Fargo*, *Burn After Reading* or in their first film, *Blood Simple*. In all these movies, the characters are portrayed as fairly normal people, who simply make bad, immoral decisions that ultimately determine their fate. The question why they make those decisions often goes unanswered by the Coen brothers, leaving the viewer to wonder whether it could happen to anyone.

So, while going along with the larger trend of portraying violence in movies, which seems inevitable for American moviemakers, the Coen brothers still like to present a unique perspective on violence, showing it in a way that it can be and perhaps should be questioned. The Coen brothers seem less interested in whether or not people are good or bad, but they are very interested in fate and finding out whether good or bad people actually deserve the good or bad things that happen to

them. This is in contrast to traditional Westerns, where inherently good people fight inherently bad people, in order to maintain a balance in society. The good guys would then always win to preserve this moral balance. However, in movies by the Coen brothers, there are no clear good and bad guys and the violence often has no greater implications on society. This is clearly exemplified at the end of *Burn After Reading*, when a group of CIA directors try to determine why the entire story happened, but concluded that there was no lesson to be learned, moral or otherwise. The Coen brothers seem to indicate that moral balance is something people as individuals have to find within themselves and if their life is morally out of balance, it might lead to problems or violence, depending on circumstances, coincidence or fate.

Paul Coughlin explains how the Coen brothers were influenced by film noir, screwball comedies, the settings of Frank Capra films, the characters of Preston Sturges films and the use of method acting, saying “Joel and Ethan Coen have worked within the realms of various genres, adopting appropriate methods of realisation to reflect these representational frameworks. The dialogue in their films is a prominent factor in the organisation and maintenance of these generic constructions and in the fulfilment of specific stylistic strategies” (Coughlin).

Alan Woolfolk, who writes about how the Coen brothers mix different film genres like comedies, detective films and thrillers, also mentions the influence of postmodernism on their films, for example the use of self-reflexivity and obvious symbolism. He applies the theories of postmodernist Frederic Jameson to their works, saying “As the inaugural film of Joel and Ethan Coen, *Blood Simple* (1984) is a startling exercise in transgeneric filmmaking that is difficult to characterize accurately not only because it draws upon the genres of film noir, comedy, the detective film and the thriller, but also because it is almost too obviously and pejoratively postmodern in its self-reflexivity, the use of obvious symbolism, and what Frederic Jameson calls “the omnipresence of pastiche” to the exclusion of any genuine “historicity”” (Woolfolk).

In his book *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers*, Josh Levine mentioned that Joel Coen once said, “The attraction of a genre is that the audience comes to it with a set of rules and expectations. The fun comes from circumventing the rules and putting a new spin on the genre” (Levine). The Coen brothers are praised as highly aware of the rules of certain traditional movie genres, while still being able to make new and creative versions of them. Carolyn R. Russell

further explains how “the Coens make films that are highly self-conscious of their relationship to preexisting film forms. Their movies rely upon a base of knowledge, cultural and film historical, that is presumed to be shared between themselves and their viewers” (Russell). This can, however, lead to problems if the viewers do not share this base of knowledge, which might lead to accusations of feeling superior.

#### 2.4: Criticism of the Coen Brothers

Despite their critical acclaim, the Coen brothers have received a share of criticism in movie reviews and literature. Perhaps dark humor also plays a role in their shortcomings as directors, as Mike D’Angelo seems to suggest, saying, “For many years, the Coens were dismissed as soulless mimics who looked upon all of their characters with contempt—a cardinal sin in some circles. The same objection had previously been lodged, mostly by the same critics, against filmmakers like Robert Altman and Stanley Kubrick, both of whom shared the Coens’ grim outlook (and who, like them, tended to be unforgiving toward human nature even in their ostensible comedies)” (D’Angelo). Both the grim outlook and unforgiving attitude towards humans can be seen as elements from dark humor.

Emanuel Levy confirms this opinion, by saying “The Coens are clever directors who know too much about movies and too little about real life” (Levy). Paul Coughlin also refers to this criticism in *Senses of Cinema*, by saying “Yet, when the Coens construct ‘human beings’ they are often accused of adopting a mocking tone to them” (Coughlin). Indeed, the use of caricatures and stereotypes is a common criticism the Coen brothers have to endure. Coughlin continues by writing “The Coens’ detailed reconstruction of identifiable communities, with all their quirks and eccentricities, has led many critics to accuse them of adopting a lofty superiority to their characters” (Coughlin). Here, Coughlin explains how the writing style of the Coen brothers can be seen as conveying superiority.

However, Coughlin does admit that “Despite all the criticism of their work—their films are merely about other films, their work smugly proposes the emptiness at the core of art, they hide behind style to avoid moral and ethical issues—the Coen brothers nevertheless set up a connection to history through their pithy investigation into the texts that represent the past” (Coughlin).

## C. Methodology

### Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I will explain how I have chosen the films for my analysis and how I will realize my research objective of determining how the Coen brothers use dark humor and what the effects are of its use in each selected film. For each film, I will choose two specific scenes from that film that clearly showcase dark humor, based on the definition of dark humor that I have used in my introductory chapter. Then I will use the humor theories that I have discussed in my chapter on humor theories, in order to analyze the use of dark humor in each scene and explain why certain jokes or certain funny scenes qualify as dark humor. For each of these scenes, I will focus on the elements of mise-en-scene that potentially influence the effects of dark humor, like setting, costume, lighting and figure expression and movement.

As I have explained in my introduction, I will try to demonstrate how the Coen brothers use dark humor in the films and show that they use it for various reasons and not just merely as entertainment or comedy for the sake of comedy. Instead, I will make it plausible that they use dark humor to address various human and societal themes and to give social commentary about these themes. I will try to determine for each film what the most prevalent themes are and what the Coen brothers exactly try to say about such themes, specifically how their use of dark humor relates to the message they appear to convey in their films or whether there actually is a deeper message to be found. For each theme, I will determine whether this is a typical theme that the Coen brothers discuss in many of their films or whether it is specific to that film. I will also analyze the many layers that can be found in their use of dark humor, as they seem to have borrowed techniques from certain movie genres, literature or from specific directors who also use a similar type of dark humor. I will analyze the intertextuality with other directors and with their own works, to determine how they have worked out their own personal type of dark humor.

#### 3.1 Selection Process

In this chapter, I will go over my reasons of choosing the four movies for further analysis in my thesis, as well as explain why I chose certain scenes that were representative of their use of dark humor.

### 3.1.1 Selection of Movies:

The movies that I selected for this thesis are the movies that I was most familiar with from my own experience of watching them and that I personally found to contain many good examples of dark humor and to be indicative for their use of dark humor. This was later confirmed in the literature review that I did, where I found many good academic sources that discussed the dark humor in their films, especially in their earlier films *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*. For the newer films *A Serious Man* and especially *Inside Llewyn Davis*, there was less extensive academic research to be found, although there were still many reviews, books and news articles available. For *Inside Llewyn Davis*, this allowed me to apply culture theories and movie theories of my own choice, which I deemed relevant to the specific subjects and themes that are being used with dark humor in this film. This also offered me the challenge to perhaps contribute to the academic literature about these more recent films.

### 3.1.2 Selection of Scenes:

For every study case, I selected two specific scenes that in my view were exemplary for the use of dark humor throughout the entire movie. This selection was based on the use of themes that were most relevant to the analysis of the movie according to the literature study and that were in accordance to the definition of dark humor that I used, which was “a film, play, etc. that looks at the funny side of things that we usually consider to be very serious, like death and illness.” (“Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus”)(“Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus”) Therefore, each scene that I will analyze will include a clear example, like an occurrence of violence or a death, that is usually shown seriously, but that is here portrayed with dark humor. Since these scenes will generally contain many instances of dark humor, I will point them all out and explain the dark humor in them, using humor theories (Ch. 1.6). By showing recurring instances of dark humor used in recurring themes, I will be able to determine how the Coen brothers typically use dark humor in their movies.

## 3. 2. Analysis

Here I will explain how I will go about my analysis of the four movies that I chose as

study cases, in order to understand the use of dark humor in these films, as well as show how I will analyze the scenes that portray dark humor.

### 3.2.1 Analysis of Movies:

In my larger analysis of the movies, I will focus on four subjects: the common themes, the movie genres, the social commentary and the characterization of each film. I will specifically focus on how each of these subjects influences the use of dark humor in each movie.

#### - Common Themes:

In each movie, I will focus on the common themes that are being discussed by the Coen brothers, whether they are typical themes for them and also whether they are discussed using dark humor. Some themes will reoccur in some or in all of their movies, which will allow for a comparison with their other movies and how they discuss said themes differently or similarly in each one.

#### - Movie Genres:

I will also analyze each movie with the question in which movie genre it can be categorized. Since some movie genres inherently have dark humor in them, most prominently dark comedies, it will be interesting to determine whether the Coen Brothers' movies I selected can be categorized as such. Some other genres of comedy typically have dark humor in them as one of many elements. Perhaps my study cases will fit completely into a certain movie genre or perhaps certain elements of different movie genres have been used, or only certain elements of a certain genre appear in their movie. I will determine exactly what movie genres apply to each study case and how this relates to the use of dark humor in each movie.

#### - Social Commentary:

Since all of the Coen brothers' movies contain social commentary, I will analyze whether this is done through the use of dark humor in each separate movie and also how this compares or differs in each individual movie.

#### - Characterization:

In my analysis of each movie, I will also focus on the characterization and how dark humor can be traced from how the Coen brothers have chosen to do characterization in each movie. The characterization can be done in two ways, either with direct characterization or indirect characterization. Direct characterization is when the director literally tells the audience what a character is like, via the narrator, via another character or the characters can introduce themselves. For example, in *The Big Lebowski*, this is done at the beginning of the film where the narrator introduces the Dude to the viewers and literally explains to them what kind of person he is. Indirect characterization is when the viewers have to figure out for themselves what the character is like by critically analyzing their thoughts, actions, voice, physical appearance, and their social mannerisms in their interactions with other characters.

Another way in which characters in a movie can be defined is in whether they are round or flat characters. E. M. Forster explained this type of characterization in his book *Aspects of the novel*, saying there are “two basic types of characters, their qualities, functions, and importance for the development of the novel: flat characters and round characters. Flat characters are two-dimensional, in that they are relatively uncomplicated. By contrast, round characters are complex figures with many different characteristics, that undergo development, sometimes sufficiently to surprise the reader” (Hoffman and Murphy). E.M. Forster also discloses another way in which characters can be defined, which is either as dynamic or as static characters, where “Dynamic characters are the ones that change over the course of the story, while static characters remain the same throughout” (Forster).

### 3.2.2 Analysis of Scenes:

#### - Mise-en-scene

In order to analyze these scenes, I will use the technique of mise-en-scene that is discussed by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in their book “Film Art: An Introduction”. The main components of mise-en-scene they mention are: setting, costume, lighting and figure expression and movement. I will analyze all of these components in each scene, focusing on each component separately and on how they affect the use of dark humor.

Bordwell and Thompson reflect on the patterning of these mise-en-scene elements, with questions like “How do they function?” (Bordwell and Thompson),

and “How do they constitute motifs that weave their ways through the film?” (Bordwell and Thompson). I will ask these same questions in my analysis, especially in relation to the use of dark humor, in order to determine how each element adds to the dark humor within the scene itself and to the use of dark humor throughout the entire movie.

Bordwell and Thompson also mention how researchers should focus on how these elements are “patterned in space and time to attract and guide the viewers’ attention through the process of watching the film, and to create suspense or surprise” (Bordwell and Thompson). Whenever there is suspense or surprise in a scene, I will explain how it affects the dark humor.

- Humor theories

I will apply the humor theories that I discussed in Chapter 1.6 to the scenes, in order to explain what exactly is funny in these scenes and then point out why these instances convey dark humor.

## D. Case Studies

### Chapter 4: Fargo

In this chapter, first I will provide a short synopsis of the story in *Fargo* in the appendix, before analyzing exactly where the dark humor lies in a few selected scenes that clearly exemplify the use of dark humor in the movie. I will use mise-en-scene to determine how dark humor is used in these scenes, before analyzing what themes are discussed while using dark humor and what the Coen brothers try to accomplish with dark humor. I will also analyze how the Coen brothers portray the characters and how they add to the dark humor. Then I will be able to conclude what makes the dark humor so typical for the Coen brothers. The questions that will be answered about *Fargo* are whether there actually is any dark humor in the movie, where the dark humor is used and why.

#### 4.1 Selected Scenes:

The first scene I selected is the one where Jean is kidnapped from her home, as it clearly showcases dark humor in its portrayal of violence and crime. Both of these subjects are portrayed comically, which I will explain with the use different humor theories. I will point out the dark humor that can be found in each small detail of this scene, which is sometimes shown overtly and sometimes in an understated way.

- The kidnapping scene:

In this scene, the two criminals, Carl and Gaear, kidnap Jean Lundegaard. While this is a horrific scenario that you would normally see in a drama or horror movie, the Coen brothers manage to inject the scene with dark humor on many occasions. At the start of the scene, Jean is sitting at home, unassuming of any potential danger, knitting on the couch and watching daytime television in pink pajamas, with unkempt hair and no make-up. Already the Coen brothers seem to mock Jean for her appearance and for being completely unprepared for the violence that is about to erupt. This could perhaps be explained with Aristotle's superiority theory of humor, which states that we laugh at individuals if we feel superior to them. Jean suddenly notices a masked

man outside, Carl, looking through the window (see Figure 1).



Figure 1, Fargo kidnapping scene

She continues to stare at him unmoved, while Carl fails to notice her and clearly has trouble seeing with his mask on. Her failure to react immediately, as well as Carl's failure to spot her on the couch is comical, as we mock their inferiority according to Aristotle, laughing with the characters' lack of basic awareness or intelligence. Carl then smashes through the window, as Jean finally starts panicking. Her panic is portrayed comically and completely over-the-top. She runs around screaming hysterically, while Gaear enters through the front door and catches her as she stumbles against him. The contrast between the hysterical Jean and the stoic Gaear also provides some dark comedy. He then picks her up and in their struggle, she manages to bite his hand (see Figure 2).



Figure 2, Fargo kidnapping scene

The viewer might expect a ruthless killer like Gaear to withstand a simple and childish act like someone biting his hand, but surprisingly it works. This can be explained with the incongruity theory of humor, where the viewer is expecting something different and laughs because he or she finds the difference surprising and ridiculous. Jean flees upstairs into the bathroom, while Gaear calmly takes off his mask and grumbles that he wants ointment. Again, this is out of character for Gaear, since you would not expect a big, strong and violent criminal to be bothered by this. Jean manages to take the phone with her into the bathroom, but it is pulled from her hands from the other side of the locked door before she can use it. The comedy here comes from the fact that the phone is vital to her rescue, but she stupidly loses it, possibly just from overestimating the length of the cord.

In a scene reminiscent of the famous scene in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* when Jack Nicholson's character uses an axe to break through a door, Carl and Gaear try to do the same with a crowbar, while Jean screams hysterically at the other side of the door. However, in contrast to the real violence and menace in a horror movie like *The Shining*, here the criminals struggle mightily to get through the flimsy door, as they poke the crowbar through a tiny hole without any danger. When they finally manage to break through, Jean appears to have fled through the window. Carl angrily runs downstairs, while Gaear calmly opens the cabinet looking for ointment for his bite mark. Just as he is about to apply it to the wound, he realizes that Jean is behind the shower curtain (see Figure 3).



Figure 3, Fargo kidnapping scene

She screams and gets herself entangled in the curtain and starts flailing around the house, before falling down the stairs. This again shows dark humor, since the Coen brothers want to make the viewers laugh about how she panics and stumbles painfully down the stairs, using techniques of overacting and slapstick humor. There is also incongruity from the fact that the two violent criminals surprisingly have to do nothing to capture her, as she takes out herself. In the end, Gaear calmly walks down the stairs with a puzzled expression and finds her on the floor, unconscious and still wrapped in a curtain (see Figure 4).



Figure 4, Fargo kidnapping scene

As Tasha Robinson explains in a review of the movie, “It’s hard to reconcile the drama of Jean’s obvious terror in the bathroom with the comedy of her flailing blindly through the house, but that’s one of the things the Coens do best: finding a way for slapstick and sickening sequences to complement each other instead of clash” (Robinson) Indeed, in this scene, there is plenty of slapstick, from Jean’s hysteria to the bumbling inefficiency of the two criminals. This is explained in the Benign Violation Theory of humor, which states that people will not laugh if they can not take the threat seriously. While the thought of being kidnapped from your home is something everyone would normally find scary, the viewers get sidetracked from feeling horror because the whole situation is somewhat ridiculous.

The Coen brothers create distance from Jean’s terror by portraying it in a comical fashion, as if they are mocking her and her dramatic fate. There is even a moment

later in the movie when Carl and Gaear actually mock her (see Figure 5) when she tries to escape, after they take her out of the trunk of their car.



Figure 5, Fargo kidnapping scene

The sight of her running aimlessly through the snow and falling over constantly in her pajamas, with the curtain still wrapped around her and blocking her view, brings great amusement to Carl and Gaear. The viewers might have the same reaction of *schadenfreude*, unless they truly feel sorry for her as an innocent victim of a crime, but the Coen brothers try to prevent this. First of all, her character gets very little screen time in the film, preventing viewers from truly getting to know her and sympathising with her. Whenever she is shown, she is portrayed as dim-witted and extremely panicky, creating less sympathy for her. Not to forget, this is the same woman that her own husband cared so little for that he decided to have her kidnapped for money, not even bothering to think about her safety or how she would possibly respond to this afterwards. All of this appears to be meant to prevent the viewer from actually feeling sorry for her, and her ultimate demise even happens off-screen, as if the Coen brothers are trying to prove to the viewers that it is truly not important.

Another scene that clearly showcases dark humor is very gruesome, but it is also one of the most iconic scenes of the movie. It is the scene where Gaear pushes Carl's dismembered corpse through a wood chipper. While it is probably difficult for many people to see humor in this, there are actually many instances of dark humor throughout this scene, which I will point out and explain where exactly the dark humor lays.

- The wood chipper scene:

In this scene, Gaear tries to get rid of the evidence of murdering his companion Carl, by pushing his body through a wood chipper. The scene begins quite similarly to the kidnapping scene, only this time with Gaear eating cereal and watching television instead of Jean. The banality of this setting is once again in contrast with the drama that is about to ensue. Carl then stumbles into the room with a serious head wound, trying to stop the bleeding, after being shot in the face by Wade while retrieving the ransom. This sight should normally shock the viewer, but the two criminals respond to it like nothing happened and that it is normal, which is comical according to the Benign Violation Theory of humor. Carl jokes “You should see the other guy”, referring to the fact that he killed Wade. This is a bit of an inside joke for the viewers, who actually know what happened, while Gaear does not. Carl then notices Jean’s body on the floor (see Figure 6) after Gaear apparently murdered her off-screen because she had started screaming. Again, this would normally discomfort the viewer, but it is comical and ridiculous because Gaear killed her for the minor nuisance of being too noisy and again they act like this is the most normal thing in the world.



Figure 6, Fargo wood chipper scene

Carl gives Gaear half of the ransom, 40.000 dollars, and then tells him he wants the Sierra they received from Jerry. In exchange, Carl says Gaear can have his truck, which he refuses. The irony here lies in the fact that Carl had already duped Gaear out of the million-dollar ransom and now he is still greedy and wants to nitpick about the seemingly irrelevant car. Gaear wants Carl to pay him for his half of the car, which angers Carl, stating that he got shot in the face after going through the trouble of

getting the money for them. It is a ridiculous argument that they get into and the comedy increases by the contrast between Carl's anger and Gaear's stoic responses. Carl yells at Gaear "Are we square?" while threatening him with a gun and walks out of the house. Since Carl has worked with Gaear for so long, perhaps he should have known better than to threaten him with a gun, but he foolishly thinks he can get away with it. Gaear then comes after him with an axe and murders him.

Later, we see Marge driving in her police car when she finds the stolen Sierra near a house in the woods. She gets out of her car and hears a strange noise coming from behind the house. Both the viewer and Marge do not know where the sound is coming from, so the curiosity is shared. She walks through the forest and looks surprised (see Figure 7) as she catches a glimpse of what is happening at the wood chipper. The audience still do not know what is happening and her reaction is comically understated, as if she sees something weird and mildly disgusting, which does not prepare the viewer for the shocking sight they are about to see.



Figure 7, Fargo wood chipper scene

She pulls out her gun and yells "police!" (See Figure 8), but Gaear cannot hear her, because of the loud noise of the wood chipper, as we see him attempting to push down a limb from Carl's body (See Figure 9) with a block of wood.



Figure 8, Fargo wood chipper scene



Figure 9, Fargo wood chipper scene

While most viewers would find this gruesome sight of a foot in a white sock sticking out of a wood chipper with a puddle of blood in the surrounding snow revolting, the Coen brothers still manage to inject the scene with dark humor, as Gaear struggles with the task at hand, using an ineffective piece of wood. Gaear then finally notices Marge, but since he still cannot hear her, she points to her police hat to clarify what she was yelling at him, comically pointing out the very obvious. He throws the block of wood at her and tries to escape by running into an adjacent field of snow. This is again ridiculous, as a dangerous, psychopathic murderer is now resorting to pointlessly throwing a piece of wood at someone. His escape plan is also comically flawed, since there is no way to hide in a field of snow. Marge has all the time in the world to take aim and she shoots him in the leg, easily arresting him.

After this, we see them both sitting in her police car, as she looks at him behind bars in the rearview mirror. She figures out that the dead body in the house was Ms. Lundegaard and that it was his accomplice in the wood chipper, along with the three dead witnesses at the side of the road in Brainerd. This emphasizes the ridiculous amount of bloodshed that Gaear has caused throughout the movie, which Marge now wants to make him feel guilty about, like a mother lecturing her child about something naughty they did.

She then wonders out loud: “And for what? For a little bit of money? There’s more to life than a little money, you know. Don’t you understand that?”(Coen *Fargo*) before she sighs and says that she does not understand, staring into the distance (see Figure 10) and saying it is a beautiful day, as Gaear sits in silence.



Figure 10, Fargo wood chipper scene

#### 4.2 Analysis: Greed, Violence, Crime and Dark Humor in *Fargo*

Some of the themes that are being dealt with in this movie by the Coen brothers by using dark humor are: the greed of Jerry Lundegaard and Carl Showalter, the petty criminality and excessive violence of Carl and Gaear, as well as the insensitivity towards violence in many of the characters. These are all negative aspects of American society that would typically be addressed with a sense of drama or horror, but throughout *Fargo* the Coen brothers instead address them with the use of dark humor.

Greed is one of the main themes that the Coen brothers expose about American society in *Fargo* using dark humor, as Jerry is so corrupted by money that he becomes increasingly desperate and resorts to crime. The desperation for money in the characters can be explained by the actual events of 1996, when the movie was released. This was not long after the savings and loans crisis and the economical recession, which had a serious impact on the local economy in Minnesota. It is never explicitly explained in the movie why Jerry is so desperate for money, but the dire financial situation at the time might be a possible factor. The fact that Carl acquires a million dollars, before burying it in the snow, might also be an allusion to frozen assets, which often occur during a financial crisis. Carl buries the money and then leaves an ice scraper to mark the place, showing his shortsightedness, as it can easily be blown away or disappear if it thaws or if it snows harder. This could also be read as a critique of bankers who take risks with money without foreseeing the possibly disastrous consequences.

The financial crisis features even more prominently in their earlier release *The Hudsucker Proxy*, which is about the business world and their immoral financial scheming. The same desperate scheming for money also returns in some of the other movies by the Coen brothers, like in *Burn After Reading*, where two people try to extract money from the CIA for a random disk they found, or in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, where a man tries to blackmail the boss of his wife. Likewise, the idea of a false kidnapping of someone's wife also returns in *The Big Lebowski*, and there is also a kidnapping featured in their movie *Raising Arizona*, where one baby of a quintuplet from a wealthy, famous family is kidnapped. In their latest film, *Hail, Caesar!*, the main character, actor Baird Whitlock, also gets kidnapped.

#### - Movie Genres in Fargo

So kidnappings and ransoms are a common theme in movies by the Coen brothers and their plots often resolve around obtaining the ransom. This shows their fascination with crime movies and literature or even horror movies, where suspense often comes from a kidnapping. For example, the Coen brothers might have been inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 horror movie *Psycho*, in which a secretary named Marion Crane steals money from her employer before going on the run and ending up at a motel, where she is then murdered. Like Jerry Lundegaard in *Fargo*, Marion seems innocuous, but makes the prompt, out-of-character immoral decision to pursue

money and is punished for it. This heightened sense of morality is also something Hitchcock was known for, which also returns in the movies by the Coen brothers.

Another thing that Hitchcock may have inspired in *Fargo*, is the use of a MacGuffin, a term Hitchcock created for an object in a movie that is desirable and that serves to drive the plot further, but which is irrelevant to the audience. In *Fargo*, this MacGuffin would be the suitcase of money that Carl buries in the snow, as the viewer never actually finds out what happens to it afterwards. Another famous example of the use of a suitcase as a MacGuffin, is how Quentin Tarantino uses one in his 1994 movie *Pulp Fiction*, as two contract killers, Vincent and Jules, retrieve a briefcase that was stolen from their boss Marsellus Wallace by an associate, but the audience never actually finds out what is inside the briefcase. The concept of two killers who acquire a suitcase also returns in *Fargo*, which could mean that *Pulp Fiction* inspired the Coen brothers, who clearly have a fascination with directors who share the same subject matter of violence and greed.

Ryan P. Doom further explains how the themes of violence and greed intermingle in *Fargo*, saying, “The violence in *Fargo* suddenly becomes much more emphasized as the greed-based violence of the male characters reaches a climax. Nearly all the men of *Fargo* evoke some form of aggression in order to protect their prospective deals that offer them each a chance to earn life-changing money” (Doom). Every man in the movie seems to be looking for a “deal”, with complete disregard for morality. They are blinded by their greed, leading to aggression and violence. Because of these elements, Doom argues *Fargo* is a crime drama, but also that it differs from other crime films, saying, “They took the standard crime drama and manufactured something that defied expectations while remaining true to the convention. After all, *Fargo* is a crime drama. It has cops. It has crooks. It has violence” (Doom). The Coen brothers took these typical elements from crime movies and took a spin on it, by using dark humor to portray the crime and violence.

#### - Characterization in *Fargo*

One of the ways the Coen brothers manage to differentiate themselves from other directors, according to Doom, is by their characterization, saying, “Most genre characters can be defined with generic one-word descriptions. [...] The two women cannot formulate further descriptions, but the men appear like realistic characters, not just blindly motivated carbon copies” (Doom). The two women only refer to Carl as

“funny-looking”, while Carl often angrily refers to his companion Gaear as a “mute”. Although Doom says the characters appear like realistic characters, because of the character acting and realistic mannerisms by their respective actors Steve Buscemi and Peter Stromare, they do come off as archetypes of dumb criminals.

In other words, the characters of Carl and Gaear are portrayed stereotypically in *Fargo*, while the Coen brothers also use stereotypical brainless thugs or stupid criminals in their other movies, e.g., in *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, where two of the convicts are described as “dumber than a bag of hammers” and in *The Big Lebowski*, where the criminals are nihilists who are ridiculed throughout the movie. As Doom explains, “instead of being slick professionals, the criminals appear completely common and amateurish in their methods and actions” (Doom).

However, they do go about their criminal activities very recklessly and brutally. This is especially the case with Gaear, who seems to react to every inconvenience with violence and has no qualms at all in murdering people. After Carl’s bumbling attempts at bribing a policeman seem to fail, Gaear abruptly shoots the policeman and he does the same to some people in a car who coincidentally witnessed them carrying the body. He also kills Jean for being too noisy and kills Carl after a rather meaningless dispute about the car. His violence is portrayed, through the use of dark humor, in an over-the-top and exaggerated way, culminating in the scene in which he pushes Carl’s dead body down a wood chipper to get rid of the evidence. Their stereotyping adds to the dark humor, because the viewer cannot take them too seriously, in accordance with the Benign Violation Theory of Humor. Despite the extreme violence, few people will feel sorry for Carl and his painful demise.

Stereotyping is not only done with the criminals, the local residents are also portrayed stereotypically. Ethan Coen referred to this stereotyping as “Minnesota nice” and explained it by saying “Minnesota is a very polite and friendly culture, and like a lot of polite and friendly cultures, it often masks, or makes you unaware, that there are other sort of things going, sort of seething, underneath, and the juxtaposition of that sort of politeness in the culture is an interesting juxtaposition to those kind of events” (Doom). A lot of the dark humor comes from the contrast of this polite community and the brutal violence they are faced with. For example, local policewoman Marge and her husband Norm live a simple, modest and mundane life. They are content of simple accomplishments, like when the artwork of Norm is used for a three-cent stamp. Everyone in the local community is portrayed with innocence

and simplicity, in contrast to the two criminals, who seem to stand out completely. Marge fails to understand why people are driven by money and sees this pursuit as something foreign to their small, peaceful community. After the gruesome murders, she immediately realizes two things: that money was involved and that the murderer was not from around there.

While the roots of the two killers are not actually revealed in the movie, we can assume that Gaear is not American, judging by his lack of proficiency in English and his Scandinavian sounding name. Meanwhile, Carl is also clearly an outsider in the community, as he is much more temperamental and often clashes with the polite locals, while he also often expresses his discontent with the endless snow and the cold weather. The notion of foreign criminals is something that also often returns in movies by the Coen brothers, like in *The Big Lebowski*, where the nihilists are German. In another movie by them, *No Country For Old Men*, hitman Anton Chigurh also has a foreign accent and a foreign sounding name, although the writer of the story Cormac McCarthy dismissed his foreign heritage, by saying he just thought it was a cool name. By using foreign criminals, perhaps the Coen brothers satirize the small town mentality in Fargo that criminality and violence always comes from elsewhere. Furthermore, the tradition of using foreign actors to play bad guys is very common in Hollywood; so perhaps the Coen brothers try to exploit this trope, in order to comment on stereotyping in American movies.

Dark humor is also used in the characterization of Jerry Lundegaard. Overall, he seems like an honest, hard-working man and the whole kidnapping plot seems out of character for him, tying in with the Incongruity Theory of humor. However, as Doom explains, “Something dark lures within him, as money drives him to the underworld” (Doom). At the start, Jerry’s life as a car salesman is uneventful, but stable, until he is corrupted by money and then it all falls apart. He indirectly gets in contact with the two criminals, via a shady co-worker named Shep, who met them while in prison. Jerry naively thinks he can simply hire them for the kidnapping of his wife without risking any violence or danger. He almost immediately regrets his decision, changes his mind and tries to call it all off.

As Doom explains, “His Minnesota manners remain, but he emerges an empty shell driven by greed, living with a wife and a son without regard for their emotions” (Doom). The first meeting between policewoman Marge and Jerry at his car lot exemplifies this. Because of his polite mannerisms, she immediately believes him

when he says the car was stolen from his lot and sees no reason to think Jerry is involved with criminals, even though he is. When Marge later returns to the dealership, Jerry can no longer pull off an air of innocence and normalcy, as he is already in too deep with his immoral scheming for money. When Marge coincidentally mentions his father-in-law Wade, the thought of his violent death makes Jerry nervous and angry, as he eventually flees the scene, proving that he is not as innocent as he seems. It is clear that Jerry only ever considered violence and crime in theory and once he is confronted with the harsh reality of it, he panics and cannot deal with it. The fact that it is already too late and the way the whole situation then escalates into the deaths of many people, including his wife Jean and his father-in-law Wade, is cruel and ironic.

Ethan Coen talked about the stereotypical portrayal of criminals in their films in an interview with Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret, in which he said “One of the reasons for making them simple-minded was our desire to go against the Hollywood cliché of the bad guy as a super-professional who controls everything he does [...] In fact, in most cases criminals belong to the strata of society least equipped to face life, and that’s the reason they’re caught so often” (E. Coen and J. Coen "Interview with Joel and Ethan Coen"). So Coen argues here that portraying the bad guys as idiots makes the movie closer to life than most genre movies.

Devin McKinney disagrees with this, suggesting *Fargo* is fatuous nonsense, which goes against Coen’s evaluation of the movie as true-to-life. McKinney continued this criticism by stating that “Talk-radio audiences in Minnesota complained that the film ridiculed them and their culture, and McKinney suggested that not only was the dialogue inaccurate in its representation of the true regional dialect but the application of it by the Coens served merely to diminish the characters rather than particularize them” (McKinney). Therefore, while the Coens were trying to be realistic in the portrayal of their characters as real Minnesotan people, this has ironically lead to accusations of the opposite, with people disagreeing about the accuracy of the characterization.

#### - Social Commentary in *Fargo*

As Doom further explains, “As with all Coen films, social commentary lurks beneath the surface. *Fargo* deals with America’s desensitization to violence, people’s cold nature and society’s love of TV. Moreover, it’s a story of normal, northern

people and their reaction to the modern world” (Doom). We see many characters, both good and bad, watching television throughout the movie, with Jean watching television before she gets kidnapped, Gaear watching television before he murders Carl and Marge and her husband also watch television together peacefully on many occasions. All of the characters’ infatuation with television seems to be something the Coen brothers criticize and in some cases it might actually play a role in the desensitization towards violence in some of the characters.

In Jerry and Marge, the Coen brothers show two possible reactions towards the dangers of violence and crime. Jerry personifies a certain naivety in dealing with crime, knowing that it is out there and that he can use it, but showing a lack of understanding of how it truly works, because of his own inexperience with it. On the other hand, Marge does understand how crime works, but seems hardened and desensitized in her dealing with it, because her work requires this. The social commentary here would be that the Coen brothers think the polite, but cold way Minnesotans treat each other might allow for the violence and adversity to happen, as nothing truly shocks or fazes them. For example, Marge and the rest of the local police show a completely unfazed attitude towards any violence. They deal with the murders as something they have all seen before many times and in the end, Marge is not even impressed by the shocking sight of the body of Carl being pushed down a wood chipper. The only thing that bothers her is that everyone is always after money, which does not comply with her small town values.

#### 4.3 Conclusion:

While the Coen brothers claim that the movie is based on a true story, it is actually a fictionalized version of multiple stories they vaguely remember from back home. The Coen brothers are from Minnesota themselves, which is why they paid so much attention to the local accents and typicalities in the film. A lot of the dark humor comes from the contrast of the polite Minnesotan community and the brutal violence they are faced with. This is probably why the Coen brothers chose Minnesota and nearby Fargo, North Dakota as the ideal setting for the story to unfold. From their own past, they know all about the endless snow, the seemingly stoic people with their typical dry humor and also about the financial crisis of the early nineties, which made the local people so desperate for money.

The themes of greed, violence and crime return in many other films by the Coen brothers, so they seem to be fascinated by them. The omnipresence of these dark subjects in their movies shows the worldview of the Coen brothers, which seems to be grim and cynical. However, they always bring a sense of morality into these issues, as if they are trying to question why people resort to such drastic measures. The characters are almost always punished for their immoral choices in their movies, but not before the Coen brothers have investigated why they made these wrong choices in the first place.

Despite all the brutal violence that happens in *Fargo*, it is still meant as a dark comedy, providing the viewer understands dark humor and can laugh with horrible themes like kidnapping, violence, crime and death. The movie has all the elements of a drama and the humor in the movie is very subtle and understated, which makes some people question whether it truly is a comedy. For example, there is very little actual laughter in the film, except when Carl laughs with Jean's unfortunate fate when she runs around like a headless chicken in the snow. This lack of actual humor in the movie is also apparent when Marge tells a joke to her police partner Lou about licence plates, saying: "Did you hear the one about the fella that couldn't afford personalized plates so he went and changed his name to J3L2404?". Lou responds not with laughter, but with a dry "Yah, that's a good one." This dryness is something that returns in all of the dialogues, and which prevents outright comedy, unless if you are a fan of dry comedy.

However, in every little detail of the film there lies some dark humor, from the stereotypical portrayal of the characters to the ridiculous, over-the-top portrayal of the violence. In this way, perhaps *Fargo* can be seen as a parody on horror or crime movies, since all of the elements of these movies are made fun of by the Coen brothers. Both the victims and perpetrators of the crime are portrayed with a fatal flaw in their character and all of their flaws are punished immediately.

Thus, the Coen brothers use dark humor to analyze the fate of immoral people, by showing that once you accept some immorality in your life, bad things will immediately start happening to you and all those around you. In this movie, the Coen Brothers play the role of judge and executioner, which they often do in their movies, by punishing their immoral characters in the most brutal way imaginable.

However, in the end, Josh Levine wonders "When we settle down comfortably with Marge and Norm at the end of *Fargo*, do we remember that the world is full of

evil, incomprehensible intention, or do we doubt the sincerity of even this, the Coen brothers' most "realistic" film?" (Levine). The fact that the story does turn out to be fictional, despite them saying in the film it is not, plus the fact that they clearly create more sympathy for Marge's perspective, maybe point out that there is optimism in the Coen brothers' worldview. While they do indicate the dangers of Minnesota's cold mannerisms, they still show it with some affection and with Marge and her colleagues' perseverance, they show how such a community can handle any adversity.

## Chapter 5: The Big Lebowski

In this chapter, I will again start with a short synopsis of the movie in the appendix, before choosing and analyzing a few scenes that showcase dark humor. In my analysis of these scenes, I will use humor theories to determine where the dark humor lies and to what effect the dark humor is used. I will also analyze the characterization and genres in the film to determine whether they add to the dark humor and its effects on the viewer or not. Finally, I will once again analyze which themes are being discussed with dark humor and whether they convey any social commentary. This way, I will be able to demonstrate how the use of dark humor in this film compares to its use in the other movies by the Coen brothers.

### 5.1 Selected Scenes:

In order to analyze the dark humor in this movie, I have chosen two scenes in which dark humor is prominently used. The first scene I chose as an example of the use of dark humor in *the Big Lebowski* has already been referred to in the title of this thesis, when Walter pulls out a gun on his friend Smokey and tells him that “he is entering a world of pain” if he does not admit to cheating by stepping over the line. Not only do the Coen brothers make fun of violence and how pointless it is in this scene, they also expose how omnipresent and easily available guns are in American society.

#### - Bowling gun scene

In this scene, the character of Walter Sobchack unexpectedly pulls out a gun (See Figure 11) during a league game of bowling.



Figure 11, The Big Lebowski Bowling gun scene

He points the gun in the face of Smokey (see Figure 12), telling him he has to mark down zero points for his error. They argue and Walter repeats the line about entering a world of pain a few times, before shouting “Has the whole world gone crazy? Am I the only one around here who gives a shit about the rules?”(Coen *The Big Lebowski*).



Figure 12, *The Big Lebowski* Bowling gun scene

The dark humor here lies in the fact that a volatile maniac is threatening to shoot someone for something as irrelevant as cheating in a bowling game and then ironically calling everyone else crazy. While the threat of violence is not considered funny in real life, it is here, as is explained in the Benign Violation Theory by A. Peter McGraw, which states “closeness increases the humor perceived in less aversive, mild violations (i.e., mishaps)”(McGraw, Warren and Williams). The closeness comes from the familiarity of the situation and the characters, since bowling is portrayed as the foremost form of fun and relaxation to the characters in the movie. Because of this, the violence is completely out of context and cannot be taken seriously by the viewers.

The humor also comes from the incongruity in the character of Walter, who is often shown as a loud, self-righteous, gun-toting Vietnam veteran, but who also has a surprising soft side. While Walter does occasionally get into angry fits, he is mostly portrayed as a loveable character, a loyal friend to the Dude and someone who tries to live by certain moral standards. His soft side is also shown earlier in this scene when he agrees to look after the dog of his ex-wife Cynthia and takes him along to the bowling alley. When Walter pulls out the gun, the dog actually starts jumping and barking at his feet, as if the Coen brothers are trying to imply that Walter is “all bark,

but no bite”. After Smokey concedes to write down zero points, Walter reverts to his former calm self, saying, “It’s a league game, Smokey...”(Coen *The Big Lebowski*). The humor in this outcome might be explained with Freud’s relief theory of humor, since any worries should have vanished by the end.

In the second scene I chose, the Coen brothers use dark humor while dealing with the most painful subject of all: death, with the heart attack of the Dude’s timid bowling friend Donny and the subsequent scattering of his ashes. The way in which Donny dies and the whole aftermath is shown with dark humor, instead of the usual gravitas and respect you would expect when dealing with death.

- Donny’s death scene:

At the start of this scene, the nihilists confront the Dude, Walter and Donny on the parking lot of the bowling alley, after setting the Dude’s car on fire (see Figure 1).



**Figure 13, The Big Lebowski Donny’s death scene**

This is funny because of the calm response of the Dude saying, “Well, they finally did it. They killed my fucking car!”(Coen *The Big Lebowski*), reminding the viewers of all the times the Dude’s car has already been nearly destroyed throughout the film. The Benign Violation Theory again explains the comedy in this scene, since the Dude and Walter do not seem to take the threat of the nihilists seriously. The level of their threat is also reduced significantly by the fact that the Coen brothers portray them as ridiculous stereotypes, with strange mannerisms and speaking with very poor German accents.



Figure 14, *The Big Lebowski* Donny's death scene

Donny asks Walter whether they are Nazis and if they are going to hurt them (see Figure 14). Walter tells him not to worry, because they are nihilists and therefore cowards who should not be feared. Donny's fear is comically shown in a childish, ridiculous way, in contrast with Walter's fearlessness. The nihilists claim that it is not fair that they could not obtain the ransom, since one of their girlfriends gave up her toe. The irony here comes from the fact that the nihilists complain about something being not fair, while nihilists typically would not care about things being fair or not, as Walter rightly points out. After learning that there never was a ransom, the nihilists decide to mug them. This is also absurd, since they were hoping for a million dollars and will now settle for loose change. While the Dude and Donny scramble for change, Walter gets angry and refuses to give them any money. The nihilists then attack them, but Walter manages to fend them off one by one.

First he throws his bowling bag into the stomach of one on them, leaving him writhing comically on the ground. The leader then comes after him with a sword, but Walter wrestles with him, before biting off his ear and spitting it into the air. While the last one is posturing ridiculously and comically threatening the Dude, Walter beats him in the face with the radio he had brought. The entire fighting scene is portrayed with a lot of slapstick comedy, with absurd weapons and fighting strategies. However, after the danger is averted, they find Donny squirming on the ground. At first, the Dude thinks he has been shot, but it turns out he simply had a heart attack, which unfortunately proves fatal.

Without the money for a proper funeral, the Dude and Walter decide to scatter the ashes of Donny into the ocean, claiming it might as well have been his dying wish. During his eulogy, Walter gives an inappropriate speech about the Vietnam War, comparing the death of Donny to all the soldiers who died too young there. While spreading the ashes, the wind blows them all directly onto the Dude (see Figure 15), which Walter fails to notice, as the Dude stares at him in disbelief while covered in the ashes of his friend (see Figure 16).



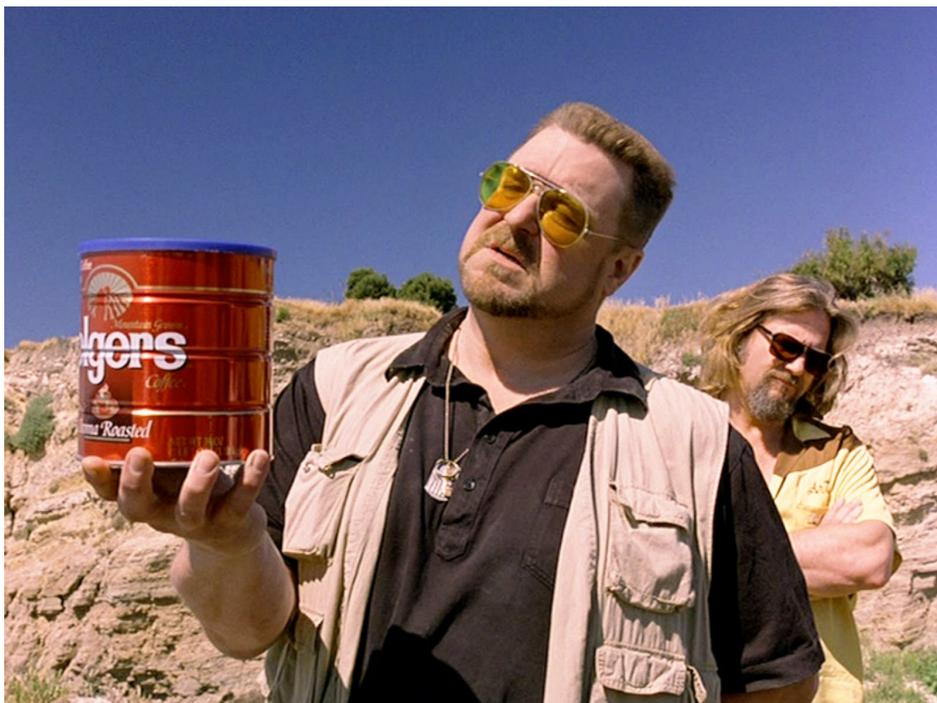
Figure 15, The Big Lebowski Donny's death scene



Figure 16, The Big Lebowski Donny's death scene

When he turns around, Walter realizes his mistake and apologizes several times, but the Dude yells at him “God damn you, Walter! You fuckin' asshole! Everything's a fuckin' travesty with you, man! And what was all that shit about Vietnam? What the fuck has anything got to do with Vietnam? What the fuck are you talking about?”(Coen *The Big Lebowski*).

The dark humor in this scene can once again be explained by the Benign Violation Theory of Peter McGraw, which states, “psychological distance increases the humor perceived in more aversive, severe violation (i.e., tragedies)”(McGraw, Warren and Williams). The Coen brothers manage to poke fun at the tragic fate of Donny, by creating as much psychological distance from him as possible, showing him as a fragile, slightly pathetic figure. His character was never really part of any of the action throughout the movie and when he is finally confronted with some action, his heart cannot handle the excitement and he dies. During his eulogy, Walter also shows a clear lack of respect and knowledge of his friend, repeating that he loved bowling three times, before bringing his own irrelevant background of Vietnam into the story, as he has done many times throughout the movie. In fact, the entire aftermath of Donny’s death is completely farcical, with his ashes being carried in a cheap coffee can from the local supermarket (See Figure 17) instead of an actual urn and then being scattered onto the Dude instead of into the ocean.



**Figure 17, The Big Lebowski Donny's death scene**

While being covered in your friend’s ashes would normally be considered horrific, the dark comedy comes from the Dude’s initial stoic reaction, before going on an exaggerated rambling tirade. In the end, they embrace each other awkwardly (see Figure 18), before deciding to go bowling again, as if nothing has changed.



Figure 18, *The Big Lebowski* Donny's death scene

## 5.2 Analysis: Crime, Language and Dark Humor in *The Big Lebowski*

Many of the themes that were shown using dark humor in *Fargo* actually return in *The Big Lebowski*, since both films can be described as crime comedies. Once again, the whole story revolves around ruthlessly obtaining money with a ransom and a kidnapping and once again this pursuit is futile and leaves innocent victims who had nothing to do with it. Both the Big Lebowski and the German nihilists are after a million dollars and will do anything to acquire it, including deceiving, stealing and using violence. The Dude and his bowling friends get mixed up in this and Donny even pays for it with his life. Thus, *like in Fargo*, the Coen brothers once again question the immorality of greed in American society, as well as the needless violence that always accompanies it. The criminals are once again portrayed as bumbling idiots in this film, even more so than in *Fargo*.

Another theme that is portrayed with dark humor in *The Big Lebowski* is language, since there is a series of misunderstandings and miscommunications. This is exemplified by the fact that the phrase “What the fuck are you talking about?” (Coen *The Big Lebowski*) is very often reiterated throughout the movie. Coughlin talks about the concept of language and the role it plays both in this movie and in *Fargo*, saying “Language operates as a cue to the themes and characters in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen [...] That they construct dialogue of wonderful inarticulacy, such as the Dude’s (Jeff Bridges) scrambled speeches in *The Big Lebowski* and Carl’s (Steve Buscemi) consistent malapropism in *Fargo*, is not merely a joke at the expense of

their characters but rather the critical interrogation of communication breakdown”(Coughlin). This is especially the case with the character of Donny, as he is constantly being ignored or told to shut up. It is also ironic that Donny is played Steve Buscemi, the same actor whose character Carl in *Fargo* cannot stop talking, which appears to be an inside joke by the Coen brothers. Many other characters in the film have trouble articulating and the Coen brothers empathize this by often reiterating lines that appeared earlier in the film and by repeating certain lines ridiculously often. As Coughlin states, “with *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* the Coens have extended this philosophy of miscommunication to an ailment of society in which inarticulacy is an observable symptom” (Coughlin). The characters in both movies often have trouble communicating with each other, which leads to conflicts that often drive the story further. Miscommunication has become a very typical feature in movies by the Coen brothers and it also returns in *A Serious Man* with the broken communication between Larry Gopnik and the outside world, which appears to ignore him and his troubles.

#### - Social Commentary in the Big Lebowski

Another important theme that is dealt with using dark humor throughout the movie is the theme of establishment versus anti-establishment, which also returns in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. In American society, there is often a conflict between these two sides, which can be harrowing in real life, but in this movie it adds to the comedy. The Dude is clearly part of the anti-establishment movement, as he briefly mentions to Maude that he was part of the Seattle Seven, saying, “Did you ever hear of the Seattle Seven? That was me ... and six other guys”(Coen *The Big Lebowski*). The Seattle Seven were seven infamous members of an anti-Vietnam War movement who were jailed for their violent protest against the war, explaining the Dude’s pacifism.

In contrast, the Big Lebowski hates this counter-culture movement, when he yells at the Dude that “Your revolution is over, Mr. Lebowski – The bums lost!” (Coen *The Big Lebowski*). This indicates that the Big Lebowski is part of the establishment, since he also cares about wealth and his good standing in the community. However, this is later disputed when we learn that he has no money himself and simply pretends to be well-off. Nonetheless, he looks down on the Dude and thinks he is a loser, as many other people in the movie seem to do. In an ultimate confrontation with the Big Lebowski, the Dude says to him: “You figured 'Oh, here's

a loser', you know? A deadbeat, someone the square community won't give a shit about"(Coen *The Big Lebowski*) The Big Lebowski then responds with "Well, aren't you?" to which the Dude replies, "Well, yeah!" The Dude does not seem to be offended by his perceived lower social status. So the Coen brothers poke fun at the differences in social class in this movie, proving that they are merely superficial social constructs that only exist in the minds of immoral people who want to exploit them.

Many of the aspects of the film can be read as explicit and implicit allusions or metaphors for American foreign policy. As Eitan Kensky explains, "This is tellingly not the only reference to US intervention in foreign affairs: Jeffrey Lebowski lost the use of his legs in Korea, Walter has been permanently affected by Vietnam, and the film's events unfold against the backdrop of the Iraq war and America's effort to liberate Kuwait" (Kensky). The entire story of the film, with the Dude and Walter often debating about whether or not to rescue Bunny, is in fact a reference to American interventionism. Since the Coen brothers point out the disastrous effects of the Korea and Vietnam wars, this might suggest a political message that American presidents should not intervene with foreign political affairs, in the wake of the ongoing American intervention in the Iraqi Gulf War. This plays in the background of the film, with George H.W. Bush delivering a speech on television while the Dude and his friends are bowling and becomes part of the Dude's unconscious when he dreams of Saddam Hussein as an employee of the bowling alley. As Kensky further explains, "On one level, US interventionism is simply one of the many social movements promising rescue and liberation challenged by *The Big Lebowski*, but on another level, the policy is a persistent focus, recurring over generations. Instead of a critique of a specific foreign policy, however, the film presents a general questioning of America's capability to intercede and rescue others"(Kensky). While many American presidents are implicitly mentioned, the Coen brothers do not focus their criticism on any policy in particular, but rather question the ability and also the purpose to rescue anyone. While the Dude was probably better off not trying to rescue Bunny, he is forced into doing so for dubious reasons that the Coen brothers clearly question.

## - Characterization in *The Big Lebowski*

Much of the dark humor in *The Big Lebowski* comes from the characterization, as Paul Coughlin explains that “*The Big Lebowski* (1998) gains much of its absurdist comedy from its depiction of the very absurd Los Angeles community”(Coughlin). When comparing the characters in *The Big Lebowski*, based in the sprawling city of Los Angeles, with those in *Fargo*, which was based in rural Minnesota, there are many differences to be found. As opposed to the flat characters in *Fargo* who are quiet and simple and remain that way, the characters in *The Big Lebowski* are more complex, reflecting the sprawling Los Angeles community that is always in motion and very chaotic. For example, while the Dude is very laid back, we often see him worrying about threatening situations like Bunny’s severed toe or the threat of emasculation when the Nihilists threaten to cut off his ‘Johnson’. All the characters in the film showcase the plurality of city life and are shaped by their diverse backgrounds, interests, musical tastes and different personal values.

The Coen brothers take advantage of this by using characters that symbolize certain social movements that were emerging at the time or that had ended already: the Dude portrays a leftover of the counter culture movement of the 1960s, Maude Lebowski represents the radical feminism of the 1970s and, according to Kensky, the Big Lebowski “personifies Reagan-era social values with their emphasis on personal accountability”(Kensky). This intermingling of social movements leads to a very absurd mish-mash of characters, as Coughlin explains “The wandering-intrigue narrative of *The Big Lebowski* is perfectly suited to experiencing the widely diverse and divergent community of Los Angeles, a culture equally receptive to doped-out slackers, right-wing militants, German nihilists, Malibu pornographers and a pederast named Jesus (John Turturro)”(Coughlin). If you look at each character separately, they do not seem to belong together, but the story connects them in absurd ways. Because of this, the different backgrounds of the characters create conflict, adding to the dark humor, poking fun at all of their limitations.

Another thing that adds to the dark humor and the absurdity, is the attitude of the characters, as Geoffrey Bokuniewicz explains, “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" (Bokuniewicz). As mentioned earlier, this can be explained with the Benign Violation Theory, which states that comedy is created by the fact that the characters respond to a dangerous situation as if it is benign.

This is mostly the case with the protagonist, the Dude, who is a pacifistic slacker with an extremely laid back attitude to life. He has no personal ambitions or aims to achieve anything in life, but nonetheless he does not feel any guilt or any sense of inadequacy. While he is extremely passive, he manages to get by in life by "abiding", by not being too bothered by anything bad and by taking things easy and maintaining a sense of personal peace. Despite this, he often finds himself in trouble when people try to invade that peace. This helps explain why there is so much comedy in seeing him get into the craziest situations, which are often threatening to him or to his masculinity, but he does not take any of them seriously. However, his passive nature ironically helps in leading him to get himself into all these threatening situations, since he easily gets taken advantage of, either by the Big Lebowski or by the nihilists.

In contrast, Walter Sobchak is not passive like the Dude, as he is strong-willed and opinionated about politics and ethics. Walter has more moral fiber than the Dude, trying to live by a certain moral code and a set of rules, for example those of his Jewish faith. However, he does not always manage to live by his own strict rules, since he is prone to fits of anger and violent rage. He seems to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder from his time in Vietnam. Because of this, he has a lot of flashbacks and always relates things to Vietnam, even when it is completely irrelevant. While he does have good intentions, Walter is so passionate about his sense of righteousness that it sometimes spills over into violence whenever he feels aggrieved. The dark humor with Walter comes from this recklessness, which often leads to violence in ridiculous, out-of-context times and places. The humor from his character can be explained with the incongruity theory of humor, where the viewer laughs with things that are surprising and uncharacteristic.

Then there is Donny, who is portrayed as quiet and soft-spoken. The comedy with Donny's character does not come from him being unthreatened by dangerous situations like it does with the Dude. In fact, it is the exact opposite, as he very easily

feels threatened and dies in the only altercation he gets into. While Donny can be seen as a tragic figure, the Coen brothers still manage to extract dark humor from his character, by exaggerating his helplessness and by morbidly mocking his tragic fate. The dark humor in his character can be explained by Aristotle's Superiority Theory of Humor. The viewer will probably feel superior to Donny and therefore laugh away his tragic fate. Donny is continuously "out of his element" and lacks any form of engagement or personal resolve. He seems to have a hard time catching up with the speed of daily life, as he fails to follow the conversations of the Dude and Walter, leading to many funny miscommunications. While the Dude mostly ignores him, Walter bullies him and often tells him to "Shut the fuck up, Donny"(Coen *The Big Lebowski*). Because of this, he is always in the background and does not really take part in the action. He is simply a bystander and shows signs of physical and mental fragility, especially in the end when he dies from a heart attack.

With these characters, the Coen brothers seem to want to indicate the importance of personal values and question what values and character traits you need to have in American society. It is clearly important to stand up for yourself in American society, which is hard and ruthless for those who fail to do so, like Donny for example. The idea of standing up for yourself is even made fun of literally, when Walter believes the paraplegic Lebowski lies about not being able to walk and tries to make him stand up, after which he painfully falls to the ground.

#### - Movie Genres in *the Big Lebowski*

Thomas S. Hibbs discusses *the Big Lebowski* in relation to the genre of neo-noir, saying: "These opening scenes introduce readily identifiable neo-noir themes. There is the theme of the loner, certainly not the hero of the old Westerns, but rather the uprooted drifter, symbolized in the tumbleweed blown by chance forces beyond its control or comprehension"(Hibbs). This is clearly the case with the Dude, who is even introduced in the opening scene by the narrator in terms of being surrendered to an absurd fate that is beyond his control or comprehension, saying "But then there was a lot about the Dude that didn't make a whole lot of sense. And a lot about where he lived, likewise." Not only is the fate of the Dude absurd to himself, the Stranger seems baffled by it as well, so from the beginning the viewer stands little chance of making sense of it.

Hibbs then adds that “Then there is the motif of a shallow and artificially constructed political culture, suggested in the television coverage of the Gulf War”(Hibbs). The speech of George H.W. Bush can be seen in the background on television, which the Dude later vaguely references by subconsciously quoting him, saying “This aggression will not stand, man”(Coen *The Big Lebowski*). Hibbs further explains other features of neo-noir that are clearly showcased in the movie, saying “Finally there is the noir staple of the “wrong man”, the chance misidentification of an ordinary an as a culprit or criminal of some sort, a misidentification that sparks a series of trials on the part of the wrongly accused” (Hibbs). Indeed, the entire plot revolves around the misidentification of the Dude as the Big Lebowski, which leads to a long series of strange events and absurd adventures.

Apart from these elements of neo-noir, the film's overall structure was also influenced by the detective fiction of Raymond Chandler. In an interview, Ethan Coen said, “We wanted something that would generate a certain narrative feeling - like a modern Raymond Chandler story, and that's why it had to be set in Los Angeles ... We wanted to have a narrative flow, a story that moves like a Chandler book through different parts of town and different social classes”(J. Coen and E. Coen "The Coens Speak (Reluctantly)"). Chandler was considered to be the founder of hard-boiled detective fiction, along with Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain, whose influence is also present in the works of the Coen brothers. Coughlin also specifically mentions the role of writer Raymond Chandler, saying “*The Big Lebowski* is perhaps more ambitious as the Coens, influenced by Raymond Chandler, fashion a story around the world of a doped out loser and social-league ten-pin bowling” (Coughlin) Indeed, the hard-boiled literature of Chandler was characterized by a cynical attitude towards emotions triggered by violence, which is present to some extent in both *The Big Lebowski* and in *Fargo*. Both the Dude and Walter often react to violence in this film like they have seen it all before, like the criminals and policewoman Marge also do in *Fargo*.

Another typical feature from Jewish literature that is possibly used in this film is the portrayal of the Dude as a schlemiel, which is an inept or unlucky person who comically exposes flaws in society. According to Ruth R. Wisse, “this ability to heighten our awareness of society's faults characterizes the schlemiel” (Wisse *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*). With the character of the Dude, the Coen brothers expose the flaws in society and how absurd they are from his perspective as an outsider. Eitan

Kensky further explains the portrayal of this figure, saying “While the schlemiel is fundamentally defined by his weakness or passivity, his peculiar type of passivity focuses us on the immorality of the world surrounding him” (Kensky). This is the case with the Dude, whose passivity is a direct result of his pacifism and being part of the hippie counter culture. This definition also applies to Donny, who can thus also be seen as a kind of schlemiel, although he does not expose as many flaws in society as the Dude, except perhaps the excessive violence. Ruth R. Wisse confirms this status of the schlemiel as an outsider, saying “His strength comes from retreating from the accepted value system even as the world involves him in its machinations” (Wisse *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*). The Dude definitely mistrusts the system, but he is confronted with its dealings through an unfortunate misidentification. Ruth R. Wisse concludes about this topic “Yet the impulse of the joke, and of schlemiel literature in general, is to use this comical stance as a stage from which to challenge the political and philosophic status quo” (Wisse *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*). So the Coen brothers were clearly inspired by this genre of literature in their portrayal of the Dude.

### 5.3 Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Coen brothers use dark humor in *the Big Lebowski*, to once again comment on the omnipresence of violence and greed in American society. Like in *Fargo*, the violent and greedy characters are once again punished, although perhaps not as strongly this time. The nihilists get beaten up by Walter, and the Big Lebowski gets exposed as a fraud, but they all walk away, or crawl, fairly unscathed. The only character that truly gets punished in this film is Donny, for his passivity and his physical and mental fragility. He is mocked by the Coen brothers using dark humor throughout the entire movie for his inability to follow conversations, being constantly out of his element and being told to shut up. With the death of the character of Donny, the Coen brothers seem to imply that in American society a lack of personal resolve is even worse than being immoral or prone to violence. Walter also comically hints at this, when he criticizes the nihilists saying, “Say what you want about the social tenets of National Socialism, Dude, at least it’s an ethos” (Coen *The Big Lebowski*). The Coen brothers seem to show here that believing in something bad is better than believing in nothing at all, even when it is Nazism. Since the Coen brothers are Jewish themselves, this is definitely saying something.

Another theme that is being discussed with dark humor in this film is the conflict between establishment and anti-establishment, which is different from *Fargo*. In *Fargo*, there is a clear divide between law-abiding citizens on the one side and criminals on the other side, where Jerry Lundegaard is the only ambiguous character, as the only one who changes side. Conflict arises in *Fargo* whenever an immoral person, often from outside the closed community, makes an immoral decision.

Meanwhile, in *The Big Lebowski*, it is not immediately clear who the victims and who the villains are and on which side everyone is. As the Dude himself explains, “This is a very complicated case, Maude. You know, a lotta ins, lotta outs, lotta what-have-you's. And, uh, lotta strands to keep in my head, man” (Coen *The Big Lebowski*). In other words, the community is much more open and chaotic, leading to the blurring of judgment. Unlike in *Fargo*, the criminals are not really the cause of the conflict here, as they are merely the puppets of those who really pull the strings. As it turns out, the conflict arises from people who have, or at least claim to have, money and social power, like the Big Lebowski, Maude Lebowski and Jackie Treehorn. They are only after more money and more power, and even try to use those who are without money and power for their immoral purposes. The conflict in this movie therefore represents a class conflict, a conflict between the rich and the poor, between those with power and those without. The Coen brothers do not actively take sides in this conflict, but rather expose the conflict as an absurd one.

Although you could say the Coen brothers create more sympathy for the side of the Dude, it is debatable whether they portray him as a good example or someone viewers should try to emulate. The portrayal of the Dude as a messianic savior or hero is problematic. With his unambitious attitude and passive demeanor, he might even serve more as an anti-hero. The Coen brothers clearly show his flaws as an individual, with his passive demeanor and his hedonistic urge to enjoy the moment, listen to music, drink cocktails, smoke weed and bowl. Regardless, this has led to a lot of reverence for the Dude from fans of the film, who have even started a mock religion called ‘dudeism’, it is not clear whether the Coen brothers intended for all of this. His idea of “live and let live” can be viewed from a religious perspective.

However, as Kensky states, “To describe the Dude, or any schlemiel, as a hero, then, is to intentionally misread the character – yet to call him an anti-hero is also incorrect given his role in the story, the challenges he makes to the world system” (Kensky). This is true, because the social commentary in this film comes

from his perspective. The question is whether he exposes this truth by his own rightful behavior? Does he actively fight this problem in society? In the end, I think he abides with these societal problems and simply wants to continue living on his own terms.

## Chapter 6: *A Serious Man*

*A Serious Man* is a dark comedy from 2009 and is one of the darkest movies by the Coen brothers to date. I will summarize its story again in a short synopsis in the appendix, before analyzing some of the darkest scenes of the film and explaining where the dark humor can be found and what the Coen brothers are trying to achieve with their use of dark humor. The Jewish-American background of the Coen brothers is featured most prominently in this film, so this will affect my analysis of the selected scenes and of the movie in general. Once again, I will also investigate the typical characterization, the social commentary and the movie genre of the film.

### 6.2 Selected Scenes:

The two scenes that I selected are both clear examples of dark humor. In the first scene I chose, we see the typical use of stereotypes by the Coen brothers, when Larry talks to Asian student Clive Park and his father about bribery. The fact that they speak broken English creates comedy due to the many misunderstandings between these characters. The humor in this scene can be explained by The Benign Violation Theory, since Larry's linguistic and social norms are threatened, but the threat seems benign. It counts as dark humor if you look at bribery as a serious offense with serious consequences, which is definitely the case in this film.

#### - Bribery scene with Clive:

In the first of two meetings, a Korean student named Clive Park visits Larry's office at the university, asking him to change his grade to a passing grade, because he felt it was unjust that he received a failing grade. Throughout the meeting, Clive has a blank expression (see Figure 19) and a stoic attitude and talks in broken English.



Figure 19, *A Serious Man* Bribery scene

This adds to the comedy, since his calm behavior is incongruous to his desperate situation. During the awkward exchange, Clive says he failed the test because he did not know the mathematics, but he understood the physics. Larry then tries to explain that you need to understand the math in order to understand the physics. Clive brings up the example of a story from class of a dead cat that he understood, which is a reference to Schrodinger's cat theory, but Larry responds that they are merely illustrative stories he uses in order to understand the physics behind them. This is funny because understanding an analogy is hardly enough to pass an exam on physics, which is an oversimplification Clive seems to make because of the language issue. Clive then asks to re-do the test, because his failed grade gives him shame and he might lose his scholarship because of it. Larry claims that this is impossible, because other students would not accept one student re-taking the test until he passes, so Clive then asks for a secret new test. Clive comically refers to this test as "hush, hush" in one of many incongruous instances where he uses informal expressions that clash with his stoic mannerisms and with his immoral intentions. Larry gets annoyed (See Figure 20) and replies that this is not workable and that he will have to bite the bullet, so Clive mutters to himself that he is in trouble and leaves. After Clive leaves the room, Larry picks up the phone, before realizing that Clive left an envelope with cash on his desk. In his confusion, Larry promptly puts the phone down with Sy still on the line, comically yelling 'call back' towards the receiver while he runs after Clive in the hallway, but he has already left.



Figure 20, A Serious Man Bribery scene

In a second meeting, Larry confronts Clive about the bribery. Clive claims not to have left anything, before even being accused of anything. His childlike innocence in defending himself helps make the violation in this scene seem benign. When Larry shows him the envelope of cash (see Figure 21), Clive repeats that he is not missing anything. This is funny because while Clive always talks in platitudes, Larry seems to adapt to this behavior by stating things very explicitly. For example, he asks Clive “This is here, isn’t it?” to which Clive can only respond “Yes sir, this is here.” and then he says “This is not nothing. This is something.” to which Clive also deadpans “Yes sir, that is something” (J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*).



Figure 21, A Serious Man Bribery scene

Larry says that he will hand the envelope over to Ari Finkle, along with his suspicions of where it came from. He angrily tells Clive that actions in his office have consequences, not just physically, but morally. This is funny because Larry clearly can not leave his background as a physics professor go. Whenever Larry states simple rules as facts, Clive easily dismisses them, like when Larry says actions have consequences, Clive responds “Yes, often” or when Larry says they both know about his actions, Clive responds with “No sir, I know about my actions”. In the end, Clive states “Mere surmise, sir” (J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*), which Larry fails to understand at first, before he slowly repeats it and concludes that Larry’s surmises are “Very uncertain”. Once again, this is funny because he tries to convince Larry that he

is wrong, although he is obviously right, so it is a benign threat to Larry's norms and convictions.



**Figure 22, A Serious Man Bribery scene**

In a later scene, Clive's father comes to meet Larry at his house (see Figure 22), claiming that there was a culture clash between his son and Larry. His statement is comically accompanied by him ostentatiously putting his fists together. Larry dismisses this, saying it would only be a culture clash if it were normal in his culture to bribe people for grades, to which the father only replies "yes." They further debate about whether or not Clive left a bribe, before the father states that he would sue Larry for defamation of his son, for falsely accusing him of bribery if he did not take the money and otherwise he would sue him for accepting the bribe, leaving him with very little choice. This is even funnier when Larry's neighbor comes to ask him whether this man is bothering him. Despite the fact that Park is threatening to sue him, which is clearly bothersome, Larry says "no" to his neighbor, since Park is not physically bothering him. In conclusion, Larry says it does not make sense that he would sue him, because that would mean his son did leave the money. Park responds with, "Please, accept the mystery". Ironically, while this is the kind of advice that Larry should take to heart in his life, he ignores it or fails to understand it through miscommunication.

The second scene I chose, is the final scene, which also showcases many instances of dark humor. Throughout the entire film, the Coen brothers have shown Larry's struggles with a seemingly infinite series of unfortunate events. However,

right before the end, Larry's luck seems to change a little bit, even hinting at a possible happy ending with Larry getting tenure, reconciling with his wife and his family after Danny's bar mitzvah. Instead, the Coen brothers only increase the darkness in the final scene, introducing such dark topics as disease, natural disaster and corruption.

- Final scene:

The outcome of the earlier bribery scene is shown in the final scene, when Larry finally decides whether he will accept the bribe from Clive. He stares at the grade list on his desk with a tortured expression (see Figure 23), with the bill for Arthur's court case -costing three thousand dollars- also lying there.



Figure 23, A Serious Man Final scene

Throughout the entire film, Larry has tried to be a good and serious man, creating a sort of tension with his idiosyncratic behavior. However, in the end he makes the out-of-character decision to accept the bribe and change Clive's grade from a failing grade to a passing grade. While he slowly erases the mark, we see the beginnings of a storm through the window behind him. Right at the moment he is finished changing the grade, the phone starts ringing. He looks ominously at the phone, until he hears the familiar voice of doctor Shapiro. His worries are cast aside when he hears him congratulate him for Danny's bar mitzvah. However, the doctor then mentions that he wants to talk to him about his x-ray results, creating suspense again. Larry goes completely quiet and his facial expression gives away that he fears

the worst. Larry asks Doctor Shapiro to tell him what is wrong over the phone, but he refuses. The doctor claims that he rather give him the results in person and urges him to come by his office immediately, implying that he is seriously ill. A terrified Larry gets behind the wheels of his car, as heavy torrential rain starts to pour down on his car while he is driving. The weather comically fits the mood of Larry's character.

Meanwhile, the viewer sees that the school of his son Danny receives a tornado warning, with the teacher telling the kids to move to the cellar of the synagogue for protection. While the teacher is fumbling with the keys to the cellar, Danny and the other kids are standing around on the playground. When Danny sees the classmate he owed the money for buying drugs, which he is finally ready to give back, we see the tornado heading straight towards them (see Figure 24).



**Figure 24, A Serious Man Final scene**

The screen then fades to black, leaving the outcome of the story up in the air with both Larry's and his son Danny's fates unknown. The timing of the disaster seems to imply that both characters get punished for their immoral behavior, Larry for being corrupted by a bribery and Danny for buying drugs, although his punishment appeared to be on hold until he actually paid for them. The ending is very ambiguous, as the viewer does not know whether to laugh or cry at this ending.

As the screen fades, we hear Jefferson Airplane's 'Somebody to Love', the song that Danny is obsessed with and listens to on his earphones, and which is also the song that was played at the very beginning of the film. The Coen brothers often use this circular effect in their films, while also often using an open ending. The use of this song is not a coincidence, as the lyrics describe someone who has lost his love and has become desperate because of it. The choice of this song can be interpreted in

two ways, either as a cruel way by the Coen brothers to laugh with Larry and his impending divorce or perhaps they are implying that he should accept his divorce, start anew and should find somebody else to love who truly loves him.

## 6.2 Analysis: Themes of Fate, Divorce, Jewish faith and Dark Humor in *a Serious Man*

The protagonist of the movie, Larry Gopnik, seems to have to endure an endless amount of bad luck. In fact, the Coen brothers use dark humor to point out how exaggerated his bad luck is, with every possible worst case scenario happening to him, like a case of Murphy's Law. Towards the ending of the film, the Coen brothers first hint at a silver lining and a positive outcome after all this darkness, but in true Coen fashion, they snuff it out completely in the end, culminating in even more darkness. However, while it can be considered cruel to bestow this fate upon a seemingly innocent man, the Coen brothers hint at a reason why he has to endure all this bad luck: his complete inaction. In the beginning, Larry lives a perfectly normal, boring, contented life in the suburbs, with a nice family, a house and a steady job, but he cannot foresee any of this falling apart the way it eventually does. Throughout the film, Larry tries to make sense of every bad thing that happens to him by analyzing it or by searching for answers in his faith, but it never seems to appear to him to actually do things to solve his problems or to prevent further harm.

When his wife tells him she wants a divorce, he merely says "What did I do? I didn't do anything"(J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*), not realizing that this could be part of the reason why Judith is no longer interested in him, but rather prefers the more assertive Sy Ableman. This juxtaposition between Larry and Sy Ableman is also made clear during the funeral, where Sy is described in glowing terms as a 'serious man' who was beloved by all and who was devoted to his wife, to his community and to his duty as a man, although of course the viewer knows better than this. In contrast, Larry can barely even utter the words when describing himself as such to Rabbi Marshak's secretary, saying "This is a ser- I'm a ser- I'm, uh, I've tried to be a serious man, you know?"(J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*).

As part of his profession, Larry teaches his students about the Uncertainty Principle in class, telling them that "It proves we can't ever really know... what's going on. So it shouldn't bother you. Not being able to figure anything out"(J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*). This is a lesson that Larry clearly fails to learn himself,

as he keeps looking for answers in vain, which prevents him from taking control of his life. In the case of Clive's bribery, Larry also had the chance to immediately report the case to Professor Finkle after first getting hands on the bribe, but instead he allows Clive to come back to confirm his wrongdoing, which creates a scenario where Clive and his father can manipulate him into taking the bribe.

Another theme that often returns in films by the Coen brothers using dark humor is the concept of divorce or the idea of a woman losing interest or falling in love with another man. This theme is also dealt with in their movies *Intolerable Cruelty*, *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*. It also returns in *The Big Lebowski* with Bunny Lebowski, the Big Lebowski's trophy wife who has no interest in her husband apart from his money. There is also Walter who got divorced from his wife, but still cares for her dog and keeps up his Jewish faith after their divorce. Divorce also appears briefly in *Fargo*, with Mike Yanagita, an old schoolmate from Marge, who lies to her about losing his wife in an attempt to make Marge fall in love with him. While the Coen brothers often portray male characters who are negatively defined by their divorce, they are often merely sidestories like with Walter Sobchak, or in the case of Mike Yanagita, side characters who do not really add anything to the plot.

However, in *A Serious Man*, as well as in *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the protagonists are seriously and harshly tested by females, which equally seriously adds to their troubles. Both with Larry Gopnik and Llewyn Davis, their inability to deal with women is thematized and becomes symbolic for their failures as individuals. In *A Serious Man*, Larry Gopnik has to deal with the fact that his wife Judith is no longer in love with him and wants a divorce, so she can be with Sy Ableman. It becomes clear that Sy has been undermining Larry's reputation by sending anonymous letters to Professor Finkle to prevent him from getting tenure at the university, in order to ruin his marriage so he can be with his wife. And while both Judith and Sy deny it, it is also heavily implied that Sy had already slept with his wife. After Sy dies in a car crash, Larry sees him in a dream as he slams him head-first into the blackboard and screams that he slept with his wife. So Larry is clearly tortured and emasculated by the thought of his wife possibly having an affair, which results in the ultimate humiliation when she asks Larry to pay for her lover's funeral. The popularity of this topic in their films seems to come from Joel Coen's own real-life struggles with

marriage, with Josh Levine pointing out “In any case, Joel did marry in those early years, but the relationship quickly ended in divorce” (Levine).

The Coen brothers also use dark humor in this movie to deal with how Larry tries to use Jewish religion and spirituality to overcome adversity. As Eitan Kensky mentions, “Although *A Serious Man* is their first film to tackle the subject of Judaism directly, elements of Judaism and Jewishness have long permeated the work of the Coen brothers” (Kensky). More than in any of their other films, the Jewish background of the Coen brothers directly influences this movie, with most of the characters being Jewish: the Gopniks, Sy Ableman and Ari Finkle, the three rabbis and even the people in the opening scene are all Jewish. In other films, this is not often the case except in *Barton Fink*, where the titular character is Jewish and in *The Big Lebowski*, where Walter Sobchak is the only Jewish character. However, Walter’s Judaism is portrayed jokingly, since he only converted to Judaism for his ex-wife. This means that technically he is not really Jewish, since this requires your mother to be Jewish. Apart from taking part in Shomer Shabbos, Walter seems to have very little affinity with Jewish faith and he does not even mind scattering Donny’s ashes, while Jewish law strictly forbids cremation. Even worse, while discussing with the Dude, he even briefly defends Nazism, albeit in comparison to nihilism, saying “Say what you want about the tenets of National Socialism, Dude, at least it’s an ethos...”(Coen *The Big Lebowski*). This shows that Walter is not really in touch with Jewish history or only when it is convenient to him.

Norman M. Cohen discusses the movie *A Serious Man* from a religious perspective, saying “It is obvious that *A Serious Man* is a modern rendition of the story of Job. If so, then the authors of both the movie and the Biblical story share skepticism about the popular religious notion that the good are always rewarded and the wicked punished, that there is an automatic connection between a person’s deeds and his consequent fate and destiny. This is a theme that permeates the Coen brothers’ entire film repertory” (Cohen) Indeed, the story of Larry Gopnik has many resemblances with the biblical story of Job, which also appears in the Thora, the Jewish book of faith. Job was also a good, faithful and innocent man who was tested in his faith in God with a series of trials. As Timothy Stanley explains, “Job begins with an accuser, hasatan, arguing that Job is only righteous because God has treated him so well. With a bit of loss, he would not be anything of the kind of good man he seems to be” (Stanley). Some of the tests Job has to endure are losing his home, his

possessions and his health, while his wife and children are killed in a whirlwind. This is all very similar to Larry Gopnik's fate in this film, although the main difference is that in the Bible, Job is eventually rewarded by God for maintaining his faith with a complete recovery, a new family and new children. While this recovery is absent in this film, the Coen brothers leave open the possibility for Larry to redeem himself in the aftermath by using an open ending. However, another difference is that Job never actually sinned, while Larry sinned by accepting a bribe, which might ruin his chances of redemption.

There is ongoing debate in Judaism about how the story of Job should be interpreted, with some rabbis believing that Job was in fact a blasphemer who was rightly punished. One Jewish interpretation comes from Maimonides, which Timothy Stanley mentions as "A similar sentiment can be felt in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed, where Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual virtues is employed to exegete a just, but not wise Job. Wisdom comes through Job's questioning, and through this reading we arrive at the philosophical meaning of the book" (Stanley). It is unclear whether the Coen brothers agree with Maimonides, since we do not know if Larry actually reaches wisdom from his questioning. The Coen brothers briefly mention Maimonides, also referred to as Rambam, in *The Big Lebowski*, when Walter talks about the 14<sup>th</sup> century Rambam's concept of *Aish*, or fire, before the sight of the Dude's car being on fire cuts him off in his explanation. While the Coen brothers clearly use Jewish stories and the interpretation by Walter as a joke in *The Big Lebowski*, it does show that they are at least familiar with them.

Cohen further explains, "In the Coen brothers' movie, *A Serious Man*, they once again present the age old question of theodicy, the paradox of a just and good God and the existence of evil and injustice in the world, challenging the apparently simplistic religious notion that God rewards the good and punishes the wicked" (Cohen). So the Coen brothers borrow this classic notion of theodicy, which questions why a just God would allow the manifestation of evil in the world, which was a popular debate in ancient Israel. In these debates, there is a clear preference in ancient Jewish culture for retributive justice, which is the idea that the punishment has to fit the crime, which is included in the Jewish law of Moses as "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Moses). It is debatable whether the Coen brothers go along with Jewish traditions here, since they appear to present an unjust God who punishes Larry disproportionately for his rather minor sins.

- Social Commentary in *A Serious Man*

The Coen brothers use this film to question Jewish faith and religious traditions and how they apply to the modern world. The film contains several traditional Jewish stories and elements, but their relevance is not always immediately clear. For example, the opening scene about the Jewish Shtetl appears to make no sense in relation to the rest of the story. It is a story that can only be understood if you know Jewish mythology, as Dybbuks traditionally leave the body of their hosts after being helped. While the woman believed the stranger was a Dybbuk and killed him after her husband helped him on the street, this ironically would have meant the Dybbuk had already left his body. The fact that the Coen brothers make no effort to explain this to the viewers only adds to the confusion about Jewish religious traditions. This confusion is made even more abundant in all of the conversations that Larry has with his Jewish friends and with all the rabbis. For example, during a picnic a friend tries to console Larry by saying that “it's not something you have to figure out all by yourself. We're Jews, we have that well of tradition to draw on, to help us understand. When we're puzzled we have all the stories that have been handed down from people who had the same problems” (J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*).

Ironically, every Jewish story that Larry hears throughout the film confuses him greatly, as he struggles to find the right answers to his questions in his Jewish faith. For example, when Larry talks to Rabbi Nachtner, he tells him an elaborate story about a Jewish dentist who found messages in Hebrew engraved in the teeth of a ‘goy’, or non-Jewish, patient. When Larry asks him about what advice he gave to the dentist, Rabbi Nachtner simply tells him that he did not know if it was a sign from God and that it is always good to try to help people. While the dentist did try to help the goy and continued in his search for new messages, he never found any others. The rabbi then admits that the story was not particularly relevant to him and concludes that “we can't know everything”. When a frustrated Larry asks the rabbi about the fate of the goy, he responds with “The goy? Who cares?” (J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*).

His discussions with Rabbi Scott also provide no solutions to his worries, as the young rabbi rambles on about not being able to see God in the world, while looking out of his window into the parking lot and continues comparing the world with the parking lot. In the end, he tells him “You have to see things as an expression of God's

will”, before adding “You don’t have to like it, of course” (J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*). Throughout the film, Larry always tries to get in contact with the legendary Rabbi Marshak, who is supposedly the wisest of all the rabbis. However, the rabbi always refuses to speak to Larry. When Larry goes to see the rabbi, his secretary tells him that he is busy, although he can see him sitting idly at his office. She clarifies to him that he is busy thinking. Ironically, his son Danny does get to meet the legendary Rabbi Marshak after his Bar Mitzvah, but he only speaks gibberish to him, quoting some lyrics by Jefferson Airplane and naming their members, before simply advising him to “be a good boy” (J. Coen and E. Coen *A Serious Man*). So again the Coen brothers comically point out that there are no answers to be found for Larry in his Jewish faith, which they question thoroughly with the use of dark humor.

#### - Characterization in *a Serious Man*

Norm M. Cohen writes about a common feature of the writing style of the Coen brothers, the use of stereotypes, saying “And in the Coen brothers’ style, they utilize highly exaggerated stereotypes and caricatures that mock, humiliate and incite the sensibilities of their viewers, who have come to understand that it is part of the price of admission” (Cohen). For example, the characters of Clive Park and his father blatantly perform to racial stereotypes of Asian-Americans, where parents often put great emphasis on academic performance. The broken English and the peculiar, stoic mannerisms of these characters can also be seen as insensitive portrayals of Asian-Americans. Other instances when the Coen brothers portray Asian-Americans in their films are also problematic. In *Fargo*, the character of Mike Yanagita is a sad, lonely figure, although he is not portrayed stereotypically and even speaks with a Minnesotan accent. In *the Big Lebowski*, the Asian thug who pees on the Dude’s rug is referred to by the Dude offensively as a ‘Chinaman’, which later leads to a debate between Walter and the Dude about the preferred nomenclature of Asian-Americans. However, it should be stated that the stereotypical portrayal of Asian-Americans in this movie is functional, as it leads to misunderstandings, which increase Larry Gopnik’s problems. Their strange portrayals are not the butt of the joke by the Coen brothers, as they are just symptoms of Larry’s confusion, his inability to communicate with others and to understand what is going on around him.

Meanwhile, Larry is clearly the archetype from popular fiction of the absent-minded professor, as he is too busy worrying to understand what is going on with his life. As is customary in films by the Coen brothers, some of the Jewish characters also perform to some offensive Jewish stereotypes. While Larry does not openly show any Jewish stereotypes, his suffering does get more pronounced if you take into account certain Jewish stereotypes. For example, his financial problems are worsened if you take the stereotype that Jews are frugal into account. His worries about being a good parent and about his impending divorce from his wife are heightened by the stereotype that Jewish women traditionally play the more active parenting role in Jewish families. Finally, the phonecall from his doctor about a possible serious disease is worsened if you take the Jewish stereotype of hypochondria into account, which also explains his daughter's obsession with washing her hair. This obsession also could be explained by the Coen brothers' own background, as Ethan Coen once said about their sister that he "saw almost nothing of my sister from the onset of her puberty until she left for college six years later. She spent those years in the bathroom washing her hair" (Levine). This shows that the portrayals of Jewish characters are probably based on impressions from their own lives. There is also the Jewish stereotype of self-deprecation and often complaining about the bad things that happen to them, although this would have to be done ironically with Larry, since he clearly has every right to complain in this film. Perhaps these are all inside jokes from the Coen brothers for their Jewish viewers, since Jewish humor is also known to make fun of themselves and their own stereotypes.

- Movie Genres in *a Serious Man*

Much like the Dude in *The Big Lebowski*, the character of Larry Gopnik is also the typical protagonist of a neo-noir film who succumbs to his fate, which he fails to comprehend. As is typical for neo-noir, Larry is an anti-hero who gets stuck in a difficult situation and has to make choices out of desperation. However, while both these protagonists share an absurd fate that is beyond their control, they have different ways of dealing with or interpreting their fate. While the Dude becomes the playing ball of immoral scheming from people with a higher social standing, he gets angry at them and calls out their immorality, but eventually abides by his fate. Meanwhile, Larry Gopnik tries to see his unfortunate fate as a plan from God that he needs to

figure out and analyze through his faith, but he cannot accept the fact that there possibly is no way prescribed to him in his faith to deal with his fate. The concept of women questioning men in their masculinity that occurs in this film with Judith and Larry is possibly borrowed from the tradition of the screwball comedy. However, the Coen brothers bring their own twist to this kind of comedy by making it a very one-sided challenge, where only the woman exposes the man's flaws, instead of the usual battle of the sexes. This battle also occurs in *Inside Llewyn Davis* with Jean Berkey and Llewyn Davis, although in both of these movies the battle does not occur within a romantic pursuit.

### 6.3 Conclusion:

There are various recurring themes and typical features from the Coen brothers' movies that appear in this film. Once again, there is dark humor. Once again, the characters are portrayed as stereotypes. And once again, there are people making immoral decisions, who are immediately and cruelly punished for them. The fact that the Coen brothers always stick to the same idiosyncrasies suggests that they are somehow laughing at their own style. Whenever another character gets punished for an immoral decision they make in their films, it seems like a wink towards their own fan base that this was to be expected in their films. This self-deprecating type of humor is typical for Jewish humor.

However, more than in any other of their films, the viewer gets an insight into the psychological reasoning behind the immoral choices of the characters in *A Serious Man*. We get a glimpse at why exactly the Coen brothers make their characters suffer so much. Here, the immorality seems to come at least partly from Larry's inability to be consoled by his Jewish faith. Perhaps this hints at a failure by the Coen brothers to come to terms with their own religious traditions. Because of their own complete embrace of the modern world as popular filmmakers, perhaps they lack affinity with Jewish traditions, which they question thoroughly throughout this film. Perhaps questioning the relevance of traditional religious stories in modern society enables them to write their own stories about big topics like fate, death and religion with their own moral implications, which typically occur in religious stories.

Cohen comments on the views of the Coen brothers on religious traditions, saying "The real question is whether the Coen brothers are being literal about the

teachings of tradition, selling short the value of a religious tradition like Judaism. One thing is clear. They must have had teachers like the ones depicted in the movie” (Cohen). While the Coen brothers have clearly gone through all the traditions, heard all the stories, learned all the customs and talked to all the rabbis, this movie implies that apparently they fail to make sense of their own Jewish heritage. Their Jewish background has clearly left an impression on them, but they have difficulties putting these impressions, knowledge and feelings into a coherent story, so the Coen brothers resort to questioning their own traditions, their own background and ultimately themselves.

While they do not deny that there might be a God in this movie, the Coen brothers show that there is no way of understanding His ways, so there is no point in trying. Trying to find answers where there are none only leads to a general sense of powerlessness, confusion and this only leads to suffering, because the world is cruel and will punish you for your confusion. Ultimately this seems to be the dark message that the Coen brothers have for their viewers, but the viewer need not worry, because they are reminded in the end that ‘no Jews were hurt during the making of this film’. This is a timely reminder that this is only a movie, so it does not necessarily say anything about the real world, except that it is also a reminder that in the real world, Jews have actually often been persecuted throughout history.

This shows the viewer the sort of reasoning behind the creation of their films, showing the true feelings of the Coen brothers about the world. Cohen writes about this, saying “Perhaps the Coen brothers have revealed their unconscious. Or better yet, perhaps they have confirmed what we can find within our own souls, the wish that the world did work that way: that reward and punishment always made sense and that God would vigorously defend the principles upon which religion seems to be founded and the promises that we expect to be fulfilled” (Cohen). This can be seen in the ending, the Coen brothers imply with the tornado that God directly and logically punishes them for their sins. However, their punishments, with potential disease or death, are beyond all proportions. So, while the Coen brothers might question whether or not you can be consoled by the thought of a just God throughout this film, they conclude with dark humor that this question becomes irrelevant if God is actually unjust. This conclusion does imply that you should try to find consolation and try to come up with answers for your questions regardless, even if you do it by simply ‘accepting the mystery’ in life.



## Chapter 7: Inside Llewyn Davis

*Inside Llewyn Davis* is a dark comedy about a struggling folk musician named Llewyn Davis who lives in New York in the 1960s. He used to be part of a successful duo, but his partner Mike killed himself by jumping off a bridge. Now he has released a solo album called 'Inside Llewyn Davis', but it fails to be a commercial success. Because of this, Llewyn has little money and is dependent on other people for couches to sleep on and for deciding which gigs or songs he plays. The struggles of Llewyn, which I will discuss in the synopsis in the appendix, are shown with plenty of dark humor. I will choose some scenes in which the dark humor is most apparent and then analyze how and why the Coen brothers use the dark humor specifically in these scenes and throughout the rest of the film.

### 7.1 Selected Scenes:

Most of the dark humor in this movie comes from Llewyn's suffering, as his irresponsible behavior gets punished. This often happens by being berated by women, like Ms. Gorfein or Jean Berkey. Jean is the person who confronts him the most, coming up with some very creative and painful insults to try to get him to change his ways. His inability to communicate with women not only leads to scorn, but also to personal harm in the final scene when he gets beaten up for heckling a female performer.

- Discussions with Jean and final scene:

While talking outside on a bench, Jean looks at Llewyn with pity (see Figure 25) and tells him that she might be pregnant from him. She gets angry about this and argues that she "should have had you wear double condoms. But if you ever do it again, which is a favor to women everywhere you should not. But if you do, you should be wearing condom on condom. And then wrap it in electrical tape. You should just walk around always, inside a great big condom" (E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*). The viewer might sympathize with Llewyn here, since the decision to have sex with him was also her own choice and perhaps she should have foreseen the consequences herself.



Figure 25, *Inside Llewyn Davis* Discussion with Jean scene

Later, while talking at a bar (see Figure 26), Jean once again angrily confronts him, by saying “You don’t want to go anywhere, and that’s why the same shit is gonna keep happening to you, because you want it to! And also, because you’re an asshole!”(E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*). This was a reaction to Llewyn arguing that folk music should be authentic, claiming that Jean and her husband were “a little careerist and a little square” for trying to write more popular songs. Of course, this is ironic since Jean and Jim can provide for themselves as musicians, while Llewyn cannot and is forced to sleep on their couch. The dark comedy in both scenes comes from the highly exaggerated beatdowns Llewyn has to endure, which he does stoically on both occasions, so they appear to be benign violations to him.



Figure 26, *Inside Llewyn Davis* Discussion with Jean scene

In the end, Llewyn plays one last gig at the Gaslight Café, after Jean fixed this for him as a final favor. At the bar, he talks to the owner Pappi, who brags about having had sex with Jean to Llewyn, who does not seem to realize that this was probably how Jean got him the gig. This adds further clarification about Jean’s inner

dealings, as she is forced into promiscuity to further her career as a female artist. She is probably very much aware of this and cynical about it, which explains why she gets so angry with Llewyn. She hates that Llewyn is so passive about furthering his career, while Jean instead is very active, but has to denigrate herself for it. She acts out her frustration on Llewyn, despite failing to tell him the harsh truth and perhaps she does sympathize with the fact that he cannot do the same that she does. This might explain why she helped him in the end, sleeping with Pappi to get him one final chance at success.



**Figure 27, Inside Llewyn Davis Discussions with Jean Scene**

Llewyn proceeds to get drunk after his show and yells at an old lady who performed after him and then gets beaten up in the alley outside (see Figure 27), presumably by the performer's husband. Since this was also the beginning of the film, this seems to imply that he is stuck in a vicious circle of failure and he cannot escape from this.

The next scene I chose is when Llewyn goes to Chicago to meet Bud Grossman, in a final attempt to make it in the music industry. The Coen brothers use dark humor to portray his desperation and then his sadness after failing to impress the impresario.

- Playing for Bud Grossman Scene:

After arriving in Chicago, Llewyn steps out of the bus, right into a puddle of snow (see Figure 28), foreshadowing that his trip to Chicago was perhaps a bad choice.



Figure 28, Inside Llewyn Davis Bud Grossman scene

When he meets record boss Bud Grossman, he is asked to play something from ‘Inside Llewyn Davis’, literally from his new album with that title, or figuratively as Llewyn plays him some intimate, heartfelt songs about his personal sorrow live and in person (see Figure 4), while Grossman looks on unemotionally. Grossman waits quietly until he is finished and then responds that he does not “see a lot of money here”.



Figure 29, Inside Llewyn Davis Bud Grossman scene

Instead, Grossman advises him to join a trio that he is putting together, but Llewyn refuses, as he has not gotten over the pain of the death of his former musical partner. In another great example of dark humor, Grossman then advises Llewyn for them to maybe get back together. This is of course impossible since his partner Mike killed himself and the Coen brothers seem to imply here that Llewyn should perhaps do the same.

If Llewyn was really intent of making it in the music industry, he would at least consider joining the trio as Grossman proposed, but it becomes clear that the suicide of Mike has traumatized him so much that he no longer wants to succeed as a solo artist. Perhaps it was Mike who was the driving force behind their duo all along and Llewyn depended on him for success, which he can now no longer do. However, this is unclear since Mike's death is never discussed or explained and he does not feature in the film, although his shadow continues to linger over the film.

## 7.2 Analysis: Failure, Authenticity, Folk Music and Dark Humor in *Inside Llewyn Davis*

The main theme that is dealt with using dark humor in the movie *Inside Llewyn Davis* is failure. The movie is a fictional story of a musician named Llewyn Davis, whose life story is partly based on the actual life of musician Dave Van Ronk. Much like Llewyn Davis, Van Ronk was an important figure in the New York folk scene of the 1960s and was known for his authenticity, but he never became famous or commercially successful. As Elijah Wald explains in the foreword of the Coens' book *Inside Llewyn Davis*, "For Van Ronk's generation, that well-worn authenticity provided a profound contrast to the ephemeral confections of the pop music world, and the choice to play folk music was almost like joining a religious order – complete with a vow of poverty, since there were virtually no jobs in New York for anyone who sounded like a traditional folk artist" (E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*).

In this movie, Llewyn Davis portrays a folk musician like Van Ronk who fails to turn his musical talents into commercial success as a solo act. The Coen brothers bring Llewyn's failure in contrast with his friends from the New York scene, who seem to manage to reach a larger audience. For example, in the end there is a short appearance of a young Bob Dylan, who reached worldwide acclaim after beginning his career in the same venue in New York where Llewyn Davis also plays in this movie, the Gaslight Café. This is a harsh reminder for the viewers of what could have been for the protagonist Llewyn Davis.

The owner of the Gaslight Café, Pappi also explains to Llewyn that his audience are more interested in watching female musicians like Jean Berkey perform, because the thought of sex moves them. This might explain his lack of success as a solo artist, which Gottlieb and Gayle Wald support with their theory that "Women performers go through complicated contortions as they both appropriate and repudiate

a traditionally masculine rock performance position which is itself premised on the repression of femininity, while they simultaneously contend with a feminine performance position defined primarily as the erotic object-to-be-looked-at”(Gottlieb and Wald). This theory is exemplified in the character of Jean Berkey, who is a more popular artist than Llewyn, but she has to perform to these standards for female artists, partly against her own wishes. This becomes clear when it turns out Jean has slept with Pappi in order to play at his bar.

Llewyn also expresses his surprise at Jim’s songwriting when he writes what he considers to be a novelty song about popular subjects like the space race and president Kennedy. Llewyn seems completely uninterested in contemporary politics or anything outside the sphere of his own daily life. In another argument with Jean, he also calls her and Jim “a little careerist, it’s a little square and it’s a little sad” (E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*) for trying to make money out of their music. Llewyn easily dismisses Jim for writing about political themes, but the appearance of Bob Dylan in the film proves that the Coen brothers think he is wrong. Bob Dylan became world famous for managing to combine the authentic sensibilities of folk music with socially conscious themes like peace and war, in songs like ‘Blowin in the Wind’ and ‘The Times They Are a-Changing’. Instead, Llewyn believes that authenticity only means that you sing songs to express your own personal feelings and sorrows through your music. Therefore, he thinks that any way of writing music for a larger audience is inauthentic. He explains this by saying “If it was never new, and it never gets old, then it’s a folk song” (E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*).

The theme of the authenticity of American popular music is something that seems to fascinate the Coen brothers, as the contrast between popular and traditional music also returns in some of their other films. For example, in *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, which is about musicians called the Soggy Bottom Boys, who sing traditional songs and become famous, despite the fact that they are fugitive criminals. The authenticity of music also plays a role in *The Big Lebowski*, for example when the Dude argues with a taxi driver about hating the popular band the Eagles, who then throws him out of his taxi. The Dude prefers the authenticity and the social consciousness in music from the American counter culture that he was part of, while the Eagles represent the exact opposite with their radio-friendly, popular music. As examples of this, during the opening sequence we hear the song “The Man in Me” by Bob Dylan, who also plays a role in this film. The dude also listens to Creedence

Clearwater Revival in his car and expresses his annoyance at losing his tapes when his car gets stolen.

Andy Bennett also addresses the problematic question of the popularity of music in his book, asking “how to reconcile popular music’s position in the marketplace with its function as a potentially counter-hegemonic cultural resource” (Bennett). Llewyn seems to dismiss any possibility of reconciliation and he prefers singing traditional folk songs, which prevents him from reaching a wider audience.

#### - Characterization in *Inside Llewyn Davis*

The portrayal of Llewyn Davis contains a lot of dark humor, which often comes from the tragic conflict between his passive personality and what the world expects of him as an artist. Bennett explains this in his book, using the theory from the Frankfurt School, who were famous for their critique of mass culture, saying that, “the mass cultural profile of modern society signaled the fate of individual autonomy, this being steadily replaced by a ‘scientific-technological reality’” (Bennett). Llewyn shares this idea with the Frankfurt School and agrees with the criticism that mass culture destroys individual autonomy. Ironically, Llewyn’s own autonomy clearly suffers from being unwilling to write music for the masses or to give in to society’s norms, since you need money in order to be autonomous. While Llewyn might feel authentic and creatively autonomous, he has no girlfriend, no money and fails to provide for himself as a musician. Llewyn does not have his own place and is always moving in with different friends, sleeping on their couches.

While he is highly dependent on other people, he is not very dependable himself. The cat that follows Llewyn throughout the movie demonstrates this. Llewyn wants to take care of the cat, but it always manages to escape from him. The fact that he fails to take care of the cat is representative of his lack of dependability, since he is not even capable of taking care of himself, let alone of another creature. Other symbolic meanings behind his affiliation with the cat could be that he is soft, perhaps too soft for this hard world, or quite literally that he is ‘a pussy’. Roland Turner also jokes about this, saying “Folk singer with a cat. You queer?” (E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*).

Apart from being portrayed as highly dependent on others, Llewyn has other personal traits showing a weakness of character. For example, he also seems very adverse to thinking about his future. When Jean confronts him about this and asks if

he ever thinks of the future, Llewyn answers dismissingly “The future? You mean like flying cars? Hotels on the moon? Tang?” (E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*). He lives on a day-to-day basis and sleeps around with women, which leads to him having to pay for two abortions.

This is ironically brought into contrast with the similar behavior of Pappi, the owner of the Gaslight Café, who seems to get away with sleeping around. He brags to Llewyn about having slept with many women, including Jean, in order to have them play gigs there. The Coen brothers seem to imply here that irresponsible behavior is not the main problem for Llewyn, since you can get away with it if you have money and a steady job. However, it is Llewyn’s arrogance that gets punished since he remains irresponsible despite overwhelming evidence that he should not be.

#### - Movie genres of *Inside Llewyn Davis*

With *Inside Llewyn Davis*, The Coen brother do not so much follow a movie genre, but rather show their affinity for ancient Greek literature, since the story is reminiscent of an ancient Greek tragedy. According to Aristotle, the definition of tragedy is that it “depicts the downfall of a basically good person through some fatal error or misjudgment, producing suffering and insight on the part of the protagonist and arousing pity and fear on the part of the audience” (Aristotle).

The tragic suicide of his former singing partner Mike seems to hang over Llewyn like a dark shadow throughout the entire movie. For example, when Llewyn sings a song for the Gorfains, he gets really angry when Gorfain’s wife sings Mike’s part. In this way, Llewyn Davis shares some traits with the tragic hero of an ancient Greek tragedy. Llewyn’s error would then be that he cannot let go of his tragic past, the death of Mike, and therefore fails to see a future for himself. His act of ‘hubris’, the Greek term for such a fatal flaw meaning exaggerated self-confidence, would be that he still pursues a career in music, despite this inability to move on from Mike’s suicide and despite his unwillingness to adapt to the demands of the music industry. He seems to be more focused on the past than on the present and appears somewhat out of touch with modern society, which makes him a tragic figure that arouses pity like in Greek tragedies.

However, Jean debunks the part of the tragic hero being a good person, by saying all the bad things happens to him “because you’re an asshole” (E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*). It is also debatable whether Llewyn truly reaches insight

from his tragic ordeal, like the heroes in ancient Greek tragedies do. He does decide to abandon his music career and join the navy, but once again he fails in this, because he does not have the right paperwork.

So while the Coen brothers might have been influenced by ancient Greek tragedies, they have changed certain aspects of it, turning Llewyn Davis into more of an anti-hero. Perhaps they did this to adapt the story to the context of modern society. The Coen brothers also show their affinity for Greek mythology in their film, when Jean insults Llewyn by saying “Everything you touch turns to shit, you’re like King Midas’s idiot brother” (E. Coen and J. Coen *Inside Llewyn Davis*). Another reference to ancient Greek tragedy is the name of the cat that travels with Llewyn, who is called Ulysses, which is the Latinized name of the much-travelled Greek hero Odysseus. Much like Odysseus, Llewyn and his cat also seem cursed, they get lost in the world and have to travel around a lot before ending up at the place they started. For the cat, this is at home with the Gorfeins, for Llewyn this is playing a gig at the Gaslight Café. This is also not the first time the Coen brothers have used the story as inspiration, with their protagonist’s name Ulysses Everett McGill and his travels in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* also clearly being a reference to the Greek figure.

### 7.3 Conclusion:

So the dark humor in this film is mostly used to portray Llewyn Davis’s failure to succeed in the hard music industry, which is questioned throughout the film. It is possible that the Coen brothers want to create sympathy for their protagonist in his unwillingness to conform to the standards of popular music, like the Frankfurt School’s criticism of mass culture prescribes. However, they also clearly point out his flaws as an individual as he lacks autonomy and his inability to foresee a future for himself defines him as a tragic figure in the tradition of ancient Greek tragedies that creates pity in the viewers. The character of Jean Berkey calls him out for his personal flaws the most, although she sees them as his own foolish wishes rather than character traits. A lot of dark humor can be found in her insults, as she confronts him very harshly for his inability to take care of himself and provide for himself. However, in the end it becomes clear that she does sympathize with him and does want him to succeed, sleeping with Papi in order for him to get one last gig before he quits the music altogether.

After his final show, Llewyn gets attacked in an alley, which was also the opening scene of the film. So this scene was either a flashback or a flash-forward. It implies that he is stuck in a vicious circle of suffering. This is of course reminiscent of Larry Gopnik in *A Serious Man*, who also faces an endless cycle of bad luck, perpetuated by his own inability to see that it is caused by his own personal flaws. Friedrich Nietzsche theorizes about this with the concept of the eternal recurrence, the idea that everything always returns and that life is an endless cycle of the same events. Nietzsche thought this was a horrifying idea, saying “What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?” (Nietzsche).

The Coen brothers seem to agree with Nietzsche that this concept is terrible, inducing it on many of their protagonists, although they also manage to extract a lot of dark humor from it in their films.

## Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

What I have tried to determine in this thesis is how and why the Coen brothers use dark humor in their films, using the study cases of *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *A Serious Man* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*. In my introduction, I introduced the hypothesis of some critics that they use dark humor to convey cynicism or nihilism, which I have tried to debunk. While some critics claim that the Coen brothers only use dark humor for the sake of comedy, using it to make fun of everything and to claim that life is dark and therefore meaningless, in my analysis I have demonstrated this to not be the case.

While their dark sense of humor is a constant throughout their films, the way they use it and the themes they discuss with it constantly evolve. Their dark humor is very adaptable, as it is used with neo-noir themes in *Fargo*, with absurdism in *The Big Lebowski*, with elements of screwball comedy in *Inside Llewyn Davis* and with Jewish humor in *A Serious Man*. Almost every instance of dark humor in their films can be interpreted in a different way, as the Coen brothers use it to discuss many different themes. They use dark humor in *Fargo* and in *The Big Lebowski* to laugh with crime and greed, exposing the high amount of violence and greed in American society. In both films, the Coens show that if you give in to greed and violence, you will immediately get punished for your immorality. In *A Serious Man*, they do the exact opposite, by showing that trying to be a morally sound, 'serious man' and a good person in terms of faith can also lead to problems, if you rely on faith too blindly and fail to question its application in your life, like Larry Gopnik does. Finally, in *Inside Llewyn Davis*, they question their earlier proposition that all greed is bad, by portraying someone who seems to suffer in life because of a lack of greed. Llewyn Davis is a musician who prefers authenticity to commercial success, which leads to financial troubles and many other problems. So in a way, by using dark humor on different, conflicting subjects, the Coen brothers manage to question themselves and laugh with things that they had previously considered to be the opposite.

Granted, there are instances of dark humor in their film that convey a certain cynicism towards certain subjects, which is included in the definition of what dark humor does. Their choice of subjects probably showcases what worries the Coen brothers themselves, and perhaps portrays their own inner fears: failure, emasculation, greed, divorce, violence and death. There are certainly autobiographical elements in

their films that they portray with dark humor, like for example Larry Gopnik's daughter in *A Serious Man* who constantly washes her hair like the Coens' sister. The recurring theme of divorce in their films might also stem from Joel Coen's own real-life experience with this. The Jewish background of the Coen brothers also seems to have influenced their humor, in their comical portrayal of Jewish characters, their intricate knowledge of Jewish stories and traditions and perhaps as well in the schlemiel character that fits with many of their protagonists.

Perhaps some of the dark humor is used in a hurtful or denigrating fashion towards certain characters, like some critics say. For example, Llewyn Davis gets lambasted by Jean and is even subtly hinted to kill himself in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. In *A Serious Man*, Larry Gopnik gets punished harder than he probably deserves for the relatively minor sin of accepting a bribe. And in *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski* respectively, both the characters of Jean Lundegaard and Donny can be deemed too innocent to vindicate their horrible fates. However, whenever the Coen brothers are cruel towards their characters, they make sure that they have a very good reason for it. When their characters get punished, this often serves a greater purpose, or the Coen brothers clearly point out the flaws that cause their painful downfall, implying that the viewer should learn from their characters' flaws and mistakes, if possible. Some viewers may find this higher moral stance condescending, but in my view it is within the power of directors to decide what happens to their own characters and why.

For example, Llewyn Davis pays the price for his lack of autonomy and his inability to see a future for himself. Larry Gopnik should learn to stop worrying about why bad things happen to him, but instead take action. In the case of Donny and Jean Lundegaard, the Coen brothers clearly point out their insignificance to the story and make it difficult for the viewer to sympathize with them. They also prevent sympathy with many of their characters by portraying them as overtly stereotypical or even by pointing out their fictitiousness. In their characterization, the Coen brothers often use stereotypes, which adds to the dark humor. It can be argued that some of the stereotypes are insensitive, especially while portraying minorities like Clive Park and his father in *A Serious Man*. However, it soon becomes clear that all characters in their films have some form of stereotyping, including the Jewish characters in *A Serious Man* or the Minnesotans in *Fargo*. Since the Coen brothers are Jewish-American and from Minnesota themselves, this shows that they are capable of self-deprecation and do not take themselves too seriously and portray all other characters

with the same lack of seriousness.

I understand why some critics believe it is problematic that the Coen brothers use so much dark humor in their films, especially since they themselves remain mysterious about their use of dark humor and do not provide a proper explanation. Their use of dark humor without contextualizing it in interviews can create some animosity, because they relativize many serious subjects, generally without truly explaining why. This forces the viewers to look for reasons themselves and if they refuse to do this, they might conclude that there are no reasons. However, the fact that the Coen brothers use dark humor in relation to so many different subjects and in so many different contexts could be interpreted to mean that they are at least trying to question themselves and try to figure out why they actually use so much dark humor, although they might already know the reason. While they question many negative elements in society, they almost never show that society is inherently negative, but instead they question why it is the way it is. If they succeed in making viewers pose the same questions about society, perhaps they will come to a conclusion together that many people can agree upon. Ultimately, this is what dark humor does: it shocks viewers and brings them out of their comfort zone about certain subjects in order to question things that some people might take for granted as given. So if it is used correctly, dark humor can actually lead to enlightenment, learning entirely new things about subjects some people believe to be fixed.

Therefore, my study shows that the Coen brothers are not cynical or nihilists, but rather that they agree with the existential or postmodern notion that it is extremely difficult to find a universal meaning in life, since everyone has their own perspective that gives meaning to their life. The fact that they show life and all its complexities and portray it in great detail, specifically by focusing on aspects that many people find negative, means that they are still fascinated by it. As long as they continue making movies with the same kind of dark humor the same intricate eye for detail and with the same eye for social criticism, this means that they are still hopeful of finding out exactly what is wrong with the world and that they do not believe it is pointless.

What also goes against the idea that the Coen brothers are cynical is the high amount of intertextuality and influences from other works that appear in their films. This indicates that the Coen brothers have obsessively studied many films and books and are paying tribute to this canon of works and are trying to become part of the canon themselves. For example, *Fargo* is very much influenced by classic crime

movies and film noir. *The Big Lebowski* is a tribute to Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled literature and also features many references to classic literature, American popular music and a portrayal of American counter-culture and other social movements. Meanwhile, *A Serious Man* is a contemplation on many traditional Jewish stories and Jewish faith in general and is an adaptation of the biblical story of Job. Finally, *Inside Llewyn Davis* features many references to ancient Greek literature, while also paying respect to the Folk music movement of the 1960s in New York, intending to portray it with verisimilitude.

The Coen brothers have released a new film this year, *Hail, Caesar!*. I believe my research on dark humor can also be extended and applied to this movie, as well as several other, older films. I believe the more films one sees by the Coen Brothers, the more evidence can be found that they use their themes, their style and their typical dark sense of humor to convey cultural criticism and self-criticism.

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## Appendix

### 1. Synopsis *Fargo*:

*Fargo* is a 1996 dark comedy that revolves around a car salesman named Jerry Lundegaard, his wife Jean, his father-in-law Wade Gustafson, two petty criminals named Carl Showalter and Gaear Grimsrud and a local policewoman named Marge Gunderson. Most of the action takes place in Brainerd, a small town in Minnesota, while the title refers to the name of the nearest-by big city, Fargo.

Jerry is desperate for money and decides to have his own wife kidnapped, in order to get a large ransom from his wealthy father-in-law Wade. He hires Carl and Gaear to do this in exchange for one of his cars and half of the eighty thousand dollars of ransom, but he actually plans to ask Wade for a million dollars and keep most of the ransom himself.

After talking to Wade, Jerry changes his mind, but it is already too late. The two men have already kidnapped Jean and afterwards Gaear shoots a policeman and kills two other witnesses in a car. The police find a trail from these killings towards Jerry through the car they were driving, but Marge believes him when he says it was simply stolen from his lot. Jerry then tries to convince his father-in-law to pay the ransom, so he can give it to the kidnappers. Instead, Wade wants to face the kidnappers himself, despite Carl explicitly telling Jerry not to bring anyone else into this.

When Wade shows up with the ransom in a suitcase, Carl is startled and in the ensuing fight, he shoots and kills Wade, while getting shot in the cheek. Afterwards, he is surprised to find a million dollars in the suitcase and decides to split the original ransom of eighty thousand dollars with Gaear and bury the rest of the money in the snow somewhere, to retrieve it later. When he returns to Gaear, he finds out that his companion has killed Jean for being too noisy. After an argument about which of the two would get the car, Gaear also murders Carl with an axe.

Meanwhile, Marge returns to Jerry at his car lot for further questioning and randomly asks him about his father-in-law. Jerry then gets nervous and flees, much to Marge's surprise. After Marge gets a tip about the two criminals and their stolen car, she rides out to their hiding place in the woods. She finds Gaear at the exact moment he is disposing of the body of his former companion Carl in a wood chipper and arrests him. Later, Jerry is also tracked down by the police and is arrested.

## 2. Synopsis *The Big Lebowski*:

*The Big Lebowski* is a 1998 absurdist comedy, in which the protagonist is an unemployed slacker from Los Angeles named Jeffrey Lebowski, who is known to his friends as “the Dude”. A group of criminals break into his house and vandalize it by peeing on his rug, after mistaking him for a rich man with the same name. The title of the movie refers to this other Jeffrey Lebowski, a millionaire in a wheelchair who is in fact “the Big Lebowski”. When the Dude discusses the situation with his bowling friends, Walter and Donny, they implore him to visit his namesake and ask for compensation, especially for his rug, saying it really tied the room together.

The Dude then visits the Big Lebowski at his mansion, where his butler Brandt greets him and shows him around the house. After talking to Mr. Lebowski about what happened, it is clear that he looks down on the Dude and his lifestyle and he refuses to compensate him for his rug. The Dude fools Brandt by saying he was told he could take any rug he wanted. Before leaving, he also meets the Big Lebowski’s much younger wife Bunny lying by the pool. She is clearly a trophy wife and a nymphomaniac, offering the Dude oral sex in exchange for money, which Brandt awkwardly laughs away.

Not much later, the Big Lebowski contacts the Dude again to say that Bunny has been kidnapped. He suspects that the same people who vandalized the Dude’s apartment have now decided to kidnap his wife. The Big Lebowski wants the Dude to deliver the ransom in a briefcase, in order to verify whether they are the same criminals. At first the Dude refuses, but after a different group of criminals visits his apartment and steals his new rug, the Dude agrees to deliver the ransom.

However, when Walter hears what has happened during another game of bowling, he refuses to believe Bunny was kidnapped. He thinks that she is pretending to be kidnapped and that she wants to keep the money for herself. Therefore, he devises a plan to replace the ransom with a ringer, a suitcase filled with his dirty underwear. After they hand off the fake ransom to the kidnappers, they decide to go bowling yet again. Afterwards, they find out that the Dude’s car has been stolen from the parking lot with the real ransom still in the trunk. When the Big Lebowski learns of the failed transaction, he gets very angry and shows him the kidnappers have sent what he believes to be the severed toe of Bunny.

The Dude goes back home and learns that his car has been found. However, when him and Walter go to retrieve his car from the car pound, they find it with its

windows smashed, smelling of a homeless man and without the briefcase. When the Dude asks a policeman whether he has any leads on who could have stolen it, he fails to help him and even laughs in his face for thinking he could. The Dude then meets the daughter of the Big Lebowski, Maude, who apologizes to him for hiring some thugs to get her father's rug back. She agrees with the Dude that Bunny probably kidnapped herself, and asks him to help recover the money, as her father withdrew it from the family foundation. She also explains to him that Bunny is a porn star for Jackie Treehorn and that she is befriended with a group of German nihilists.

Those same nihilists visit the Dude in his apartment with a ferret and threaten him, claiming to be the kidnappers of Bunny. They bring the Dude before Treehorn, who asks him where Bunny is, claiming that she still owed him some money. After realizing that the Dude cannot help him, Treehorn spikes his drink and abandons him at a police station, where he is once again insulted by a policeman and tossed out.

When the Dude returns to his apartment, he finds it completely in ruins. To his surprise, he finds Maude there, who then seduces him and has sex with him. Afterwards, they talk and Maude explains that she merely wanted to have a baby without any involvement from the father, for which the Dude was the perfect candidate. She further explains the whole situation of her family to the Dude: that her father actually has no money of his own, but that all the money was her mother's and is now in the family charity fund.

The Dude now understands that the Big Lebowski used him to obtain a million dollars from the foundation and that there was never any money in the suitcase. When the nihilists heard about the million dollars, they also used the situation to claim a false kidnapping of their friend Bunny to obtain that money. The Dude, together with Walter, angrily goes to confront the Big Lebowski, saying he is a fraud who likes to think that he is important by lying and bullying innocent people like him. Walter grows convinced that Lebowski is not a paraplegic and drags him from his wheelchair and drops him on the ground, although it turns out this was not a lie.

Thinking it is all over, Walter and the Dude decide to go bowling again. However, when they show up at the bowling alley, they find the Dude's car on fire, surrounded by the nihilists. Unaware that Bunny has already returned, they make an ultimate attempt to obtain the money. The Dude explains that their plan has failed, because there was never any money or any kidnapping. The nihilists claim that it is not fair that all their efforts were in vain, so they decide to mug them. Walter is not

amused by this and attacks them with his bowling bag, managing to defeat all three of them. However, during this chaos, Donny gets a heart attack and dies. After a short eulogy near the ocean, where they came to scatter his ashes, Walter and the Dude decide to go bowling again.

While bowling, the Dude talks about the entire ordeal with a man called the Stranger, who turns out to be the narrator of the movie. The Stranger asks the Dude if he could perhaps swear less, but he accepts that he cannot. He finally concludes that “the Dude abides” and says he takes much comfort from that.

### 3. Synopsis *A Serious Man*

The prologue of the movie is about an ancient Jewish village in Eastern Europe, which is called a Shtetl in Jiddish. A man welcomes another man named Groshkover into his home, inviting him in after helping him on the street. His wife then tells him that Groshkover is dead, concluding that this man must be a ‘dybbuk’, a ghostly figure from Jewish mythology that inhabits the soul of another person after dying. The man laughs this off, but his wife stabs what she believes to be the ‘dybbuk’ in the chest with an icepick, which of course he does not appreciate.

The story then picks up in the 1960s in Minnesota, where a Jewish physics professor named Larry Gopnik is faced with a series of difficult situations that confuse him and test him in his faith. First of all, his wife Judith tells him that she wants to get a divorce after falling in love with another man named Sy Ableman. Meanwhile, his two children are misbehaving, with his son Danny being introduced to marijuana and owing money to a schoolmate for it and his superficial daughter Sarah secretly stealing money from him to save for plastic surgery. Also, his autistic brother Arthur is unemployed and lives with them and he is always doing weird things around the house, like draining a cyst on his back. Arthur is also constantly writing down his philosophical observations on life, trying to create his own theory of probability in the universe, in something he calls the ‘mentaculus’.

Throughout all these difficulties, Larry tries to find solace in his Jewish faith, but his Rabbi Marshak is never available to him, so he has to talk things through with young, inexperienced rabbis like Rabbi Scott and Rabbi Nachtner, who advise him with clichés or with irrelevant parables and fail to console him.

At the university, Larry is then faced with a Korean student, Clive Park, who wants to bribe him into giving him a passing grade and leaves an envelope with

money on his desk. When Larry accuses him of bribery the next day, Clive denies everything. Afterwards, Clive's father visits Larry at home and tells him that he will sue him, either for accusing his son of bribery or for accepting his bribe. His department head Ari Finkle then also tells Larry that they are not planning to renew his tenure, due to anonymous written complaints that they have received.

Furthermore, Judith asks Larry to move out of the house so she and Sy can live there, which means Larry has to stay at a motel with his brother Arthur. She also blocks their shared bank accounts, so he has no more access to his money. Larry gets in touch with a divorce attorney to deal with the divorce, but then he learns that his brother is being accused of charges of solicitation and sodomy. Both the costs of the divorce case and Arthur's court case further add to his financial troubles.

In another weird twist of fate, both he and Sy get involved in two separate car crashes, but while Larry leaves his accident unscathed, Sy dies. Judith then asks Larry to pay for Sy's funeral. After this tragedy, things finally seem to evolve for the better for Larry: he reconciles with Judith at their son Danny's bar mitzvah and he learns that it was Sy who had been sending the anonymous letters to the university all along to undermine his reputation. After Professor Finkle compliments Larry on Danny's bar mitzvah, he says he might get the tenure after all. Danny, who smoked weed before his bar mitzvah, also finally gets his confiscated radio back from Rabbi Marshak, in which he had put the money he still owed to his classmate.

However, a large bill from his brother Artur's court case arrives at Larry's office, prompting him to accept Clive's bribery and change his grade to a passing one. As soon as he changes the grade, he gets a call from his doctor with bad news from an x-ray exam, saying he needs to come over immediately. After he gets into his car, the weather gets really bad.

Meanwhile, Danny and the other kids in his class receive a torndao warning and are told to move into the basement of the synagogue for protection. Just as Danny is finally about to hand back the money that he owed to his classmate, they see a giant tornado rapidly approaching them.

#### 4. Synopsis *Inside Llewyn Davis*

The movie begins with Llewyn performing at a club called the Gaslight Cafe and then he gets beaten up in an alley afterwards, which turns out to be a flash-forward to the ending scene. After this scene, we see Llewyn visiting professor Gorfein and his wife, who have befriended him and respect him for his musical talent. After sleeping on their couch, he follows their cat outside and accidentally locks himself out of their apartment. Therefore, he has to take their cat along with him on his travels throughout New York.

He decides to go to his musician friends Jim and Jean Berkey, a married couple that is also a singing duo and they reluctantly let him stay for the night. The following morning, the cat escapes once again and gets lost in the city. Llewyn goes outside and talks with Jean, who is fed up with his irresponsible behavior, after informing him that she may or may not be pregnant from him. She asks him to pay her two hundred dollars for an abortion, because she refuses to have a baby that might be his.

At first, Llewyn thinks about asking his sister for the money, but she refuses to support him and advises him to go back to working at the marine, like their father also did. Llewyn refuses and decides to collaborate with his friend Jim and a singer named Al Cody on a political song called 'Please Mr. Kennedy', in order to receive the two hundred dollars immediately in royalties. Llewyn complains about the songwriting, but goes along with Jim's suggestions after it turns he wrote it.

After sleeping on the couch at Al Cody's place, Llewyn meets with Jean at a bar, where she continues to criticize him for going nowhere with his life and they argue about the authenticity of folk music. He then sees what he believes to be the Gorfeins' cat pass by the cafe and runs outside to catch it. When he goes to the abortion doctor to make an appointment for Jean, he learns that his ex-girlfriend never actually got an abortion and instead moved to Akron to live alone with the baby.

The Gorfeins then invite Llewyn back for dinner and he brings back what he thinks is their cat. After the dinner, they ask Llewyn to sing a song, but he gets angry when Mrs. Gorfein starts to sing along. She starts crying and then notices that the cat he brought was not theirs, making her even more upset and she yells at him to take the cat and leave.

Llewyn then decides to go to Chicago, where he wants to meet famous music impresario Bud Grossman, who might be able to help his career. He rides along with two people, the driver named Johnny Five who is a poet and rarely speaks and a pretentious Jazz musician named Roland Turner, who makes fun of Llewyn for writing folk music. After stopping and eating at a restaurant, Roland collapses in the toilet from apparent drug use. Johnny and Llewyn have to carry him back to their car, where he passes out. At night, a policeman stops them and arrests Johnny. Since Llewyn has no car keys, he leaves the car behind with his cat and the unconscious Roland still inside and then takes a bus to Chicago.

After arriving in snowy Chicago, he auditions for Bud Grossman, who wants to hear him play a song live. Llewyn plays a song from his own album, but Grossman says he is more suitable for playing in a group and proposes that he join a trio that he is forming. Llewyn refuses, saying that he was already in a duo before.

A dejected Llewyn hitchhikes back to New York, staring into the distance while driving past Akron and then stops after running over what he thinks was his cat. When he arrives in New York, he decides to rejoin the marine and pays money to get back into the union. He visits his old and sick father at the hospital and he plays him a song, but he barely notices. He then visits his sister to get his old license for shipping out, but she accidentally threw it away.

He goes to Jean and finally apologizes for everything and she tells him that she fixed him one last gig at the Gaslight Cafe. After his final show he gets beaten up, which is also how the movie began. After this, Llewyn visits the Gorfains one last time and learns that their cat, ironically named Ulysses, has returned home to them.