

# *An Esoteric Take on The Big Lebowski*

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More than a movie *The Big Lebowski* is the kind of miracle that, more rarely than occasionally, slips through the cracks of the Hollywood machinery. That's because the Coen Brothers' previous film, *Fargo*, earned seven Academy Nominations and won two, for best original screenplay and best actress in a leading role, Frances McDormand, incidentally Joel Coen's wife. So, with a lot more clout behind them, the Coen Brothers embarked on their next project, *The Big Lebowski*, in which the leading role of the Dude is sublimely played by Jeff Bridges. The Dude, by the way, was inspired by a real man, Jeff Dowd, a publicist who helped the Coen Brothers in launching *Blood Simple*, their first film.

In the Dude we find the archetype of the slacker, i.e, according to the definition in the dictionary, an educated young person who is antimaterialistic, purposeless, apathetic, and usually works in a dead-end job. In fact, the Dude doesn't seem to work at all. He does bowl, though, and with a passion.

After the clamor over *Fargo* critics expected, let me guess, some more graphic violence

on the screen, with people harming each other in inventive ways (a wood chipper, anyone?). That, according to the exoteric worldview we are made to digest by mainstream media, is the way to Oscars and fame: think of *The Godfather* I and II, or just about anything by Tarantino, or *Fargo* itself. Instead the Coen Brothers gave us an offering that, back in 1998, left the majority of the critics perplexed. What on earth had they just watched?

To make some sense out of the film, some of them brought Raymond Chandler into the picture, one of the founders of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction. In particular, they found references to *The Big Sleep*, Chandler's first novel (1939), which was adapted for the screen in 1946 in the eponymous film noir directed by Howard Hawks. Indeed there are similarities. Most of all, each film is loaded with a labyrinthine storyline. Joel Coen said that "it's a hopelessly complex plot that is ultimately unimportant." And here is where many critics missed the point. They got lost in the convolutions of the plot, which is more or less resolved at the end if one really cares to follow it. But the plot was, in fact, a parody of the genre. And it couldn't be otherwise, as the Dude is no Philip Marlowe. Again, there are some superficial resemblances: they're both wisecracking and hard-drinking, but that's about it. The Dude is a stoner, something that simply could never belong in Marlowe's universe. And above all, the Dude brings forth an esoteric dimension that is completely lacking in Chandler's work and characters.

Quoting Chandler: "As I look back on my stories it would be absurd if I did not wish they had been better. But if they had been much better they would not have been published. If the formula had been a little less rigid, more of the writing of that time might have survived. Some of us tried pretty hard to break out of the formula, but we usually got caught and sent back. To exceed the limits of a formula without destroying it is the dream of every magazine writer who is not a hopeless hack."

After the critical and popular success of *Fargo*, the Coen Brothers found themselves in the enviable position of being able to do as they pleased. And they produced a film that defies all genres and is thoroughly enjoyable on many levels. They did, however, expect a much better reception. *The Big Lebowski* has since become a cult movie, and obviously it resonated from the very start with people who are tired of formulaic Hollywood concoctions and found the Dude and his antics if nothing else refreshing.

The Dude seems to be very keen only on bowling. He sips White Russians as often as he can and there always seems to be a little pot at reach. He makes much of his rug, which is "micturated upon." In fact, the peeing on his rug "that tied the room together" could be seen as the source of all evils. When he manages to get a new rug from the millionaire Lebowski, the Dude is shown lying on it, listening in his Walkman's headset to sounds recorded in a bowling alley, and looks as serene as a seraph.

Later on in the film, after the Dude has helped the millionaire's daughter -- Maude -- to conceive (she is played very well by Julianne Moore), we hear the Dude tell her that in his younger years he contributed to drafting the Port Huron Statement that founded Students for a Democratic Society, and was a member of the Seattle Seven. Quoting one

of the Statement's passages: "Mankind desperately needs visionary and revolutionary leadership to respond to its enormous and deeply-entrenched problems, but America rests in national stalemate, her goals ambiguous and tradition-bound when they should be new and far-reaching, her democracy apathetic and manipulated when it should be dynamic and participative."

The film opens with President George H. W. Bush on TV addressing Iraq's invasion of Kuwait with, "This aggression will not stand!" It looks incredibly rhetorical and phony. In fact, a few days later, the Dude uses the same statement so as to plead with the millionaire Lebowski for him to have the rug cleaned up. After all, they peed on it because of a case of mistaken identity, taking the Dude for the millionaire. At this reasonable request the millionaire responds with a barrage of hateful insults, to which the Dude replies, "Fuck it."

In this simple assertion lies much of the Dude's mental and emotional outlook. Gone are the youthful days in which he would urgently write of "visionary and revolutionary leadership." There's somebody like George H. W. Bush at the helm, come on! So, what can a man do? That, I suspect, is what the film asks. The Dude, a self-confessed pacifist, is water-boarded in his own toilet, punched in the face, heavily insulted by both the millionaire and the head of the Malibu Police, mocked by another policeman, lied to, seduced by Maude who, perhaps long-sightedly, wants his semen, and obviously his genes, for her baby, but certainly not a father/husband.

That's not all. His house is broken into various times, and the German nihilists threaten the Dude by throwing a ferret ("Nice marmot," he exclaims when he first sees it) in the tub in which he's taking a bath. When Jesus, the bowling pedophile, tells him: "I see you rolled your way into the semis. Dios mio, man. Liam and me, we're gonna fuck you up." The Dude replies, "Yeah well, that's just, ya know, like, your opinion, man."

His beat-up car goes through all sorts of accidents and misadventures until it's finally set aflame. He pockets none of the rewards promised by the millionaire. And in addition to all of the above he puts up, for the whole film and presumably for the rest of his life, with his bowling buddy Walter, a Vietnam veteran with an anger-management problem, to put it mildly. It's the ultimate irony: the former hippy paired up with the war veteran who, as a *modus operandi* in civilian life, retains a highly belligerent attitude.

And yet, nothing seems to phase the Dude. Yes, he gets angry (to the point that Walter tells him: "Come on. You're being very unDude."), swears constantly, and talks back to Walter and many other unreasonable people who seem to surround him like mosquitoes, but soon he will be stirring himself another White Russian, or will have a smoke, or relax in a warm bath. Occasionally he resorts to the gentle movements of Tai chi to keep stress at bay. Like a mystic, he focuses on the big picture. Better yet, like a true mystic, he doesn't focus at all.

Much has been made of Dudeism, a philosophy of life inspired by the Dude. But there's nothing new in this, as he seems to belong in the great stream of *Philosophia Perennis*

which, down the millennia, has produced strikingly similar concepts even if expressed in different ways and from different cultures and ages. And in fact the proponents of Dudeism cite Lao Tzu, Epicurus, Heraclitus, the Buddha, and the pre-ecclesiastical Jesus Christ as examples of ancient Dudeist prophets.

What is sublime about the Dude is that he won't preach at all. He tried that in his youth, and now obviously sees it as youthful folly. Somehow he gets by with very little money and finds materialism an inherently strange beast. The "Chinaman" who originally pees on his rug; the millionaire; the German Nihilists; the porno film producer; the sundry thugs -- all are materialists very attached to wealth and willing to employ violence so as to safeguard it or increase it. Because of a case of homonymy, he is suddenly surrounded by such people as if he'd walked into an asylum. But at least it's clear to him and to the perceptive viewer that they are the lunatics.

The level of aggressiveness and latent or explicit violence he registers around himself is appalling. After he's made love to Maude, he tells her, "It's a complicated case, Maude. Lotta ins, lotta outs. Fortunately I've been adhering to a pretty strict, uh, drug regimen to keep my mind, you know, limber." That is telling. The world around him has gotten so f...d up lately, he's found himself forced to adhere to a "pretty strict drug regimen." Normally, one gets the feeling that his long evenings spent bowling and a general relaxed attitude would take much of the load off. But the load, lately, has been enormous. Yet, he miraculously maintains his peace of mind.

There is something transcendental about this: the Dude rises above all circumstances. He spends the whole movie angry, which is not his nature at all, and the Coen Brothers deserve further praise for such a clever idea: to extrapolate the Dude from his habitual milieu and toss him into a circus full of hostile lunatics who want something from him and will insult him, threaten him and beat him to get it.

We are a million miles away from the claustrophobic world of Raymond Chandler. In fairness, he wrote his novels at the height of modernism, a very injudicious and theocentric period in the history of western culture in which the world was reduced solely to sensory perception and materialistic pursuits.

Lao Tzu is a sage of ancient China and a key figure in Taoism. Whether he actually lived or is a legendary figure remains to be established, but he's considered to be the author of the *Tao Te Ching*, a fundamental book both in philosophical Taoism and Chinese religion. In it, one finds the assertion: "Banish wisdom, discard knowledge, / and the people shall profit a hundredfold." Excluding Plato and all Neoplatonic schools, this is how from "love of Sophia," or of wisdom, philo-sophy in the West has degenerated into "love of sophistry" -- precisely the type of "wisdom" and "knowledge" that Lao Tzu urges us to discard. In fact, Nihilism, so very present in the film through the actions of the German Nihilists, is lampooned probably as what the western world has misguidedly arrived at after millennia of discursive philosophy gone awry.

The Dude towers above such a warped and incomplete Weltanschauung. And that is what

mainstream critics initially failed to realize. As the movie has grown in cult status and become, in effect, popular, they've gone back to it, and belatedly dished out favorable reviews -- ten or more years after its original release, some of them de facto recanting publicly. The fact is, mainstream critics are fed the Aristotelian / Euclidean / Cartesian / Newtonian / Darwinian canon we were all fed at school. Then, if they pursue higher education, they're fed more doses of the same canon, of which the history of cinema is also imbued. To grasp the implications of *The Big Lebowski* was beyond them, and in fact for the most part they did not. But it struck a chord with many of us, who have gone back to it time and again, and turned on friends to it. It scores very highly from a standpoint of rewatchability, too.

At first one tries, in vain, to focus on the plot. But the film is also very funny. Then there are many gems in the dialogue: "[Walter] Say what you like about the tenets of National Socialism, Dude, at least it's an ethos." "[Walter] And also, Dude, Chinaman is not the preferred, uh, nomenclature... Asian-American. Please." "[Millionaire's trophy wife] Dieter doesn't care about anything. He's a nihilist." "[Dude] That must be exhausting."

The photography and dream sequences are stunning, and the music, a perfect accompaniment, also thanks to T-Bone Burnett, who is credited as musical archivist. Bob Dylan's *The Man in Me* is heard repeatedly, and is ideal: "The man in me will do nearly any task / As for compensation, there's a little he will ask / Take a woman like you / To get through to the man in me." Of course this could be seen as an ironic comment on Maude's choice. But in fact, despite her disparaging remarks after she's made love to the Dude ("Look, Jeffrey, I don't want a partner. In fact I don't want the father to be someone I have to see socially, or who I'll have any interest in rearing the child himself") she has picked the Dude, of all people, out of the multitude of potential sperm donors. And that must be because he is so disarming that she's decided at once, upon talking to him in her atelier, that he is the one who will give her a child. So somebody in this material world does realize the qualities and potentialities of the Dude.

Finally, the acting is inspired, especially from Jeff Bridges and John Goodman respectively as the Dude and Walter.

The film ends with the death of Donny, the third member on their bowling team, a meek man played by Steve Buscemi (as opposed to his character in *Fargo*) who is constantly and rudely silenced by Walter. But despite Walter's brandishing of a handgun and even of an Uzi, and despite the Nihilists' resorting to, astonishingly, a saber, there is no violent death in the movie (evidently to the chagrin of mainstream critics): Donny dies of a heart attack. And the disposing of his ashes by Walter is yet another "travesty," as the Dude calls it since the ashes end up not in the Pacific Ocean, as intended, but, carried by the wind, mainly on the Dude himself.

At the very end of the film the narrator, a cowboy with a strong southern drawl played by Sam Elliot, meets the Dude again at the usual bowling alley. The whole adventure, or misadventure, it now seems, has been a case of much ado about nothing, with two major exceptions: Donny's death, tragically, and the news that "there's a little Lebowski on the

way." The Dude doesn't even know this, and probably will never be told, nor will he ever inquire: by now, we know the character well enough. But he's back in fine spirits, preparing for the bowling tournament finals, serene and smiling. That is the true nature of the Dude. The narrator says: "Take it easy, Dude -- I know that you will." And the Dude replies, "Yeah, man. Well, you know, the Dude abides."

And that is that: the Dude abides. In the face of adversity and the virulence of the whole world the Dude, of all people, is level-headed, tolerant, and consistently non-violent. He never punches back; the concept of revenge doesn't seem to inhabit his mind. What is more, he seems implicitly to make allowances for a lot of overaggressive people, out there, who will act like very hostile lunatics. "It's good knowin' he's out there, the Dude, takin' her easy for all us sinners," finally comments the narrator after the Dude has left.

There are many pacifists in the world -- until their patience is severely tested, or their rights blatantly usurped. There are also people persuaded that peace is the natural state for mankind. It's a beautiful idea that unfortunately doesn't correspond to reality. Even Buddhism allows for "the lesser evil" to avert "a greater evil." History reads like a tragic litany of wanton aggression and invasion. Peace seems to be the exception, war the rule.

The ancient Roman playwright Plautus summarized human nature with "Homo homini lupus" -- man wolf to the man. Too many beings on this planet thrive on the death of others, from microbes to predators. To presume that mankind is a brotherhood of, say, angels, is misguided. Even trees kill one another in a type of chemical warfare called allelopathy.

In his youth, the Dude tried to change the world, with a manifesto, no less, occupying Berkley, and so on. Eventually he realized that it was hopeless. But that didn't make him become bitter, or angry, or revengeful. Nor does he lead by example, as the cliché would go. He doesn't do, he is. Even when provoked, he harms no one. He cares little about money and is, in essence, a sensible, honest man with the kind of patience and tolerance that belongs to the spiritually gifted. He doesn't preach; now in the wisdom of his maturity, he never would; he just abides. With more people like him, the world would improve markedly.