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The White Russians Are Coming!

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> Sometimes there's a man – I won't say a hee-ro, 'cause what's a hee-ro? But sometimes there's a man, and I'm talkin' about the Dude here – sometimes there's a man, wal, he's the man for his time 'n' place, he fits right in there, and that's the Dude, in Los Angeles... and even if he's a lazy man, and the Dude was most certainly that – quite possibly the laziest in Los Angeles County... which would place him high in the runnin' for laziest worldwide – but sometimes there's a man... Sometimes there's a man.
>
> -*The Big Lebowski*[1]

Thus goes the Stranger's (Sam Elliot) opening monologue in the Coen Brothers' stoner anti-/*ur*-noir film, *The Big Lebowski* (1998). The narrative voice that opens the film therefore sets up an expectation of genre at the very outset – it is night in Los Angeles, and amidst its mean streets walks (or dawdles) a man. But the narrator is soon confused, and, in his attempted description of the protagonist's import in the general scheme of things ("his time 'n' place"), loses his train of thought. The genre has been established, and immediately derailed.

The Big Lebowski, released to a less-than-enthusiastic reception in 1998, is set in the Los Angeles of the early nineties and tells the story of the Dude – played brilliantly and completely unselfconsciously by Jeff Bridges – a fumbling, lovable stoner who finds himself embroiled in a world suddenly gone noir. The Dude is an unemployed, ageing hippie "whose only ambition now

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seems to be to have enough change to buy a fresh carton of milk for his White Russians. In the midst of America's consumer culture, the Dude finds his happiness in simple pleasures like bowling with his buddies."[2] As Iraqi forces invade Kuwait,

> 1960s throwback Jeffrey Lebowski – known simply as 'the Dude' – encounters unchecked aggression on a more intimate scale. His name has been confused with that of a local grandee whose young trophy wife has run up a sizeable debt to a Malibu pornography king. Goons attempt to extort the money from the wrong Jeffrey Lebowski, and wind up urinating on the Dude's most beloved possession, a ratty little rug that really tied the room together. Seeking compensation from his namesake, the Dude finds himself improbably recruited as private investigator in a kidnapping scheme involving the trophy wife and a nihilist techno band. A slow-witted cowboy narrator, a feminist artist searching for a sperm donor, a joyriding teenager who is flunking social studies and the Dude's bowling partner and best friend Walter, an oafish and occasionally psychotic gun-toting Vietnam vet, all get in on the act. But who is actually responsible for the kidnap – or whether there even *was* a kidnap – becomes less and less clear... [3]

The concomitant existence of the establishment of generic elements and their immediate *attempted* subversion is the central structural concern of *The Big Lebowski.* This is why it can be seen as, to coin a not very apt term, anti-noir – it cites, negates, but ends up revalidating, the tropes, conventions, and, most of all, the worldviews at the heart of film noir in an attempt to formulate a critical revaluation of the genre, thereby calling into question the very status of film noir as a generic construction. It does all of this, of course, very very haltingly, never sure of its own articulation of noir, constantly bumbling its way through the conventions of noir (and who knows what those really are!) to present, obliquely, certain incisive comments on the genre. In this manner, it might be more justifiable to call it an *ur-noir*, a retroactive *ur* text that hovers above the tentative genre and deliberately articulates all the conventions, themes, styles, and

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inarticulate elements of noir. Operating essentially through humour, the film plays out a constant tension between oppositional binaries: noir/*not* noir and parody (which by its very nature has a binary at work within), the modern/the post-modern, comedy and tragedy, all pointing to the eventual, therefore holistic, reassertion of noir on various elements, none of which need have anything to do with noir at all. The sum of the parts is qualitatively different from the whole, which leads to an interesting question – can genre in general, and noir specifically, exist in spite of itself? And is *The Big Lebowski*, by ambling its way through pastiche, parody, homage and loving reconstruction, trying to point us towards the utter indefinability of noir?

Film noir, of course, is famously complicated. Rarely can critics get themselves to agree, even about broad definitions. Some, in fact, believe that it is not a genre at all, while others don't really know what to believe. Some insist on a noir structure (semiotic and/or semantic), others see a noir style/mood, yet others see noir as a genre based on morality. Joan Copjec puts her finger on "our uneasy sense that we never adequately defined [*film noir*] in the first place. This unease is not new, but has bothered criticism of *film noir* from the beginning. Even the fundamental question regarding the status of *film noir* – is it a genre or not, does it exist as a coherent body of films or not? – remains, in many critics' minds, unsettled."[4] "On the whole," says Marc Vernet, "*film noir* is like a Harley-Davidson: you know right away what it is, the object being only the synecdoche of a continent, a history and a civilization, or more precisely of their representation for non-natives."[5] And Elizabeth Cowie even calls it "'the genre that never was,'" a constellation that "names a set of possibilities for making existing genres 'different.'"[6]

So what *do* we agree on with respect to film noir? That the so-called Classical period begins during the Second World War with John Huston's 1941 adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's

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The Maltese Falcon and ends in 1958 with Orson Welles's nightmarish symphony, *Touch of Evil*. That it owes a debt in terms of story[7] to the hardboiled writings of various American authors of the '20s and '30s, and in terms of visual aesthetic to moody pre-war German Expressionist films and stylish French poetic realism, and is somewhat rooted in the tradition of the Hollywood gangster film. That it was almost birthed by the French (French critic Nino Frank first called it the "dark film," *film noir*, and the first sustained analysis of noir, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941–1953*, was published in France in 1955 and perhaps even created the genre; thus, film noir is very much a historical construct, if nothing else). That it is inhabited by antiheroes of conflicting moral resonance, femmes fatales with peroxide hair, oddball villains, chiaroscuro, deep foci, canted camera angles, thick shadows, blinking neon and rainswept urban spaces.

But these 'characteristics' are also precarious. For instance, Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, editors of *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, include Josef von Sternberg's 1927 *Underworld* as the first noir film and stretch the end-date forward by citing Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) as classical noir. 'Night' might seem to be the defining colour of film noir, but, as the title of James Naremore's great book on the genre points out, film noir is *More Than Night.* Ultimately, noir needs perhaps to be seen as a convenient textual category, something that just makes it easier to think and talk and write about this corpus of films; as Naremore writes, "we need to recognize that film noir belongs to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema; it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse – a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies."[8] And to completely consign the genre argument to the dustbin of history, Todd

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Erickson, writing in 1990, goes so far as to suggest that noir only crystallizes into a fully formed genre – neo-noir – in the eighties and not before.[9]

Erickson notes the slumbering of film noir after *Touch of Evil* through the sixties – presumably because of the consumer culture boom of the 50s, "the overall mood of the nation was in a vibrant upswing" – and its re-emergence in the 70s as a result of various economic, technological and socio-cultural factors:

> Ranging from post-Vietnam War disillusionment to the Feminist movement, and an alarming wave of international terrorism, which mirrored many of the factors present in post-World War II America.... In addition to these various socio-cultural influences, there are three principal factors which have stimulated the resurgence of noir in the contemporary American cinema: 1) Technical advancements made with color film stock (this means that the shadowy, high-contrast images familiar to film noir can now be realized with color film); 2) the pervasiveness of crime and the public's fascination with sensational crime stories; and, most importantly, 3) a definitive noir sensibility among contemporary filmmakers.[10]

This "historical gap that separates the eighties from the fifties," as Slavoj Žižek puts it in "'The Thing that Thinks'," leads to a new engagement with old noir. Beginning in the late seventies, not only are classical noir films remade fairly regularly – *DOA, The Postman Always Rings Twice, Against All Odds* as a remake of *Out of the Past, Farewell, My Lovely* as a remake of *Murder, My Sweet, Body Heat* as a remake of *Double Indemnity* – but there begins also "an attempt to resuscitate the *noir* universe by combining it with another genre, as if *film noir* were today a vampire-like entity which, in order to be kept alive, needed an influx of fresh blood from other sources."[11] The always-elusive noir entity is now further complicated by transmogrification

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into a hybrid 'neo' space that reaches its pinnacle, according to both Foster Hirsch and Alain Silver, in the early nineties.

Of course, this throws up its own set of problems of definition. Some of these are too broad or vague; Jason Holt, for instance, defines neo-noir according to four too-general conditions: these films are predominantly in colour, depict sexuality explicitly, are graphically violent, and tend not to end on a note of poetic justice, i.e., the guilty are not necessarily punished.[12] Similarly, Mark Conrad, in his introduction to *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, offers the highly tautological definition of noir as "any film coming after the classic noir period that contains noir themes and the noir sensibility."[13] The critical terms of neo-noir being, therefore, only slightly less muddled than those of noir, William Covey's amalgamation is as workable a definition of neo-noir as any other; writing of "Character and Style in Postmodern Neo-Noir," he posits:

> Neo-noir is, historically, a post-1964 collection of investigative crime films that may repeat certain themes and stylistic devices, without essentializing classic noir elements. As such, these postmodern films necessarily change and respond to various social and cultural factors that match the times in which they were produced. In classic noir criticism, critics identified stylistic elements such as: the *femme fatale*, gritty, urban landscapes, and light/dark visual contrasts (Schatz 111-113). While post-classic films sometimes contain classic elements, I identify new visual landscapes, themes and the character role of the *père fatale* as a man who participates in the overt, graphic sexual and criminal plotlines of many of these stories.[14]

The dark obsessions of the dangerous father seem to set the tone for neo-noir and, Covey believes, this is what aligns a film with the condition of post-classic, 'neo-,' noir. Žižek agrees that "a crucial component of the *film noir* renewal of the eighties [is] a new

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type of father which characterizes 'post-industrial', corporate late capitalism... a lone figure of uncanny, ethereal, frail materiality, devoid of a sexual partner."[15] Add to this Jerold J. Abrams's notion of what the transition from classic noir to neo-noir is all about – the essential fragmentation of the detective, "the fusion of detective and villain... [the detective is] no longer looking for some mysterious villain in the city. He's looking for himself: he's looking for himself as an other"[16] – and the narrative and thematic concerns of neo-noir begin to coalesce around *The Big Lebowski*. First, the Big Lebowski (David Huddleston), the millionaire, is just such a father figure, obsessed with appearances, himself frail, wheelchair-bound, but willingly thrusting danger upon the Dude and Walter (and eventually, and tragically, even Donny) by furnishing them with a ringer for the ransom money and then setting the German Nihilists upon them. Secondly, the narrative is fundamentally birthed at a point of fusion between hero and villain, when one Jeffrey Lebowski is literally mistaken for another. But these tendencies are taken to hyperbolic, absurd extremes. The millionaire Lebowski may be a sexually impotent, physically frail and deliberately evil father figure, but he is ludicrously so, as evinced near the end when he is thrown out of his chair by Walter and utterly humiliated, simpering and sniffling on the floor. Similarly, the "fusion of detective and villain" is accomplished in the very first major sequence of the film (with the hoods breaking into the Dude's house looking for the money the other Lebowski's wife owes all over town) and the central narrative impulse of the genre is held up and thwarted at the outset. The detective has already found the villain, and we are only a few minutes in. An *ur*-text that is hell bent on articulating all the articulations of noir/neo-noir, but which also has built into its discursive order the overt expression of the fundamental inability of such articulation.

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Note the voiceover, that heightened noir artifice that is often indulged in but keeps collapsing every time the omniscient narrator loses his train of thought. For all practical purposes, then, *The Big Lebowski* is equally placed in relation to both noir and neo-noir, as an *ur*-text encapsulating, presenting, and continually negating and validating the network of ideas that gives neo-/noir its texture and form.[17]

In 1944, Raymond Chandler published his seminal essay, "The Simple Art of Murder," which has since become a sort of manifesto of hard-boiled crime fiction (the literary progenitor of cinematic noir). In it, he lays bare the character of the hard-boiled protagonist –

> [D]own these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.[18]

Chandler hints at the noir sensibility, *these mean streets*, which, if it indeed exists, seems to be pervaded by a sense of ubiquitous moral corruption. "Noir isn't crime so much as it's existential dilemma," says Luc Sante. "It's about isolation and wide-ranging but unspecific fear – a kind of fear of being."[19] This sense imparts to the noir world an otherworldliness, a feeling of existing in a dimension that is not ours, and a time that is not ours either. Perhaps this is why the noir protagonist is more often than not a character caught in a *time that is not his own.*

This sentiment ("One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being," Marie Sarton once said), coupled with the sense of the detective being in a different time

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than his own, positions the film in the fabric of continuum of the genre, linking Jeff Bridges's stoned slacker mumbling *atypical* detective to that other great off-kilter portrayal of the *typical* noir protagonist, Elliot Gould's Philip Marlowe ("a slack-jawed buffoon who mumbles to himself and his cat"[20]) in Robert Altman's 1973 adaptation of Chandler's *The Long Goodbye.* The Stranger's introduction to the Dude stops just short of setting the latter up as this "man of honour," contenting itself with merely "a man... Wal, I lost my train of thought here. Ah hell, I've introduced him enough."

The Big Lebowski witnesses thus a constant retardation of the expectations of genre (much like *Hamlet,* a text obsessed with the retardation of tragic expectation[21] and, coincidentally, one that is quoted in *The Big Lebowski)* that results in a breakdown of communication and a metaphorical alienation. The very form of the film, screwball comedy, is predicated on the impulse to withdraw from a tragically noir to a nonsensically comic world, but it merely achieves a delay. This is an enigmatic code that, in attempting to efface the generic destinations/results/characteristics of noir, actually presents the absence. The alienated spaces in thought and action are the wellspring of much of the humour contained in the film; dumbfoundedness, interruption, stuttering, incompleteness, are all moments of comic release, and the profusion of profanity (the word 'fuck' and its derivatives are used over two hundred and sixty times)[22] expresses the inability of articulation without lapsing into the nonsensical, in direct contravention of the terse economy of noir dialogue. Indeed, the kind of humour operating in the film fits predominantly into the category of what the nineteenth-century social reformer, philosopher and biological theorist Herbert Spencer termed his "relief theory," to wit, "humorous laughter is a manifestation of the release of nervous excitement or emotional tension."[23] At the

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philosophical heart of the film, therefore, lies a lesson about the virtue of humour and its role in helping one accept the ways of the world – "the Dude abides."

In this respect, *The Big Lebowski*, because of its liminal existence between the worlds of noir and comedy, articulates the absurdity of the world – the "sense of the senselessness of life, the devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose"[24] – and can perhaps best be thought of as retroactive *ur*-noir; I say *ur*-noir because it exists as a conflict between its own structural, narratival and formal motives, encapsulating all the motives of noir in a manner that points to the utter hopelessness of defining these motives. In the same way that an *ur*-text is seen as some sort of primitive, prototypical text that is at the very beginning of an artistic continuum and articulates what will become the obsessions of that continuum, *The Big Lebowski* manages, very ex post facto, to bring unto its own narrative fabric all the noir obsessions of the previous half-century. Raymond Chandler once wrote, "A good story cannot be devised: it has to be distilled;"[25] it is as if the film depicts a list of noir ingredients to be distilled, but is very aware that the process of distillation has been messed up; indeed, that there *is* no proper way to distil noir. This is why it can be seen both as noir masquerading as comedy and comedy pretending to be noir, and simultaneously so. All things can be *defined* (epistemologically) as what they are not, but *The Big Lebowski* incorporates this practice into its discursive fabric and, therefore, in this paradox of language, exists *ontologically* as both what it is and what it is not. It *humours* noir and, to take a linguistic liberty, it *noirises* humour.

But laughter is a strange animal, so how are we to locate it philosophically? It is often a transgressive act, as Mikhail Bakhtin points out in his theory of the carnivalesque (in *Rabelais and His World)* – the carnival is a bounded field of disorder within the larger context of orderly

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social behaviour, and laughter is its driving force. "Humour brings about a change of situation, a *surrealization* of the real... a joke is a play upon form."[26] Humour in *The Big Lebowski,* therefore, is a radical way of re-envisioning the conventional noir space, providing an existential release to characters that would otherwise be doomed by the destructive forces of evil around them. In this respect, the Dude seems to be the moral centre of the noir world of Los Angeles, opting out of the usual trajectory of urban life and choosing to remain a slacker.

That the moral universe of *The Big Lebowski* is corrupt is evident and in keeping with the noir schema. Noir plays out in "a deterministic universe in which psychology..., chance... and even the structures of society... can ultimately override whatever good intentions and high hopes the main characters may have."[27] This "fatalistic nightmare" reasserts itself every time the noir tradition is mocked – the police chief treats the Dude brutally after his drugged Busby Berkeley dream sequence, the Dude's car is stolen after the failed 'hand-off' where Walter's dirty underwear is thrown out instead of the ransom money, and Donny (Steve Buscemi) succumbs to a chance heart attack while Walter beats up the German nihilists. There is often, in art, a critical function that humour performs, and Critchley puts it eloquently when he says that "by laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realise that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed."[28] *The Big Lebowski* is a drama in frustrated attempts at pointing out the fact of the emperor's new clothes, because the noir world always reinscribes these subversions within itself – after all, the Dude never does get his rug back, and, as Neil Gaiman points out, "it has always been the prerogative of children and half-wits to point out that the emperor has no clothes. But the half-wit remains a half-wit, and the emperor remains an emperor."[29]

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The Big Lebowski thus plays itself out in the field within the extremes of noir and its parody. The parodic impulse of the film can be witnessed in its 'quoting' and reversal of the history of noir; its insistence on "the imitation of [the] peculiar...style [of noir], the wearing of a stylistic mask"[30] – the familiar noir urban space of Los Angeles remains, but its hitherto dark alleyways are converted into the bright lights of the bowling alley; the Raymond Chandler story goes wild; the intoxicant is no longer whiskey but White Russians and marijuana; the femme fatale is uncharacteristically cannier than the protagonist and, even more uncharacteristically, gets exactly what she wants from him; the noir tough guy is a pacifist-stoner-slacker. The Dude is a radical 'unBogarting' of the noir detective, an even more pronounced misfit than and homage to Robert Altman's iconoclastic representation of Philip Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye*. The archetypal character devices and gender identifications are subverted hilariously – not a single male character in the film smokes a cigarette (the Dude, of course, constantly smokes marijuana, a substance culturally posited as antithetical to tobacco ever since the sixties; consider Allen Ginsberg's "Put Down Your Cigarette Rag (Don't Smoke)," with its exhortations of "Don't smoke don't smoke don't smoke... dope dope"). This is an extreme *denial* of convention, in much the same vein as Elliot Gould's Philip Marlowe takes *exaggeration* to its limit by lighting a cigarette in every scene in which he appears in *The Long Goodbye.* Similarly, the Dude eschews traditionally masculine drinks for his White Russians and milk moustache, and bowling becomes the ultimate expression of masculinity in his world. The rejection of these archetypes, thus, brings together two differing theories of the essential nature of human beings: as *homo ludens* and *homo risibilis.* The former is a notion indebted to Johan Huizinga, that human beings are *homo ludens,* ludic creatures for whom the game is the world. Huizinga sees "civilization aris[ing] and unfold[ing] in and as play...culture itself bears the character of play."[31] It is play

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that makes us "more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational."[32] For Huizinga, play *becomes* culture, and culture, therefore, is a process of play. This is distinct from the latter notion – dating back to the Middle Ages, at the very least – of the nature of man as *homo risibilis* or laughing being, more often than not capable of laughing at the ridiculous in himself/herself.[33] These differing ideas intersect frequently in the film, most clearly expressed in Walter's existential response to whatever goes wrong, "Fuck it. Let's go bowling." This is a sublime execution of the two traditionally opposing modes, the mock-heroic and the burlesque,[34] in simultaneous action, reducing a kidnapping to a forgettable event while elevating a bowling game to a necessary condition for life (echoing, therefore, Huizinga's thesis of "the play-element of culture").

Laziness becomes the Dude. It goes with his joints and his gainful unemployment. The Dude opts out of the rat race to claim brotherhood with that urban outsider, the noir tramp, as he detours through the urban twilights of L.A., and, more frequently, the brightly-lit interior of the bowling alley. The alienated figure of the noir antihero is thus reduced to a farcical ritual of California slackerism, marijuana and White Russians to generate ambiguously-directed humour. Are we meant to be laughing *at* this stoner's version of the gunslinger of the west, of the spiritual drifter of the road movie, or *with* him? His complete lack of curiosity is intriguing, because it should logically throw a spanner in the noir plotworks, but doesn't. In *Being and Time,* Martin Heidegger talks about curiosity as an attunement (a mood) interested only in seeing (witnessing or absorbing external stimulus), not contemplating what is seen. Curiosity is thus characterised by a restlessness of sorts:

> When curiosity has become free, it takes care to see not in order to understand what it sees, that is, to come to [an authentic relation to] it, but only in order to see. It seeks novelty only to leap from

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> it again to another novelty. The care of seeing is not concerned with comprehending and knowingly being in the truth, but with possibilities of abandoning itself to the world. Thus curiosity is characterized by a specific *not-staying with what is nearest*.[35] [emphasis mine]

This is how the narrative of traditional film noir moves, impregnated with an impulse towards what Heidegger calls "changing encounters" and "continual novelty," a "not-staying with what is nearest." Consider the typical elaborate Chandleresque noir plot that is propelled by the narratival desire to 'see' everything; there is a constant drive in the noir protagonist towards the omniscient. *The Big Lebowski* is driven by an almost opposing instinct of non-curiosity. The protagonist is hardly ever the agent of narratival progress – his lack of curiosity can be infuriating sometimes, for instance, when he doesn't even bother to check the contents of the briefcase supposedly containing the ransom money. However, the narrative continues to proceed regardless of the non-agency of its primary player – *The Big Lebowski* is a film that unravels despite its main characters. As Maude (Julianne Moore) says, "the story's ludicrous." She is, of course, describing *Logjammin*, the pornographic film-within-the-film, but it's also a self-reflexive comment that shows the extent of delight in self-denigration – this is, after all, a film that took off because someone peed on a fucking rug, and it is sustained by a relatively minor desire – "All the Dude ever wanted was his rug back." As MacGuffins go, this one is pretty elaborate.[36]

Unlike other noir films, which express the irrationality of the human condition through logically constructed symbolism (so we have chiaroscuro lighting, an all-pervasive moral corruption, and hopeless endings), *The Big Lebowski* functions within the Theatre of the Absurd in its contempt for logical discursive routine.[37] The articulation of desire ("All the Dude ever wanted"), therefore, is as impotent as the inability to communicate, and expressible only through

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what Andre Breton called *l'humour noir*, a term recalling the Renaissance use of 'humours' and establishing a connection between humour and melancholy.[38] "Indeed, all humour – is replete with the unhappy black bile, the *melan-cholia*.... [but] humour consists in laughing at oneself, in finding oneself ridiculous, and such humour is not depressing, but on the contrary gives us a sense of emancipation, consolation and childlike elevation."[39] This is a telling comment, particularly in the context of the relationship between Walter and Donny. Walter's humour arises very much out of superiority, in treating Donny like a child; at one point he even tells Donny – "you're like a child who wanders into the middle of a movie and wants to know...." Donny's humour, on the other hand, shows a readiness to being treated as a child, thereby always being comfortable with his body as the site of humour. This seems to confirm the "eccentric position of human beings in nature... by the fact that not only *are* we our bodies, we also *have* our bodies. That is, the human being can subjectively distance itself from its body, and assume some sort of critical position with respect to itself."[40] The Dude's body is draped shabbily and personal hygiene does not appear to be high on his list of priorities; he seems to be going to weed.[41] This abjection of the body as the object of humour plays upon the noir trope of the abjection of the body as the location of hopelessness in a morally chaotic world. Body parts become MacGuffins and sources of dread – Bunny's (Tara Reid) toe, Maude's naked body flying towards the Dude in mid-air, the threatened castration ("Ve vill cut off your Johnson!"), Jesus Quintana's (John Turturro) gyrations and French-kissing of the bowling ball, these are all examples of the Bakhtinian "material-bodily-lower-stratum"[42] – but here, unlike in Rabelais (who is Bakhtin's object of study), they *almost* veer into the domain of scatological humour before stopping just short.[43]

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The incongruity in the film between *being* in relation to one's own self and to the external world is the source of much of the humour. The Dude is self-assured in his own conviction of "fitting right in." But, of course, he doesn't. He is outside the culture of work, as well as on the margins of noir. He *appears* to be the "tranquillized" "inauthentic" being Heidegger speaks of. This notion, however, is further complicated – "This tranquillization in inauthentic being, however, does not seduce one into stagnation and inactivity, but drives one to uninhibited 'busyness.' Being entangled in the 'world' does not somehow come to rest."[44] But the Dude is never busy, even when entrusted with making the drop-off. It is as if he has come to terms with his inauthenticity, and this gives him a heightened sense of self. The Dude is perfectly comfortable, therefore, in his own skin. There is none of the anxiety of alienation in *The Big Lebowski* (although there is alienation, especially personified in the figures of the German Nihilists, who, it seems, do believe in making a fast buck, if in nothing else) that assails the traditional noir hero. This "tranquillization in inauthentic being" is in another sense the "rigidity" Henri Bergson refers to in his theory of laughter:

> The comic figure possesses, or better, is possessed by *un effet de raideur*, a certain stiffness or inflexibility which is emphasized through an absent-minded, almost unconscious, mechanical repetitiveness.[45]

The repetitive is machinic, and therefore often uncanny. The bowling ball's eternal circular motion and the tumbling tumbleweeds of the opening credit are emblematic of the cyclical motion of confusion upon confusion that builds up till the structure of the film begins to squeal for a release, which is when Donny dies. Uncanny humour collapses into melancholy humour, culminating inappropriately in Walter's hilariously poignant eulogy for Donny that is

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sabotaged by the upwind. Life in *The Big Lebowski* consists of "strikes and gutters, ups and downs," and while the strikes and the ups undermine the all-encompassing corruption of the noir universe, one is always aware of the gutters and the downs that keep reasserting themselves once the laughter dies down. "The black sun of depression at the centre of the comic universe" never fails to rise.[46] This is the philosophical conundrum at the heart of the film – is there a way out of the noir universe through humour? The answer *The Big Lebowski* seems to be furnishing us with is "no." At least, not entirely. The hopelessness inherent in film noir rears its ugly head time and again and is never exterminated; it is, however, more often than not kept at a distance. The Dude, says the Stranger, is "taking it easy for all us sinners," thereby reaffirming the presence of sin in the world. Although, hearkening back to Sartre's idea that our acts define not just us but are universal in nature, the Dude's actions can be seen as taking away a little bit of our (the viewer's, as well as of the characters inside the noir universe) own existential anguish. "The world can offer nothing more," laments Heidegger, but, contra Heidegger, the Dude does seem to resolve some of noir's angst for us.[47]

The Big Lebowski takes noir to its extremes and makes it look ludicrous. This, however, does not mean the noir world actually *becomes* ludicrous. The "fatalistic nightmare" of noir invariably re-establishes itself in the final analysis – the Dude's room isn't "tied together" anymore, Donny is still dead, and the Big Lebowski stays unpunished – and the half-wit remains a half-wit, while the emperor remains an emperor. The film uses humour not to resolve the infelicitous condition of the noir world, but to keep it in a state of abeyance. Humour retards the inevitability of cruel fate, but is powerless to keep it from being revalidated time and again within the noir framework. Nothing really changes in the end except for the worse. *The Big Lebowski* does for the most part humour film noir, both by infusing the usually dark mood with

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comic light and by paying homage to the traditional concerns of the genre through parody, pastiche and play. Yet, in doing so, it radically revitalises and revises the structure of film noir. Its great achievement is the establishment of a film that has very little to do with film noir superficially except in the realm of blatant pastiche, but, at its heart, expresses all the thematic elements and structural conclusions of the genre. In this respect, it is reactionary in the sense that it does not offer much hope for the triumph of a different, less evil moral order. It is, however, not entirely pessimistic. In affirming the absurdity of life within the noir world, it also puts forth the prospect of living a knowing life on one's own terms. The absurdist humour of the film recognizes the subjective intensity of passion the Dude and Walter feel towards bowling and their ability to confront the meaningless condition of their existence with one-liners. Humanity is affirmed in its ludic desire – "Fuck it. Let's go bowling" – and this is conflated with a happy rejection of oneself as a cog in the machine coexistent with a knowing acceptance of the ultimate futility of action. "The Dude abides," and does it with a smile, which is perhaps the dominant expressive gesture of the film. Humour changes the expectations of the genre, but the more things change, the more they remain the same.

The Big Lebowski exists in a perpetual tension between the ludic desire for revolutionary being and the organising principles of genre. Genre, ultimately, is a way to organise different layers of discourse into coherent components. It classifies, organises and excludes. In this respect, genre is anti-anarchic. In film, it is usually thought of as a categorising phenomenon for "classifying films in terms of common patterns of form and content."[48] But it is important here to make a distinction between – or acknowledge the complicated presence of – the existence of different classes of things, and classes of classes of things, and classes of classes of classes of things, ad infinitum. And genres relate not only to the internal dynamics of form and content

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within a film, but also to external aspects like economics and politics (blockbusters, for example, are defined usually by their big budgets, audience reception, etc.). Extending this perspective to its logical end, one can therefore argue that all categories are subsumed by genre. Keeping this in mind, *The Big Lebowski* exists in a sort of deterritorialising relation with noir. The purifying drive of genre impels film noir to attempt to inscribe *The Big Lebowski* within its schema of encoding and decoding. The film, however, attempts to defer/differ meaning eternally. By this, I mean that it plays with the notion of the spatiality of genre by *differentiating* – it exists in a generic space that is *not* noir, but is conceivable only in terms of noir – as well as with the notion of its temporality by *deferring* (meaning and its imposition) – it keeps *becoming* noir, but never really *becomes* noir.[49] In this way, it could perhaps be seen as a deconstructing process that (contradictorily, but obviously) never arrives at an end.

The space/time distortion in the law of genre generates a being/doing dichotomy that is unmappable on only one axis of noir (either space or time). This is what allows *The Big Lebowski* to go beyond being simply a lovingly parodic homage to film noir, and transforms it into something rich and strange. It is perhaps in this contradictory state that the film's generic status can be usefully analysed, and, perhaps more importantly, that the film allows us to examine our own perceptions of what the fundamental underpinnings of noir really are, and *whether* they really are at all. It constantly defines itself in its attempt to be *not*-noir, thereby exposing the unshakeable association with film noir (regardless of how hard it tries to merely parody the genre) and transcending to a state of *ur*-noir-ness. The gradual breakdown of performance that is evinced in all the blunderings of the narrative's prime movers essentially parallels "the noir hero's existential journey from casual investigator to entrapped participant."[50] *The Big Lebowski* brings "new shit... to light," bestowing noir with the brightness of bowling

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alleys and the surreality of dream sequences, and it acknowledges the one central fact of noir criticism – that our *thinking about this case had become very uptight.*

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Endnotes

[1]Transcribed by author from Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, dirs., *The Big Lebowski*. DVD. Universal Studios, 2008 (1998). All further quotes from the film are transcribed by the author. I'd also like to thank Dr. Cynthia Baron for our brainstorming session about this paper, and Dr. Don McQuarie for doubling up in laughter at the very mention of *The Big Lebowski*, every single time.

[2] Will Russell, "Hey Dude: The Lebowski Festival," *The Independent*, August 15, 2007, Arts and Entertainment section, U.K., http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/hey-dude-the-lebowski-festival-461663.html.

[3] J. M. Tyree and Ben Walters, *BFI Film Classics: The Big Lebowski* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 9-10.

[4] Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir: A Reader* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), x. For various attempts to define film noir, see Alexander Ballinger and Danny Graydon, *The Rough Guide to Film Noir* (London: Rough Guides, 2007); Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941–1953*, trans. Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002 [1955]); Alain Silver and James Ursini (and Robert Porfirio – vol. 3), eds., *Film Noir Reader*, vols. 1–4 (Pompton Plains, N.J.: Limelight, 2004 [1996–2004]); Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1992); James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998); Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

[5] Marc Vernet, "*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom," in *Shades of Noir*, 1.

[6] Elizabeth Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," in *Shades of Noir*, 121, 131.

[7] I use here Gerard Genette's generally accepted definition of *story* – "the totality of the narrated events." See Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 13.

[8] James Naremore, "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 49, No.2 (Winter, 1995-1996), 12-28, 14.

[9] Todd Erickson, "Kill Me Again: Movement becomes Genre," in *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight, 1996), 307-330. The label "neo-noir" was invented around 1981, argues Foster Hirsch, with reference to Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat.* See Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight, 1999), 18.

[10] Ibid., 312, 314.

[11] Slavoj Žižek, "'The Thing that Thinks': The Kantian Background of the *Noir* Subject," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 199-226, 199. Foster Hirsch also mentions the connection between film noir and horror movies, citing David Lynch's *Lost Highway* as "the termination point for noir-become-horror [with its] purely uncanny spectacle [and dismantling of] noir's historical dependence on internal logic and consistency." See "Beyond Noir: The Roads to Ruin," in *Detours and Lost Highways*, 307-324.

[12] Jason Holt, "A Darker Shade: Realism in Neo-Noir," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 23-40.

[13] Mark T. Conrad, Introduction to *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir,* ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 2.

[14] William B. Covey, "*Pères Fatales:* Character and Style in Postmodern Neo-Noir," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* Vol. 28, Issue 1, 2011, 41-52, 41.

[15] Žižek, "'The Thing that Thinks': The Kantian Background of the *Noir* Subject," 210.

[16] Jerold J. Abrams, "Space, Time and Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema," in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, 9, 10.

[17] And hence, all references to 'noir' in relation to *The Big Lebowski* in the paper imply both noir and neo-noir.

[18] Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in *The Simple Art of Murder* (United States: Vintage, 1988), 18.

[19] Quoted in Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways,* 7.

[20] Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways,* 18.

[21] Hamlet's hesitation, think Freud and generations of critics after him, arises out of his Oedipus Complex – he is ashamed that what was done (his father's murder, and Claudius marrying Gertrude) is what *he* wanted to do. Can it be that *The Big Lebowski's* screwball comedy always seeks to halt the eventual tragedy of noir because of a similar terror of the inevitability of noir, both formally and morally? For Freudian responses to Hamlet, and for readings that argue for the opposite interpretation, i.e., that Hamlet does *not* delay, see Kenneth Muir, "Freud's Hamlet," in *Shakespeare Survey Volume 45: Hamlet and Its Afterlife,* ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[22] Calculated, presumably painstakingly, by Tyree and Walters.

[23] Adrian Bardon, "The Philosophy of Humor," in *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide, Volume 2,* ed. Maurice Charney (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 468.

[24] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Pelican Books, 1968), 24.

[25] Raymond Chandler, *The Raymond Chandler Papers: Selected Letters and Nonfiction, 1909-1959,* eds. Tom Hiney and Frank MacShane (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 78.

[26] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

[27] Alain Silver and James Ursini, Introduction to *Film Noir (*Taschen, 2004), 15.

[28] Critchley, 11.

[29] Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman Volume 9: The Kindly Ones* (United States: Vertigo, 1996).

[30] This is how Fredric Jameson describes parody in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 5.

[31] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949), ix.

[32] Ibid., 4. Northrop Frye later updates and expands this notion when he calls play a condition or "question…of it's not really happening, [which] is inseparable from all cultural development." See Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye's*

Late Notebooks, 1982-1990: Architect of the Spiritual World, Volume 5, ed. Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 127.

[33] Critchley, 41, 95.

[34] The mock-heroic uses elevated style and language to treat a trivial subject, while the burlesque does the opposite, i.e., it treats a serious subject in a trivial manner.

[35] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 161.

[36] The 'MacGuffin' is Hitchcock's term "for the key element of any suspense story." See Alfred Hitchcock, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1997), 124. Žižek defines it as "the pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion but which is in itself 'nothing at all' – the only significance of the MacGuffin lies in the fact that it has some significance for the characters – that it must seem to be of vital importance to them." See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 163.

[37] See Esslin.

[38] The Renaissance theory of the humours was the guiding principle when it came to thinking about the differences among people and groups. "The humours were discussed as the visible sign of the qualities in the body, associated with the four bodily substances [blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm], whose proportion and balance signify temperament and the state of well-being or ill health." See Roger Smith, *The Norton History of the Human Sciences* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 58.

[39] Critchley, 94-5.

[40] Ibid., 42.

[41] A pun that, in the context of the film, is entirely intended.

[42] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1984). Cited in Critchley, 44.

[43] The film never really indulges in straight out scatology. Steve Buscemi, who plays Donny, points out in an interview the "semi-obscene" nature of John Turturro's cleaning of the bowling ball.

[44] Heidegger, 166.

[45] Critchley, 56.

[46] Ibid., 50.

[47] Heidegger, 232.

[48] Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film (5th edition)* (New York: Longman, 2004), 84.

[49] See Jacques Derrida, '"*Différance*,"' in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1973), 129-60. "*Différance* is the word that Derrida coins to describe and perform the way in which any single meaning of a concept or text arises only by the effacement of other possible meanings, which are themselves only deferred, left over, for their possible activation in other contexts." See John Phillips, "*Différance*," http://www.angelfire.com/de/jwp/Differance.html.

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[50] Cynthia Baron, "Film Noir: Gesture Under Pressure," *Genre and Performance: Film and Television*, ed. Christine Cornea (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), 37.