Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 17
Issue 1 *April 2013*

Article 40

4-1-2013

Homeric Heroes in Ethan and Joel Coen's The Hudsucker Proxy (1994), The Big Lebowski (1998) and No Country for Old Men (2007)

Vaughan S. Roberts
Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick, UK, vaughan.roberts@btinternet.com

Recommended Citation
Roberts, Vaughan S. (2013) "Homeric Heroes in Ethan and Joel Coen's The Hudsucker Proxy (1994), The Big Lebowski (1998) and No Country for Old Men (2007)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 40.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/40

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Homeric Heroes in Ethan and Joel Coen's The Hudsucker Proxy (1994), The Big Lebowski (1998) and No Country for Old Men (2007)

Abstract
This paper explores how the Homeric trope of the 'hero' appears in three films by the writer/directors Ethan and Joel Coen – *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). It will identify the classical traits of hero and anti-hero, mapping them onto characters in these movies. The paper concludes by examining how the ways in which the Coen brothers' play with the notion of the 'hero' connects with recent thinking on culture and myth in the work of Graham Ward, William A. Dyrness and Robert N. Bellah.

Keywords
Hero, Anti-Hero, Identity, Godlike, Fate, Irony, Self, Values, Hudsucker, Lebowski, Coen Brothers, William A. Dyrness, David Brown

Author Notes
Vaughan S. Roberts is Rector at the Collegiate Church of St Mary, Warwick, UK. He writes widely on artistic and organizational culture, and is co-author with Clive Marsh of Personal Jesus: How popular music shapes our souls (Baker Academic Publishing, 2013). Dr Roberts holds a BA in Biblical Studies from the University of Wales, an MA in Theological Studies from McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago and a PhD from the University of Bath, UK.

This article is available in Journal of Religion & Film: http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/40

Introduction[1]

Ethan and Joel Coen's film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) begins with the sound of a prison chain-gang splitting rocks in unison and singing 'Po Lazarus'. Against this soundtrack some words from Homer's *Odyssey* burn onto the black screen:

O muse!

Sing in me, and through me tell the story

Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending,

A wanderer, harried for years on end …[2]

A number of observers have noted the importance of the Homeric journey motif in this movie, even if they disagree about its significance. For example, James Mottram argues, 'Spuriously based on Homer's *The Odyssey*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* keeps the idea of home, and the journey to it, very much as its heart.'[3] By contrast Tim Cawkwell believes there is an important clue with many of the characters' names in the film. Thus, 'the reference in the names to Homer's *Odyssey* is no accident. When the story is described in the credits as "based on Homer's *Odyssey*" you struggle at first to connect the epic with 1930s America. But the Coens are both tongue in cheek, relishing the juxtaposition and serious.'[4] This ambiguity extends across all of the Coen brothers' work and the viewers' lenses that are applied to them. For instance, Chris Deacy in his discussion of how categories such as 'religious' or 'secular' can be defined in the world of movies draws attention to Ann Beavis'

analysis of *Fargo* (1996), which is viewed as 'non-religious' or 'irreligious' by some, yet by others as shaped by 'classical Christian concepts of virtue and vice' and 'with profound affinities to the law and wisdom traditions of the Jewish Testament'.[5] He concludes that the distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' categories can be 'tenuous and discordant'[6] and it is significant that an apparently 'secular' medium 'has the capacity to raise vital questions about the spiritual landscape and normative values of western society'.[7] Those values are informed and structured by the figures of the hero and anti-hero, which we will explore in this paper.

Many have noted how the figure of the 'anti-hero' or the 'little man' is significant for the Coen brothers' movies, not least in the character of the Dude who is placed at number 4 in one online list of the greatest anti-heroes.[8] However, this paper will argue that far from being a whimsical diversion, the brothers' allusions to figures in this strand of literature can be seen as an important element in their films. Drawing on Hook & Reno's *Heroism and the Christian Life* (2000) and J. D. P. Bolton's *Glory, Jest & Riddle* (1973) I suggest six key attributes of the Homeric hero:

(i) The hero's task is of divine origin

(ii) There is something 'godlike' about the hero

(iii)The hero is governed by fate

(iv)A hero is made on the battlefield

(v) Heroes fight to save their community

(vi)The listener or audience is invited to identify with the hero

If Achilles is portrayed as the greatest hero in ancient Greek culture then his antithesis is Socrates, who is often depicted as the ultimate anti-hero embodying a distinctively alternate view of heroism. The six corresponding attributes of the Socratic anti-hero are:

(i) The anti-hero's origins are ordinary

(ii) An anti-hero's life is inauspicious

(iii)Anti-heroes are governed by irony

(iv)The anti-hero is made through oratory

(v) The focus of the anti-hero is creation of self

(vi)The audience is invited to reject all exemplars

These characteristics are not a detailed heroic typology. This is an ongoing area of investigation whose contemporary origins Robert A. Segal has located in the work of such 19th century thinkers as Thomas Carlyle, Herbert Spencer and G. W. F. Hegel.[9] Their ideas on hero myth have been subsequently developed into more elaborate theories by critics such as Otto Rank, Joseph Campbell, Lord Raglan and René Girard. This paper examines how Ethan and Joel Coen utilise, explore and play with these characteristics of hero and anti-hero in three films – *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007).

A link between the first two films has been made by Mark Cousins in his history of art cinema *The Story of Film*. He observes that: 'In *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) a novice mailroom worker, Norville Barnes, is

installed as the chief executive of Hudsucker Industries. Together with the lead characters in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *O Brother Where art Thou* (2000), Barnes can now be seen as a Coen archetype: a gormless, rather asexual man who has strayed into the closed romantic realist world of Hawks, Capra or Preston Sturges, who doesn't understand its strangeness and who is all at sea. The lackadaisical Dude in *The Big Lebowski* in particular captured the slacker mood of his times, but the Coens' affection for these men – together with their instinctive surrealism – made their films among the most singular of their times.'[10] This paper, whilst recognising the common ground that Cousins identifies between the characters of Norville Barnes and Jeff Lebowski argues that in terms of the trope of the hero, there are significant differences between these two individuals and the way that their stories are unfolded in the Coen brothers' movies. Then it will examine how the image of the Homeric hero has been explored in one of the brothers' more recent films, *No Country for Old Men* (2007) before concluding with a discussion about how this figure fits into some recent sociological and theological discussion about myth, play and semiotics drawing upon the work of Graham Ward, William A. Dyrness, Robert N. Bellah and Umberto Eco.

A Homeric Hero in 'The Hudsucker Proxy'[11]

The plot of *The Hudsucker Proxy* revolves around Norville Barnes, a new graduate of the Muncie College of Business Administration, who arrives

in New York looking for work and bringing with him his 'great idea'. Unable to find a suitable position at the Nidus employment agency he answers an advertisement for a job in the post room at Hudsucker Industries. The President, Waring Hudsucker, has just committed suicide by jumping from a window during a board meeting at which the company's healthy financial report was being presented. His stock will be sold to the public on 1st January unless something is done. The board decide to nominate a proxy to front the company, depress the stock and allow them to buy it back at reduced price. On the face of it, there is nothing particularly divine about the opening of this story, however on closer inspection there are some significant symbols and narrative motifs, which point to a higher order at work.

(i) The hero's task is of divine origin

The story actually begins on New Year's Eve as the time moves towards midnight. Norville Barnes is climbing out onto a ledge high up on the Hudsucker building close to the face of a large clock. The scene is set by an introductory voice-over but we only discover much later that this voice belongs to Moses, the keeper of the clock, and a guardian angel figure for Norville. The circle is the key symbol which drives this film. It reoccurs in the clock, in Norville's great idea for kids (the Hula-Hoop) and it plays a crucial part in setting Norville on the road to his destiny. Leaving Norville on the ledge, the film flashes back to his arrival in the city and his vain search for employment. When he cannot find a job at the employment agency Norville

sits drinking coffee looking through a newspaper's employment advertisements. Finishing his drink, he puts down his cup and leaves. As it is cleared away, the cup leaves a circular stain around a notice for a job at Hudsucker Industries. The paper as a whole is caught by a draught from the coffee shop door but it is only the sheet with the circular coffee stain on it that follows Norville Barnes down the street. This sheet wraps itself around his leg and finally Norville notices the circle and responds to the job advertisement. The viewer is left to speculate whether this is just coincidence or whether something else is at work.

(ii) There is something 'godlike' about the hero

Heroic characters are ambiguous, since they have attributes that are both human and divine. As Bolton argues, "the heroes and heroines have themselves something godlike about them … Yet in original fact these heroes were men of flesh and blood, no more superhuman than the poet who sang of them."[12] In The Hudsucker Proxy the godlike nature of the hero is developed by contrasting Norville Barnes with the Satanic character of Sidney J. Mussberger played by Paul Newman.[13] Following the suicide of Waring Hudsucker, Mussberger assumes leadership of the Board and oversees the plan to depress the stock and buy up Hudsucker Industries. Norville has a profound faith that his great idea of the Hula-Hoop will triumph in the marketplace. It is this immutable faith which finally vindicates the hero.

(iii) The hero is governed by fate

The place of fate in this movie is underscored by the crucial role that the image of the circle plays in the visual unfolding of the plot. At one point during a party Norville is having a conversation about karma with a journalist who is trying to unmask what is happening at Hudsucker Industries. The hero describes karma as "the great circle of life, death and rebirth … a great wheel that gives each of us what we deserve". To which Amy responds, "Yeah, I think I've heard of that. What goes around comes around." From another angle, Hook and Reno define fate as "being in the right place at the right time"[14] which is a theme throughout the film.

(iv) A hero is made on the battlefield

The Hudsucker Proxy is a battle between optimism and cynicism as well as good and evil. The film reaches a climax with Norville jumping from the building in a similar fashion to Waring Hudsucker. However he is prevented from smashing onto the sidewalk by the intervention of his guardian angel Moses who stops the clock at the top of the Hudsucker Building. This gives Waring Hudsucker the time to reappear as a more traditional angelic figure with wings and halo, and explain to Norville why he jumped. Hudsucker also reveals that he has left instructions that whoever the Board appoints as chairman inherits his stock and he had assumed it would be Sidney Mussberger. Meanwhile, as this conversation is taking place, Moses is having to do battle with Mussberger's henchman, Aloysious, over re-starting the

clock. To a certain extent this short fight between the angels of light and darkness encapsulates the conflicts which underlie the whole film. This is the context from which Norville emerges as the hero.

(v) Heroes fight to save their community

There is little indication that this hero is fighting to save those people who are part of the Hudsucker conglomerate. It is clear that Norville does not feel a part of the community at Hudsucker Building and this is exemplified by his sacking of the company's elevator boy when the boy comes to Norville with his own great idea for a new kind of drinking straw. Rather, the film identifies Norville as a member of small town America. At the start of the film he arrives on a bus from Muncie, Indiana, while Amy Archer, the journalist working on his story ingratiates herself into his confidence by pretending that she is a "Muncie girl". And the movie concludes with Norville and Amy embrace and making the sign of the Muncie Eagles. The community that Norville represents is small town America rather than the big city metropolis, which leads into the final point.

(vi) The audience is invited to identify with the hero

Muncie, Indiana was chosen in 1925 by sociologists Robert and Helen Lund as the most typical small city in America for their Middletown project. This suggests Norville is an everyman figure with whom we can all identify.

Heroes and Anti-Heroes in 'The Big Lebowski'

Ostensibly this film is about heroism and employs allusions to the archetypal heroic movie genre, the Western, in order to set the scene. *The Big Lebowski* opens with *The Sons of the Pioneers* singing an old bluegrass ballad 'Tumbling Tumbleweeds' and a voice described in the script as "deep, affable, Western-accented" introduces the central character Jeff Lebowski, aka the Dude. The heroic framework is established at a very early stage when the audience are told by the narrator:

> …Now this story I'm about to unfold took place back in the early nineties – just about the time of our conflict with Sad'm and the Eye-rackies. I only mention it 'cause 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 talking about the Dude here – sometimes there's a man who, wal, he's the man for his time and place, he fits right in there – and that's the Dude, in Los Angeles …[15]

As regular viewers of films by the Coen brothers will be aware, the audience should not necessarily take anything revealed in the introduction at face value. In fact, as the plot unfolds, a playful interaction develops between the characteristics of hero and antihero. For instance, a friend of the Dude's called Walter Sobchak appears to exhibit the characteristics of a traditional hero. Thus, at various points in the movie Walter ascribes much of his own personal motivation to his conversion from Catholicism to Judaism. In other

words, his tasks in life are of divine origin. By contrast the Dude claims that Walter's obsession with keeping the Sabbath is because he has not moved on from the separation with his ex-wife, for whom he originally converted. Second, he is a figure who is larger than life physically and temperamentally. Throughout the film Walter's explosive character is contrasted with the inoffensive Donny, the third member of the bowling team, and there is something Zeus-like about Walter's behaviour. The symbols of Zeus are the thunderbolt, eagle, bull and oak, and the explosive, flighty, confrontational and stubborn characteristics that these images represent are found in Walter's character. For example, in this movie, the arena of bowling is also the battlefield where heroes are made. Walter is a Vietnam veteran who has a tendency to use his military experience on the bowling lanes. Early in the story there is a scene where the rules and etiquette of the contemporary sporting battlefield interact with Walter's expectations from a more conventional heroic arena, as he accuses an opponent (Smokey) of cheating:

WALTER

Over the line, Smokey! I'm sorry. That's a foul.

SMOKEY

Bullshit. Eight, Dude.

WALTER

Excuse me! Mark it zero. Next frame.

SMOKEY

Bullshit. Walter!

WALTER

This is not 'Nam. This is bowling. There are rules.

DUDE

Come on Walter, it's just - it's Smokey. So his toe slipped over a little, it's just a game.

WALTER

This is a *league* game. This determines who enters the next round robin, am I wrong?

SMOKEY

Yeah, but -

WALTER

Am I wrong!?

SMOKEY

Yeah, but I wasn't over. Gimme the marker, Dude, I'm marking it an eight.

Walter takes out a gun.

WALTER

Smokey my friend, you're entering a world of pain.

DUDE

Hey Walter -

WALTER

Mark that frame an eight, you're entering a world of pain.

SMOKEY

I’m not -

WALTER

A world of pain.

SMOKEY

Look. Dude, I don't hold with this. This guy is your partner, you should –

Walter primes the gun and points it at Smokey's head.

WALTER

HAS THE WHOLE WORLD GONE CRAZY? AM I THE ONLY ONE HERE WHO GIVES A SHIT ABOUT THE RULES? MARK IT ZERO!

DUDE

Walter, they're calling the cops, put the piece away.

WALTER

MARK IT ZERO!

SMOKEY

Walter –

WALTER

YOU THINK I'M FUCKING AROUND HERE? MARK IT ZERO!!

SMOKEY

All right! There it is! It's fucking zero!

He points frantically at the score projected above the lane.

... You happy, you crazy fuck?

WALTER

This is a league game, Smokey.[16]

Although Walter's temper has a short fuse, as the heroic figure he is also fatalistic, in that when his plans go wrong (as they often do), he will often shrug his shoulders and say, "Awww ... Lets go bowling." There is no calamity in life that cannot be put right by knocking over a few pins. Indeed, throughout the film Walter is the character who lives by his deeds. Almost every problem that the Dude encounters as the narrative unfolds is due to a course of action suggested by his friend. This scene suggests Walter is determined to fight for a community or way of life that he believes in. In many ways this film is about some of the tribes in Los Angeles and Walter is very loyal to those tribes to which he has chosen to belong – the bowling league, the Vietnam veterans and the Jewish faith. However, although Walter is drawn as a person with some heroic traits, the audience is not ultimately being invited to identify with him. Whilst there are some aspects of his character which suggest that he is a regular person (e.g. he bowls, is divorced, is argumentative) and that he is someone with whom we can identify, when the

script's authors become incarnate in the film through the character of The Stranger, they point us towards the anti-hero as the central figure of the story. One of the ways in which this achieved is through establishing a contrast between Walter (hero) and the Dude (anti-hero) in which the Dude helps Walter deal with his past through a Socratic (non-violent) approach to life. So we turn to examine how some of the attributes of the anti-hero are worked out in the character of Jeffrey Lebowski or the Dude.

(i) An anti-hero's origins are ordinary

In the script of The Big Lebowski the first description of the central figure is significant:

> *It is late; the supermarket is all but deserted. We are tracking in on a fortyish man in Bermuda shorts and sunglasses at the dairy case. He is the Dude. His rumpled look and relaxed manner suggest a man in whom casualness runs deep … The Dude glances furtively about and then opens a quart of milk. He sticks his nose in the spout and sniffs.* [17]

This man who comes on the scene is an ordinary person. He is not someone of divine origin nor is he presented as someone of great deeds. The Dude is introduced doing the everyday activity of buying milk, for which he writes out a cheque for 69 cents.

(ii) The anti-hero's life is inauspicious

As the film progresses, we will see that this Jeffrey Lebowski stands in sharp contrast to his millionaire namesake for whom he is mistaken by a couple of thugs. Just as the central character is shown at the outset to be an ordinary person in a regular setting, so we are told that his everyday life is not at all auspicious. In his voiceover The Stranger describes what the Dude is like:

> … and even if he's a lazy man, and the Dude was certainly that – quite possibly the laziest in Los Angeles County … which would place him high in the runnin' for laziest worldwide.[18]

The nature of the man is underscored by his home, which is a small and plainly furnished Venice bungalow, and his daily life, which in the film never extends beyond the bowling alley. The Dude is a good example of an anti-hero in that he is an ordinary man living an inauspicious life. However, all that is about to change as the finger of irony points at the deadbeat Jeffrey Lebowski and he is mistaken for the wealthy Jeffrey Lebowski who has many trappings of success – money, beautiful home, young wife and fawning PA. As it says in the production notes for the DVD of the film:

> It takes guys as simple as the Dude and Walter to make this story complicated … and they'd rather be bowling.[19]

(iii) Anti-heroes are governed by irony

One of the unanswered questions in this film is: *who* is the Big Lebowski of the title? Is he the Jeffrey Lebowski who is the powerful self-made millionaire that shares the same name as the Dude and with whom the Dude is confused or is he the drifting bum who has no career, no job and little money (i.e., the Dude)? As the narrative develops the ironic twists in the plot begin to grow. We discover that the Jeffrey Lebowski who is portrayed as the successful businessman has actually inherited his wealth from his late wife and is in the process of embezzling $1 million from his own trust fund for needy children. The Dude may not be a paragon of virtue but he does have a set of values with which we are invited to be sympathetic. Just as the name Jeffrey Lebowski applies to two different people, so one person can have two names – the Dude is also Jeffrey Lebowski. But why is he called the Dude? This colloquialism can just refer to a man, any man at all, or it can mean something more specific. For instance, it may indicate someone who is stylish and fastidious, or a city dweller, especially one holidaying on a ranch in the Western US. Perhaps the Coen brothers intend all of these meanings at different levels of reality and irony. The name may have its origins in a German dialect word meaning 'fool', which implies that he is the archetypal outsider, whose 'wisdom' is considered foolish by the standards of society. In that case, it is not unreasonable to see him as a Socratic anti-hero who cannot be understood by the accepted mores of his peers.

(iv) The anti-hero is made through oratory

Throughout the movie the Dude stands in relief to both his friend Walter and his alter-ego Jeffrey Lebowski. The other two are portrayed as men of deeds in the Homeric pattern. One has been a soldier and the other an achiever in the world of business. The Dude is clearly neither of these. When the Dude is employed by Jeffrey Lebowski to find his young wife who has gone missing, his only piece of genuine detective work proves to be a failure. After one of the Dude's leads takes a telephone message and writes on the pad by the phone, the lead takes the top piece of paper and excuses himself, leaving the Dude alone in the room. The Dude takes a pencil and rubs the pencil over the sheet, hoping to reveal something significant underneath, only to find it is an erotic doodle. The sole resources at the Dude's disposal are his wit and skills at oratory. A scene which highlights the contrast between the hero as the person of deeds and the anti-hero as the one skilled in wit is where Lebowski is hiring the Dude to find his missing wife.

LEBOWSKI

> … It's funny. I can look back on a life of achievement, on changes met, competitors bested, obstacles overcome … I've accomplished more than most men, and without the use of my legs. What … What makes a man, Mr Lebowski? … Is it … is it, being prepared to

> do the right thing? Whatever the price? Isn't that what makes a man?
>
> DUDE
>
> That, and a pair of testicles.

Ultimately, the Dude is able to bluff his way through the film. Although the narrative strands resolve themselves in the closing scenes and the Dude emerges triumphant, that is not because of his deeds. Resolution comes about despite any of the Dude's actions and the only way he survives is through his powers of oratory and skill at bluffing.

(v) The focus of the anti-hero is creation of self

An underlying theme in this film is the question: what makes a man? This is underscored by the use early in the soundtrack of Bob Dylan's song "The Man in Me." This track returns later in the film during one of the Dude's dream sequences. Significantly, James Mottram argues:

> The Big Lebowski is a film that pits its characters against their environments. From the opening shot of the Dude in the bathrobe, shopping at the supermarket, to a man in full cowboy garb in a bowling alley, characters face a lack of harmony at every turn.[20]

All the characters seem uncomfortable with themselves or are searching for their setting in life, from the nihilists who "believe in nothing" yet crave money to Bunny Lebowski who escapes from her parents' rural existence to the city and is no more contented.

(vi) The audience is invited to reject all exemplars

Just as the character of Walter Sobchak is given the characteristics of the hero, apart from being asked to identify with him, so the Dude is portrayed as the anti-hero with the exception that we are explicitly invited to see him as some sort of role model. The closing scene of the movie includes this final exchange between the Dude and The Stranger:

THE STRANGER

Take it easy Dude – I know that you will.

The Dude, leaving, nods.

DUDE

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

Gazing after him, The Stranger drawls, savoring the words:

THE STRANGER

The Dude abides …

As his head shakes in appreciation, his eyes find the camera.

> … I don't know about you , but I take comfort in that.
> It's good knowin' he's out there, the Dude, takin' her
> easy for all us sinners.

There seems to be a sense in this film that the Dude is a symbolic person, a cipher for many other 'Dudes' who inhabit our world, but there may be another level to the name as well.[21]

A Homeric Hero in 'No Country for Old Men'

The traits of the Homeric hero have continued to be a significant archetype in the Coen brothers' work. A good and more recent example is the portrayal of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in their adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* (novel 2005, movie 2007). Throughout the film Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, played by Tommy Lee Jones, explores the six heroic characteristics in a way that it is typical of the Coen brothers' films, as ambiguous and subversive.

(i) The hero's task is of divine origin:

Towards the end of the movie Ed Tom Bell says reflectively to an old colleague: 'I always thought as I got older God would sorta come into my life somehow. And he didn't. I don't blame him. If I was him, I'd have the same opinion of me that he does.' In other words, he had hoped that he would attain

a sense that his life or (at least) his calling to law enforcement was of divine origin but that has not been the case. This heroic trait is inverted.

(ii) There is something 'godlike' about the hero:

He is the God-like narrator of the story, who sets the scene and draws the film to an end with his account of heaven presented in his dreams. In his review of the movie, Roger Ebert notes how the movie opens with 'the flat confiding voice of Tommy Lee Jones' and when he gets the DVD of the film 'I will listen to that stretch of narration several times. Jones' delivers it with a vocal precision and contained emotion that is extraordinary and sets up the entire film.'[22]

(iii) The hero is governed by fate:

The themes of fate and luck are present throughout the film, bookended by the two contrasting coin tosses offered by hired killer Anton Chigurh first to a filling station attendant (who calls correctly and lives) and second to Carla Jean who refuses to call and is killed. Fate is portrayed as random. Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson) another bounty hunter hired to track down Chigurh is described as having a charmed life but is casually killed. Even Chigurh is afflicted by a completely unrelated, random, violent act at the conclusion.

(iv) A hero is made on the battlefield:

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is a war veteran and an important theme in this movie is that the *contemporary* battlefield upon which he finds himself is not only disorientating but also driving Sheriff Bell towards retirement. The hero is being 'made' in a new way on a strange and confusing battlefield.

(v) Heroes fight to save their community:

Throughout the movie Bell is depicted as someone who has a concern for his local community and its inhabitants. He knows people and their stories – as evidenced when he tells Carla Jean the story about Charlie Walser being randomly injured by his own bullet whilst trying to kill a steer and by his actions in trying to protect Llewelyn and Carla Jean from Anton Chigurh.

(vi) The listener or audience is invited to identify with the hero:

Ed Tom Bell introduces himself as someone who is trying to do his best in a difficult world. His testimony has sent someone to the electric chair but he seeks to be open and honest about his intentions and actions.

It is arguable that the characters of Llewelyn or Carla Jean (or both) function as the anti-hero in this film, allowing Sheriff Ed Tom Bell to take on and develop the heroic role. However, as was observed in the introduction, the Coen brothers' films subvert, disrupt and play with tropes and characters, therefore it is prudent not to force them too tightly into a preconceived frame.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the characteristics of the neglected Homeric hero are as important to the Coen brothers' films as the traits of the Homeric anti-hero. The tendency towards play and re-imagination of mythic archetypes is not unique to any one expression of culture. As John C. Lyden has argued, religions and films operate in a similar, complex fashion, i.e., 'by presenting an alternative view of the world, they suggest things might be different than they are.'[23] Furthermore, a movie does not function in a vacuum: 'The values one finds in the film will depend on what one brings to it and how one appropriates it, as the meanings found in a myth can be interpreted in many ways even though the myth sets forth a basic pattern for finding those meanings.'[24] Graham Ward has used the work of French philosopher Georges Sorel (1847-1922) on violence and myth to describe the contested nature of mythmaking. He makes the case that 'myths are aesthetic, for the power of their ideology lies in the "idolatry of words," in the appeal they make through images to the imagination – to an imagined glory, an imagined heroism or martyrdom.'[25] Ward goes on to describe how this widespread process of the 'aestheticization' of society, the generation of myths, continues in political and economic activity and that the 'politics of Christian discipleship is about first unmasking the theological and metaphysical sources of current mythologies and revealing the distortions and perversions of their current secularized forms.'[26] However, as well as finding secularized 'distortions' of Christian

myths, we might also discover that some myths take us deep into the foundations of human culture.

Thus, as Ward argues, it is important to continue the work of uncovering how heroic myths are still at work in society and in the process of doing so we can use those stories to comment on some of the political and economic traits of our time – from whatever religious tradition. We can see elements of such a social critique in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *The Big Lebowski, No Country for Old Men* and other films by the Coen brothers. It is also possible to use the heroic traditions to analyze some of the psychological and social patterns exhibited by individual and collective human behaviour. There are aspects of these in the three movies that we have examined but we can also find them across their body of work, e.g. *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Fargo* (1996), *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) and *A Serious Man* (2009). All cultures have their heroic stories and all faiths have been forged in dialogue with those traditions. In our contemporary society it is significant that two film-makers who were raised in a Jewish background can fuse elements of heroic myth with Christian and Jewish traditions in order to make a form of entertainment that re-presents all of these things in ways which continue to speak of and critique the modern world.

This tradition of social critique has a much longer history, which some argue extends to the dawn of society. Drawing on the work of Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) Robert N. Bellah argues that play is foundational for human beings and human society. In the process of evolution, expressions of

ritualised behaviour and religion have emerged from the play impulse.[27] Furthermore, not only does this impulse towards play and ritual lead to the emergence of early forms of the social organization such as the state, but also to those renouncers who challenge the conduct of civic order by offering alternative, utopian visions of the future. A good example of this can be found in the prophetic writings of ancient Israel.[28] In other words, we can see the dynamic of hero and anti-hero which is explored in the movies of the Coen brothers as a contemporary manifestation of the play impulse, which is foundational for creating society as well as for the process of analysing existing structures and putting forward alternate visions for social values and organization.[29]

From a theological perspective William A. Dyrness contends: 'we are all born into patterns of particular cultures, which, for better or worse, shape us … culture is inherently moral and even theological. It is a dynamic and changing set of practices, objects and commitments that, initially at least, constitute the limits of the possible for human activity.'[30] These limits might be perceived as binding or restrictive but that is not how Dyrness understands it, because he goes on to say: 'Having a place to stand historically is not a limitation; it is a grace.'[31] In other words this sense of 'situated-ness' helps to provide the cultural space for developing what he calls a poetic theology or what might be described as a theology of popular culture. The Coen brothers' playful use of heroic tropes is part of this situated-ness which has emerged

from the deeply rooted role that play and the performance of ritual have in society.

This paper has argued that some key elements in the movies made by the Coen brothers can be seen as situated in the heroic traditions of western culture. The film-makers have themselves been shaped by these practices and they re-configure them in an artistic and playful way as they continue to shape the wider society of which they are a part. In particular, I have examined how we can see traits of the hero and anti-hero in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and situated that within the wider context of social play and social critique in religious and theological discourse. Crucial elements in the impulse to play are openness and freedom. Dyrness argues that theology and religious practice are both open processes, e.g., 'Like music, faithful living happens … between the notes'[32] and theological performances 'allow new and deeper resonances to emerge.'[33]

The portrayal of heroes and anti-heroes in the Coen brothers' films work in a similar dialectic or space 'between the notes.' It is natural in contemporary Western culture for both viewers and commentators to focus on the anti-heroes but those characters all require an heroic figure to help define themselves and to provide the narrative momentum. Umberto Eco has spoken of texts being playgrounds for 'unlimited semiosis'[34] and how in this context 'symbols grow but do not remain empty.'[35] The same could be said about the tropes of the hero and anti-hero in the 'text' of a movie and we can see that

this process of interpretation not only connects different but related areas of the cultural and theological playground, it takes us far back into the role and history of play itself.

---

[1] Versions of this paper have been presented at Mansfield College, Oxford, and the Network for the Study of Religion & Popular Culture conference at Sarum College, Salisbury in 2011. My thanks to the helpful comments from Dr Sharon Jones, Nicky Gladstone and the anonymous peer reviewers for the *Journal of Religion and Film*.

[2] Ethan Coen & Joel Coen. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (London & New York: Faber and Faber, 2000), 3.

[3] James Mottram *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, (London: Battsford, 2000), 152.

[4] Tim Cawkwell *The Filmgoer's Guide to God*, (London: DLT, 2004), 42. The tongue in cheek or subversive nature of the Coen brothers' is also noted by Clive Marsh who notes how their movies 'flirt with the sentimental and subvert it' in *Cinema & Sentiment: Film's challenge to Theology* (Milton Keynes & Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2004), 108.

[5] Christopher Deacy *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*, (Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 4.

[6] Ibid. 135.

[7] Ibid. 137. I have explored the boundary between 'religious' and 'secular' when examining the playful and ambiguous use of imagery drawn from Christian sacraments in the work of Paul Verhoeven and Joe Wright's adaptation of *Atonement* – see Vaughan S. Roberts 'Too Much is not Enough: Paul Verhoeven, Rene Girard & the Femme (Fa)tale' in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 15 No 2 (May 2000), 233-245 and 'Implicit Sacraments in *Atonement*: The Movie' in *Implicit Religion* Vol. 11 Number 3 (Nov 2008), 297-308.

[8] http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2010/03/the-10-greatest-anti-heroes-4-the-dude.html accessed September 25th 2012.

[9] Robert A. Segal *Hero Myths: A Reader*. (Oxford UK & Malden USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 2-5.

[10] Mark Cousins *The Story of Film*. (London: Pavilion Books, 2011), 453-454

[11] Cathleen Falsani briefly describes Norville Barnes from *The Hudsucker Proxy* and Jeffrey Lebowski ('The Dude') from *The Big Lebowski* as 'anti-heroes' in *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 82 and 111 but without discussing the necessary characteristics for such a description.

[12] J. D. P. Bolton. *Glory, Jest & Riddle.* (London: Duckworth, 1973), 3.

---

[13] "The script makes repeated references to Mussberger's own Satanic appearance. As his plan seemingly comes to fruition, 'he laughs demonically' and 'evil', we are told, 'prevails'. Moments earlier, the board members are described as 'Hellishly bottom-lit'. The Hudsucker building … [is] a place where the Luciferian Mussberger will do battle for Norville's soul." Mottram *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, 99.

[14] Brian S. Hook & R. R. Reno. *Heroism & the Christian Life: Reclaiming Excellence*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 11.

[15] E. Coen & J. Coen. *The Big Lebowski*, (London & New York: Faber & Faber, 1998), 4.

[16] Ibid. 25-27

[17] Ibid. 3 and 4.

[18] Ibid. 5

[19] Anon. *Production Notes for The Big Lebowski.* Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 2000, 8.

[20] James Mottram. *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*. (London: Battsford, 2000), 139.

[21] The character has spawned his own religion ('Dudism') and church ('The Church of the Latter-Day Dude') but exploring such a phenomenon is not within the scope of this paper. For further discussion see Falsani *The Dude Abides*,117-119.

[22]http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071108/REVIEWS/711080304/1023 accessed September 25th 2012.

[23] John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. (New York & London: New York University Press, 2003),156.

[24] Ibid. 156

[25] Graham Ward. *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic and London: SCM Press, 2009), 165

[26] Ibid. 165

[27] Robert N. Bellah. *Religion in Human Evolution*. (Cambridge: MA & London, UK: Belknap Press, 2011), 568

[28] Ibid. 573-576

[29] Charles Taylor also identifies play as a significant element in this social dialectic which he describes as 'structure' and 'anti-structure' in which ritualised forms of state and religion provide structure and the various forms of carnival offer anti-structure, i.e. this interplay: 'enables us to see that *play* of structure and anti-structure can take place on more than one level, because it is this whole complementarity of state and church together which

plays the structural pole to the anti-structure of carnival. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: MA & London, UK: Belknap Press, 2007) 50 (my italics).

[30] William A Dyrness. *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan & Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans, 2011), 37-38.

[31] Ibid. 237.

[32] Ibid. 81.

[33] Ibid. 293.

[34] Umberto Eco. *The Limits of Interpretation.* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 41.

[35] Ibid. 42

REFERENCES

Anon. *Production Notes for The Big Lebowski.* Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 2000.

Bolton, J. D. P. *Glory, Jest & Riddle.* London: Duckworth, 1973.

Cawkwell, Tim. *The Filmgoer's Guide to God* London: DLT, 2004.

Coen, E. & Coen, J. *The Big Lebowski.* London & New York: Faber & Faber, 1998.

Coen, E. & Coen, J. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* London & New York: Faber & Faber, 2000.

Cousins, Mark. *The Story of Film* (new edition) London: Pavilion Books, 2011.

Deacy, Christopher. *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*, Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005.

Dyrness, William A. *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*. Grand Rapids, Michigan & Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans, 2011.

Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation.* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Falsani, Cathleen. *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009.

Hook, Brian S. & Reno, R. R. *Heroism & the Christian Life: Reclaiming Excellence*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

Lyden, John C. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals.* New York & London: New York University Press, 2003

Marsh, Clive. *Cinema & Sentiment: Film's challenge to Theology.* Milton Keynes & Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2004.

Mottram, James. *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*. London: Battsford, 2000.

Roberts, Vaughan S. 'Too Much is not Enough: Paul Verhoeven, Rene Girard & the Femme (Fa)tale' in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 15 No 2 (May 2000) 233-245

Roberts, Vaughan S. 'Implicit Sacraments in *Atonement*: The Movie' in *Implicit Religion* Vol. 11 Number 3 (Nov 2008) 297-308

Segal, Robert A. *Hero Myths: A Reader*. Oxford UK & Malden USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*, Cambridge: MA & London, UK: Belknap Press, 2007

Ward, Graham. *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic and London: SCM Press, 2009.