

# THE BIG LEBOWSKI

## [1998]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

Copyright © – 1999, 2020

Punk gangster bill collectors (Philip Moon, Mark Pellegrino) mistake Jeff Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), who prefers to be called “The Dude” (his *nom de* bowling), for another, richer Jeff Lebowski (David Huddleston), whose young, ex-porn queen, trophy wife Bunny (Tara Reid) owes money all over town. Before realizing their mistake, they urinate on his carpet. The Dude is a left-over from the hippie generation who keeps his mind oiled with Thai stick marijuana and his body with White Russians. He confronts his namesake with a demand for restitution. After an initial meeting, Big Lebowski hires The Dude to deliver the ransom money to release Bunny from the various groups that may or may not have kidnapped her. Assisted by his two bowling buddies, the aggressive and foul-mouthed Walter (John Goodman), a left-over of the Vietnam Era, and dim ex-surfer Donny (Steve Buscemi), everything goes predictably wrong. The Dude gets mixed up with Big’s feminist artist daughter Maude (Julianne Moore), teenage car thieves, and a Hispanic bowling champion who mispronounces his own name (John Turturro). Rather than The Dude solving the mystery, the plot more-or-less grinds to a halt and, presumably, The Dude can now smoke dope and drink his White Russians in peace. (Rated R).

The visual portion of *The Big Lebowski* begins with a tumbleweed gently wafting its way from the wilds into Malibu. This rootless, entangled structure could only be the Coen Brothers themselves, bringing their sharp wit and even sharper movie making skills from the Minnesotan prairies of *Fargo* [1996] to produce an equally jaundiced view of the California coastline.

The aural portion begins with a cowboy narrating in a basso profundo voice-over that makes outer space seem small by comparison. In a sure sign of things to come, the cowboy promises a rip-roaring story and immediately qualifies it to “parts are ok.” After a bit of imperious, long-winded, and self-conscious rambling, he loses his train of thought – and says as much. This riffing on Hollywood pretentiousness and bad film making (where voice-over narration is most often completely superfluous), the Coens set their audacious sights on the very film making industry that just a year ago crowned them kings of independent film makers with Academy Awards.

However, at the center of *The Big Lebowski* are characters so shallow and predictable that they become fascinating. They develop through underdevelopment. The subtitle of this film might well be “Depth Takes a Holiday.”

Primary among the film’s menagerie is The Dude. If it is possible to imagine a man most removed from any whit of competence to handle the ransom drop for a

kidnapping, it would be the Dude. Laid back, inept, spending much of the film in a bathrobe and slippers, writing a 69¢ check at the supermarket, as a detective, he stumbles haplessly through what might be generously called the plot. A '60s hippie leftover, he is a fish out of water in the modern world.

Beginning each day with determination, but the temptation of pot and White Russians made with half-and-half are too much for him as he slides back into the mist of a life where ignorance is indeed blissful. Whereas Philip Marlow in *The Big Sleep* [1946] (see below) tenaciously hangs to every clue, The Dude is willing to call it quits at any time in preference to an extra frame of bowling. In fact, if we treat the two titles as if they were mathematical formulas, we can factor the equation: Lebowski = Sleep. And indeed, this is a good definition of The Dude.

The second major character/cultural icon is Walter. Whereas The Dude is laid-back and sleepy, Walter is the opposite pole. His occupation of burglar alarm installation is apt – he is all alarms. His philosophical prowess extends to distinguishing Nazis from nihilists. Once a Polish Catholic, now an Orthodox Jew, Walter queries, “What has become of 3000 years of Jewish civilization – from Moses to Sandy Koufax?” His aggression and bluster lead him to all the wrong choices (just as The Dude’s laid-back attitude does). *The Big Lebowski* clearly condemns both approaches as dysfunctional, but, as one would expect of a Coen Brothers film, it offers few alternatives.

As with most of the Coen’s films, the characters are carefully selected pawns in a game of cultural exploration (exploitation?). Indeed, what *Fargo* did for Minnesota, *The Big Lebowski* does for L.A. And, since L.A. has a rather large filmic history and while Minnesota does not (my apologies to my Minneapolis friends and readers), the film makers can organize their satirical/sociological tour around the nether aspects of West Coast culture. Obviously, the easiest way to structure a film about a filmic city is filmically.

Consider: What film follows this general set of opening incidents? The detective visits an incredibly rich millionaire/invalid in a vast maze of a house. His manservant demeans the detective. The invalid is involved with two women, the younger of whom is a borderline nymphomaniac who is being blackmailed and involved in pornography! The plot is never neatly tied up – we are never really sure who “did it.” When you consider the similarities in the titles between *The Big Lebowski* and *The Big Sleep*, all becomes clear.

However, more important than the similarities between the films are the differences in the demeanor of their characters and the culture in which they swim. In these differences is the sum total of *The Big Lebowski*. (This is in addition to their riffs on Busby Berkeley, *The Long Goodbye* [1973], *Chinatown* [1974], *Cutter’s Way* [1981], *After Hours* [1985], *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* [1976], and the Coens’ own masterpiece *Barton Fink* [1991].)

*The Big Lebowski* is the ultimate tour of Los Angeles, but not the L.A. of *Pulp Fiction* [1994] where everything has a gloss of danger and glitz. Nor it is the L.A. of *L.A. Story* [1991] where the city becomes a magical kingdom. Nor is L.A. any longer the ultimate Chandleresque city where a brave man must tread mean streets. This is the L.A. of the valley: where people stay at home at night to play Scrabble, where empty restaurants do a great business in take-out, where 70% of the world's porn films are made. It is this kind of disjunctive, deceptive ordinariness, this kind of faux complexity that *The Big Lebowski* is all about. So, what issues does this Coen-constructed city address?

Here are some of the issues. Interior decoration: “Man, it really tied the room together!” – mourning the loss of a rug due to a terminal case of urination stain. Music: The Dude storms out of a cab in the middle of nowhere because the driver won't stop playing an Eagles tape. Religion: Four years ago, Walter converted to Judaism, orthodox, when he married. Now that he is divorced, he not only keeps his ex-wife's dog, but also the Sabbath. Bowling: As Walter loudly announces, “This is not ‘Nam,’ this is bowling, there are rules.” And there's bowling rival, Jesus Quintana, dressed head-to-toe in camera popping orange and lavender, who equates bowling with pronounced sexuality. Car Theft: The most innocent character in the film is a car thief.

A few more. Nihilism: Jackbooted German nihilists (including Peter Stormare and rock singer Flea) try to horn in on the ransom money even though they have nothing to do with the kidnapping. (But watching them order pancakes is a hoot.) Art: Feminist artists paint nudes from trapeze-like slings trying to one-up Jackson Pollack and abridge sex to an intellectual exercise. Video artists are reduced to hopelessly giggling toadies.

Of course, we expect the internal life of a quite stoner who would rather soak in a bathtub and listen to whale sounds, to be quite different than his external one. And so it is. The Dude dreams of Saddam Hussein, with his name neatly embroidered in red, renting bowling shoes and spraying the insides with disinfectant. In another, he goes bowling with a Valkyrie. And the sexual nature of bowling – imagine a single pin flanked by two bowling balls – is fully played out in a Busby Berkeley musical number where the infinite chorus girls wear bowling-pin headdresses.

But at the center of this Hollywood films is Hollywood: Hollywood, of course, must appear in several guises because it is, ultimately, the point of everything. Hollywood itself appears personified by a totally mythical cowboy, only to pass judgment on itself and on the movie. Hollywood classics survive, as with Mr. Potter of *It's A Wonderful Life* given a new lease on life as Big Lebowski – wheelchair, greed, and all (with a nod to Major Anderson from *The Magnificent Andersons* [1942] thrown in for good measure).

Among all this glitz and smartness (while Joel studied filmmaking at NYU, brother Ethan was “doing” philosophy at Princeton), there might be a plot. Like The Dude himself, who may be the laziest man in Los Angeles County, the film itself is so laid back that it never seems to come up with what might even generously be called

coherence. But never mind. The visual mischief matches that in the plot – and you haven't lived until you've seen a bowling alley from the point of view of a bowling ball . . . or even from inside it.

It is good to see that the Coen brothers, crowned with an Academy Award or two, have not succumbed to acclaim by putting a mainstream damper on their creative spirit. They still have the audacity to derive the main character's – and the film's – momentum from a man urinating on the wrong man's rug. It is also good to see that the Coens' love and fascination with what makes America America is undiminished. Beneath an easy-to-grasp surface in which America is dysfunctional and idiosyncratic, a nation that uses both language and the media as a means of avoiding communication, the Coens implant the same characteristics, but as objects of love. Their humanist economy is clearly one of great affection toward ineffectual, hapless and out-of-date non-heroes who ultimately triumph (without even raising a finger) over those who the culture clearly demarks as morally superior. All this makes *The Big Lebowski* a comedy with insight – what more can one ask?

*The Big Lebowski*. Directed by Joel Coen. Written by Joel and Ethan Coen. Cinematography by Roger Deakins. Music by Carter Burwell. Production design by Rick Heinrichs. Distributed by Gramercy Pictures, 1998.