„They Treat Objects Like Women, Man“

The Representation and Examination of Feminist Attitudes in the Films of the Coen Brothers

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay serves as an exploration of the representation and presentation of the Female in the works of the Coen Brothers – more specifically in six of their films (Blood Simple, Barton Fink, Fargo, O Brother, Where Art Thou?, The Big Lebowski, A Serious Man). A portrayal of the depressing reality and lack which the Female is faced with will be examined along with dependency on the Male in the Coen brother's fictional universe. The essay will mostly be utilizing the works of such theorists as E. Ann Kaplan, Claire Johnston and Anneke Smelik to illustrate its points, using feministic and psychoanalytic approaches. This will be used to critique the all-too-common representation of the Mother-figure and the woman being stuck as a secondary character, mostly as a sexually threatening female. The objectification, exploitation and general suppression becomes apparent in the movie industry as a regular occurring theme in their repertoire. Their films often contain a defeatist attitude regarding the chance of the film industry in improving the representation of real female autonomy. The films addressed in this essay contain their more notable work, and include such issues as patriarchal oppression, religion, silencing of the Woman and the problematic aspect of relegating the female to the margins, often stripping her femininity and presenting her as „not-man“. This essay furthermore takes a look at the relationship between the male and female characters – how in many cases the males are portrayed more favorably by default. The films of the Coen Brothers often serve as a satirical look at the many genres of the film industry and ultimately their representatives for the female gender can be regarded as a reminder of the inherent and insufficient portrayal of a real woman that faces the female audience, depriving them of the possibility to identifying with female protagonists.
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Introduction

The Coen Brothers, (from now on referred to as CBs) are among the most critically acclaimed directors in modern times. Their films are known for being eclectic, innovative and enjoyable – spanning many genres and themes. In this essay I will examine how the CBs films present female characters compared to the broader American film industry. The films I examine (in chronological order) include: Blood Simple, Barton Fink, Fargo, The Big Lebowski, O Brother, Where Art Thou? and A Serious Man. These films depict female characters who face a variety of challenges and hold differing aspirations. I will however try to show similarities between these characters. The CBs are obviously well versed in the history of the film industry which manifests itself in their work. They are also aware of the representation of women in Hollywood. The films I have chosen contain many aspects of typical female representations, including the femme fatale and the conventional portrayal of the Mother, as well as personality clichés, such as the threatening sexuality of the Female and a lack of feminine autonomy.

Throughout this analysis, I will be utilizing and referencing the written work of feminist theorists, including E. Ann Kaplan, Anneke Smelik, Mary Ann Doane, Claire Johnston, and Laura Mulvey, among others. I will be using the psychoanalytic and feministic approach of Kaplan through her groundbreaking work (Women in Film: Both Sides of the Camera, Motherhood and Representation) and focusing on such theoretical concepts as the Male Gaze, the role of the Mother within feminism and the portrayal of the Female as “Other” by such theorists as Johnston (Mirror Cracked) and Mulvey.

The main arguments of this essay are as follows: Since the Hollywood protagonist has been mostly monopolized by male representation, female spectators have severely lacked a valid presentation of women, showing them as real autonomous beings. Erica Rowell described how the brothers have through their exceptional work managed to challenge the audience by “holding a mirror up to society to show us its cracks” (p.4) Their films are therefore useful to examine because of their popularity and tendency towards societal satire. Furthermore, as the CBs have paid homage to the history of film across many genres (e.g. the Western, the Goof-ball comedy, and Film Noir to name but a few), their films offer the opportunity to observe female characters across a variety of historical and thematic settings. This accomplishment is achieved through the CBs use of “meta irony” and through seizing of the zeitgeist after having been exposed to a “steady diet of wildly variegated old movies” as children, resulting in their extensive references to genres of films. (Russell, p. 1 – 4)
Analysis of popular films in order to reveal certain gender stereotypes or inequality is an important tool for the film examiner, as the Annenberg Institute Reports show clearly. These reports reveal how women are still being underrepresented and sexualized, how gender inequality in films is prevalent in both adult and children’s entertainment and how imbalanced the gender ratio of writers/directors still is. (Smith, *Gender Inequality in 500 Popular Films & Gender Stereotypes*) The examination of female representation in this essay is therefore especially relevant today with the emerging focus and discussion on the need for adequate portrayals of female protagonists.

An example of this deficiency can be shown when Kaplan writes:

“…the Mother is either idealized, as in the myths of the nurturing, ever present, but self-abnegating figure, or disparaged, as in the corollary myth of the sadistic, neglectful Mother who puts her needs first. The Mother as a complex person in her own rights, with multiple roles to fill and conflicting needs and desires, is absent from patriarchal representations. Silenced by patriarchal structures that have no room for her, the Mother-figure, despite her actual psychological importance, has been allotted to the margins, put in a position limited to that of the spectator.” (p. 127)

This is an important component of how many of the notable female characters, among them mothers, are presented in the work of the CBs. Claire Johnston was first to write about how women in films have often been represented as “not-man” thereby explaining how “in relation to herself she means no-thing, the “woman-as-woman” is absent from the text of the film”. (Smelik, p. 9) The problematic tendency to portray woman as the Other - “not-man” - is a natural aspect of the CBs films. However, the brothers manage to manipulate expectations of the typical representation in many ways.

In the CBs oeuvre, female characters often search for autonomy through separation from the male. The brothers present many forms of the stereotypical female in their films while remaining true to the struggle they have to face in their attempt to gain control over their own lives. The CBs have managed to portray the Female's relationship to the Patriarchy through different genres and by representing a plethora of stereotypes/archetypes that serve as a message to the audience. There are, however, exceptions. For instance, the character of Marge in *Fargo* is an example of a female character defying expectations and providing the audience with an example of adequate representation. Many of the male characters in the
Coen films can be viewed as a characteristic of the Patriarchal mindset of their times. This is certainly the case with characters such as Abby's husband, Marty, in *Blood Simple*. Audiences are faced with the horrific reality of oppression while being shown the many possibilities of improvements. The main questions I will try to answer are these: Have the brothers, through many of their more notable films, managed to portray the eternal struggle which the Female has faced in order to gain autonomy through separation from the male – along with her success or lack thereof? Are their films possibly feminist in nature? And furthermore, do their films present a reality in which complete autonomy for the Female is nigh impossible, implying a lost cause due to a previously established rigid way of thinking?

1. *Blood Simple* & the Woman as ornament

*Blood Simple* (1984) is the brothers ’directorial debut – a film they managed to write, direct and produce on their own through ingenuity and perseverance. The movie is a grim, Noir-ish tale revolving around a few clueless characters who inadvertently find themselves in a horrific situation. It tells a story of a jealous husband determined to have the upper hand over his cheating wife; at first by hiring a private detective in order to expose her infidelity and then asking the same detective to murder her as revenge. A bar manager called Ray quits his job in order to pursue his boss’s wife, Abby. After a few confrontations between the two the boss, Marty, decides to utilize the PI he has hired as an assassin. His plan backfires when the PI decides to fake the murders, collect his pay and subsequently tries to kill Marty. The plot thickens when Ray stumbles upon Marty and assumes that Abby is the culprit, since her gun is at the scene. Ray therefore decides to cover up for his lover. He ultimately kills Marty himself by burying him alive. The PI later returns in order to absolve himself of the crime and tries to kill the couple, succeeding only with Ray. Abby's attempt to separate herself from her husband plays a large part of the film and becomes a catalyst for the events which later unfold – the woman as property or an ornament thus becoming a central theme in the film. However, the main premise of the film seems to focus on man’s capability of cruelty under duress and his inability to control his own destiny.

Claire Johnston wrote in her essay *Critical Strategies* that “..it is probably true to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent.” (p. 25) Frances McDormand’s character, Abby, fits adequately into
this analysis. She is portrayed as an object of desire and supplies the motivation for each of the characters’ actions. For most of the film her reaction and feelings to the evolving situation are completely ignored, so that the Male Gaze is central. Abby is therefore defined as “the Woman” – the object which everyone seeks to possess – therefore implicitly incorporating her as the “object of flawless beauty”. (Smelik, p. 11) The degree to which the characters seek to possess her are extreme. Her husband is of the common male mentality that if he cannot have her no one else will. He decides to destroy the beautiful object out of pure possessiveness – a symptom of chauvinistic mentality of the Male's total dominion over the Female. Johnston furthermore wrote of how “Within a sexist ideology and a male-dominated cinema, woman is presented as what she represents for man.” (p. 24), which describes the role Abby has to play prima facie. For her husband, Abby represents property – a thing which he has been robbed of and must therefore be compensated for by having her and her lover murdered. Marty's frustration at not being able to control the Female is apparent in his behavior throughout the film: He tries to coerce an attractive woman to make love to him – ordering her to “fake a headache” in order to join him. When that backfires he attacks Abby and forcibly tries to have his way with her – exclaiming “let's do it in nature!” His fate is ultimately to be buried in a field, i.e. in nature, an ironic conclusion – a conclusion which is reminiscent of how Adam Lowenstein described the blurring of the Female and the Country, along with associations between the Male and the City (p. 134). Abby's lover, Ray, is another representative of an aspect of the male-dominated world Abby lives in. He is determined in his decision to “steal” Abby from his employer, as a hierarchic status symbol. Her meaning in relation to him is as an object to signify him as the stronger male, because of course the Female should, according to “natural or animal law” assign herself to the strongest male. She is therefore, according to him, a symbol of his coup, and he is perhaps pursuing her to rectify his self-assessed status in the patriarchal hierarchy. Even his action of covering up Abby's “crime” could easily be perceived as trying to protect himself more than her, as he fears he would be blamed for the crime itself. He furthermore does not hesitate to exhibit signs of jealousy and suspicion when presented with the possibility of Abby having been unfaithful to her husband before meeting her, although that is never confirmed.

The main struggle of the film is arguably Abby’s inability to break free from her husband’s control, and her desperate attempt to gain autonomy through separation. Furthermore, she is presented as the film’s femme fatale – a female whose sexuality is a harbinger of violent repercussions. By seeking independence from the patriarchal institution
of marriage, Abby sets into motion a chain of events which leads to the demise of each and every character – except for herself. By the end of the film, the audience experiences the sequence of events through her eyes, therefore the empathy, which at first was felt for the male characters, eventually shifts towards Abby. Furthermore she breaks free from her passive, objectified role and takes active part in trying to survive her attacker and thus outliving her male counterparts. In this, she invokes a feeling of the stereotypical “Final Girl” described by Carol J. Clover in *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in Modern Horror Film*. She is the only one of the main character innocent of violence or force, a woman at the mercy of her male companions whom eventually assimilates the role of the active (and masculine) hero.

Abby is almost unaware of the events taking place – her thoughts and feelings are insignificant since she represents the “other” or as Mary Ann Doane puts it:

...as far as the cinema is concerned, it is not accidental that Freud's eviction of the Female spectator/auditor is co-present with the invocation of a hieroglyphic language. The woman, the enigma, the hieroglyphic, the picture, the image – the metonymic chain connects with another: the cinema, the theatre of pictures, a writing in images of the woman but not *for* her. For she *is* the problem. The semantic valence attributed to a hieroglyphic is summoned, particularly when it merges with a discourse on the woman, to connote an indecipherable language, a signifying system which denies its own function by failing to signify anything to the uninitiated, to those who do not hold the key. In this sense, the hieroglyphic, like the woman, harbours a mystery, an inaccessible though desirable otherness. (Doane, p. 42)

Thus Abby is portrayed as being “mysterious,” akin to many other female characters in films. Consequently the other characters are unsure of her motives or feelings; accusing her of infidelity, manipulation and murder. Since Abby stands as the enigmatic other, the fault of each event lies essentially within her male counterparts, seemingly rendering her an ineffectual being, until she is finally dragged into the situation bewildered and afraid. Ultimately however, Abby’s actions will prove otherwise. She is able to abandon her abusive husband and fight back against a very violent and capable man. The CBs therefore represent the Female in *Blood Simple* as an admirable but ultimately oppressed person at the mercy of her male contemporaries.
2. Barton Fink & the exploitation of the Woman

*Barton Fink* (1991), a horrific and comedic drama set in the 1940's, is a story of a writer suffering from a severe case of “writer’s block”. Barton is an accomplished novelist who, out of indecision, foolishly agrees to “sell-out” to Hollywood and write a screenplay for a wrestling film. The film depicts his inability to do so, and his subsequent bewilderment over the behavior of the people in his life – most notably his neighbor and his novelist idol (Mayhew) - who later turns out to be a huge disappointment to Barton. In the beginning of the film we see Barton portrayed as a somewhat successful playwright who yet is unsure of how he should proceed with his career. After he is offered a job as a film writer on a B-movie wrestling flick, he is cooped up in a hotel and gets to know his blue collar neighbor, a traveling salesman by the name of Charlie Meadows, who is played by one of CB's staple actors, John Goodman. To him, Barton expresses frustration because of his inability to understand the industry he has been thrust into, and consequently experiences writer’s block. After Barton gets to know Mayhew, a famous, and now alcoholic writer, and his secretary/lover, Audrey, he becomes privy to how twisted the show business really is. He begins an affair with Audrey which is immediately cut short by her untimely death in a mysteriously gruesome murder. After a long and arduous struggle Barton finally manages to complete the film script, only to have it rejected on the grounds for it being too artistic. Barton's conundrum reaches its breaking point when his neighbor is revealed to be a deranged serial killer. The film's main theme tends to play on the twisted nature of Hollywood and the question of artistic integrity.

Judy Davis plays the part of Audrey Taylor, a woman in an abusive relationship with her employer. She takes a liking to the protagonist, only to end up violently murdered after a sexual encounter with Barton. Audrey is the equivalent of the typical female counterpart of the male protagonist in most films – i.e. she is at least Barton's equal, or may in fact even be his superior as indicated by her repressed talents. This however is overshadowed by the dominant male characters in the film.

Audrey is a clever, talented and creative woman who, as it turns out, is responsible for the writing of many of her alcoholic and adulterous boyfriend/employer Mayhew’s novels, allowing him to take credit for her work. He is a character thought to be inspired by a famous dipsomaniac, the novelist William Faulkner. This revelation comes as a complete shock to the protagonist, who is disgusted with his former idol. Audrey herself is, however, apologetic for
his chauvinistic and problematic behavior – dismissing it as understandable. Her tendency to perpetuate and even celebrate the undeserved appraisal of the reigning patriarchal values – the Female as the doting servant willing to lend aid and care to the more important male – is not uncommon within our dominant patriarchal society and therefore serves to illustrate this theme well. Women are taught at an early age to behave “lady-like,” and any authoritarian behavior is deemed unacceptable. The Guardian and the Huffington Post posted articles recently on a movement to ban the word “bossy”, as it appears that the lexicon of the working people has through time become sexist in nature.

(http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/sep/01/feisty-flounce-bossy-words-put-women-down and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karin-agness/bossy-ban-the-main-proble_b_4993754.html) Audrey is a fine example of this trope: a female who refuses to display even a hint of authority or competence beyond her expected role, for fear of reprisal from her community. Furthermore, her abuser is a symbol for society’s proclivity toward negating, erasing, and even appropriating the works of women.

Audrey accepts her role as a Mayhew's sidekick – an implication of the passivity, or self-suppression women commonly express in response to oppression. However, the audience of the film is both privy to this and given the opportunity to disapprove of it through the identification with the protagonist. As Mary Ann Doane wrote in her essay Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator: “Given the structures of cinematic narrative, the woman who identifies with a female character must adopt a passive or masochistic position, while identification with the active hero necessarily entails an acceptance of what Laura Mulvey refers to as a certain “masculinisation” of spectatorship.” (p. 48) The audience sympathises with Audrey not by associating with her, through her struggles and desires – which remain relatively hidden except for her need to uphold the patriarchal values set by her society – but by identifying with the character who is acceptable, i.e. the male protagonist, Barton Fink. To balance out this injustice, or perhaps even spotlight this tendency in other films, the character of Barton is portrayed by John Turturro as effeminate and almost hysterical at times. Therefore, the representation of the woman-as-woman is partly realized within the protagonist rather than the secondary female character. (Smelik, p. 9)

Another aspect of the Female’s inability to gain complete autonomy and the suppression she faces in the world of films is shown through Audrey's expression of brazen sexual conduct. Her actions result in dire repercussions. She is in a relationship with a married
man, and her reward is abuse, oppression, and neglect. But furthermore, the reprisal for her sexual encounter with Barton Fink himself is catastrophic. After their sexual escapades, Barton wakes up next to her mutilated body, himself completely intact, thus indicating that Audrey's fate is directly related to her sex. Many films, especially the older ones, tend to regard the female sexuality as a menace. Females who flaunt their sexuality shamelessly present a threat to the Patriarchy and are often relegated to “absence, silence and marginality“. (Kaplan, p. 7) Audrey is therefore another example of this propensity of the film industry. Her death is furthermore an indication of the tendency of the male-dominated film industry to try to eradicate the threat which women pose when demanding representation; at first through “the gaze”, then by fetishizing them and ultimately through violence and murder. (Kaplan, p. 74)

Audrey's divine punishment is visually represented in the final sequence of the film which is reminiscent of the realm of Hell. The burning hallway is filled with chaotic images of suffering and death, and there John Goodman's character, Charlie Meadows, stands as a symbol of the devil himself. However, Charlie may even be a figment of the protagonist’s imagination. Joel Coen described in an interview how they wanted the “film's atmosphere to reflect the psychological state of the protagonist” and went on to explain their intention of leaving Audrey's murder as a mystery of sorts, saying “We did not want to exclude the possibility that it was Barton himself, even though he proclaims his innocence several times.” With such an ambiguous ending Barton's possible stabbing of Audrey could be interpreted as his unresolved rage towards her shortcomings. (Palmer, p. 175) However, Joel also went on to say how the film itself mostly hinted at Goodman's character being the killer – lending credence to the theory of him being a demonic punisher of sorts. (Palmer, p. 175)

When Claire Johnston wrote, that: “If we view the image of woman as a sign within the sexist ideology, we see that the portrayal of woman is merely one item subject to the law of verisimilitude, a law which directors worked with or reacted against. The law of verisimilitude (that which determines the impression of realism) in the cinema is precisely responsible for the repression of the image of woman as woman and the celebration of her non – existence.” (Johnston, p. 25) Her words ring true in the case of the CBs; for they have through their films reacted against this phenomenon and even highlighted it through irony or included it unwittingly. Barton Fink therefore includes a female character who is, as many of their female characters, purely defined by her relationship to the male characters. It is her inability to separate herself from her controlling male which robs her of her potential
autonomy, and her fate is ultimately a horrific one. Audrey's maltreatment and exploitation is relevant even to this day, and her predicament lends the film a certain gravitas.

3. Fargo & the autonomous Woman vs. the Patriarchy

In 1996 the brothers produced and directed the dramatic thriller *Fargo* – a film which would earn them significant prestige and garnering seven Academy Award nominations. *Fargo* is in many ways a feminist movie, and its theme is strongly concerned with the ongoing transformation of gender roles in contemporary society, along with the importance of principles and priorities. The film is set in Minnesota, and relays the troubles of one Jerry Lundegaard, portrayed by William H. Macy, a financially inept salesman who decides to have his wife kidnapped in order to claim ransom from her father. The subsequent events are simultaneously tragic, horrific, and hysterical.

After Jerry hires two goons to hijack his unsuspecting wife, his plan soon goes awry. After Jean is kidnapped by two inept thugs her father, Jerry's father-in-law, insists that he take control of the negotiations. The thugs get pulled over by a police officer and are forced to kill him, along with two passers-by who happen upon them. Later, Jerry's father-in-law goes to pay the ransom but demands to see his daughter and is shot in the stomach as a result. The film ends with one of the kidnappers, played by Peter Stormare, murdering Jean as well as his partner in crime, played by another Coen favorite Steve Buscemi. Marge, the local officer on the case, discovers him trying to force the body into a wood-chopper. Frances McDormand plays the role of Marge Gunderson – intuitive and resourceful police officer who happens to be seven months pregnant. The themes of the movie seem to revolve mainly on some random cruelty and the senseless violence of mankind, although an important subtext is to be found in *Fargo*, which is the shifting roles of genders in modern society.

With the character of Marge, the brothers reveal a great aspect in their work – which is the importance placed on the role of the mother. Many of their more notable female characters are, will be or want to be mothers above all else – and this tendency has a lot to do with the expectations placed on females by patriarchal standards inherent in their community.

Marge represents one of the more complex characters of the Coen Brothers’ oeuvre, although her benevolence and ethereal wisdom lets her fall into the “saintly-mother” category (Kaplan, p. 127). She is wise beyond all the other characters of the film, does not incorporate any other
aspirations than to perform her job to the best of her capabilities, her bright demeanor making her both likeable and relatable. She is close to being the perfect female, and as close to achieving autonomy as any of the CBs female characters. The brothers themselves even described Marge as a three dimensional person rather than a caricature, partly due to McDormand's portrayal (Palmer, p. 187). Since Marge's most memorable feature is her pregnancy, her becoming a mother plays a large role in how the audience perceives her. The representation and role of the Mother in films has been limited to what society deems acceptable, and mothers have furthermore often lacked a place within the feminist dialogue. In most Hollywood films the mother seldom has a large role, if any, and her character is lacking substance in such a way that the audience has trouble relating to it. According to Kaplan, the mother figure is in films furthermore restricted to a nurturing, goofy, menacing or martyr-like being; often lacking any real substance or character development the other family members are permitted. (Kaplan, p. 126-128) While the brothers depict many fascinating female characters in their body of work, they have repeatedly treated mothers in a specific way, i.e. intensely devoted to the concept of having children. This is most certainly the case in their films *Raising Arizona* and *The Big Lebowski*. There is a problem with presenting motherhood as an ultimate goal: for it implies the limitation of the woman to be only a caregiver, a breeder. However, in the case of *Fargo* the female protagonist is given much more depth than her predecessors of mother-figures in films. Her role is that of authority, and she appears in a traditionally male line of work, even leaving her husband at home while she goes out wielding a gun.

Marge's marriage is simple but a loving one and she performs admirably at her job. She outsmarts most of her colleagues and she rebuffs the advances of an intense suitor in a strange sub-plot which serves to endear her to the audience. Her relationships and struggles in the film furthermore serve as a counterpart to the character of Jean Lundegaard, the hapless wife of Jerry, performed by Kristin Rudrüd.

Although Jean Lundegaard's life comes to an early demise in the film, she plays an integral part of the plot. Marge's loving relationship to her husband is paralleled by Jean's unusual marriage to Jerry. Even though their communication in the film is brief and they appear to care for one another, Jerry's actions speak volumes for his real feelings. He is willing to subject his wife to a horrific fate, i.e. being hijacked and kept for ransom, simply to prove his worth and avoid responsibility for his own failures. Jean therefore remains a prop to each of the male characters, even in a way to her obstinate and domineering father. To her
husband and captors she seems little more than a means to an end; their means of illegally and immorally obtaining money. Her death is furthermore pointless and horrific, and serves as a lesson to Marge on the fragility of human existence, and even more significantly, the dangers of being a woman in a man's world. Marge's remarks at the climax of the film describe her feelings on the violent actions of these uncaring men adequately: “So that was Mrs. Lundegaard on the floor in there”, she remarks and adds, “And for what? For a little bit of money. There's more to life than a little money, you know. Don't you know? And here you are, and it's a beautiful day. Well. I just don't understand it.”

Marge's defeated tone when trying to reason with the viciousness of uncaring men reveals her helplessness towards the commonly senseless and harsh actions of her male-dominated society. Despite her being in a place of authority, having demonstrated an aptitude towards making her own decisions and displaying genuine willingness to help her fellow man, Marge is unable to adequately influence her contemporaries. This certainly sets a certain gloomy tone for the movie, as is often the case with the CBs.

4. The Big Lebowski & the aggressive Woman

In 1998 the brothers wrote and directed their arguably most beloved film to date, The Big Lebowski. Described as a “comic send-off to Raymond Chandler’s The Big Sleep” the film is simultaneously hilarious, confusing and exciting. (Palmer, p. 12) It would eventually become a cult classic, spawning philosophical literature, dress-up events and even themed establishments. Its protagonist is Jeffrey Lebowski, a directionless but content underachiever, indefinitely unemployed and settled in his unimpressive way of life. One day he is attacked by two thugs in a case of mistaken identity, and his precious rug is stolen. One which totally tied the room together. He decides to take his grievance to his namesake, Mr. Lebowski, in order to get compensation for his loss. When rebuffed in his endeavor he practically steals a rug and gets by some strange twist of fate involved in the rescue of Mr. Lebowski’s young wife, Bonnie. He subsequently gets to know Lebowski’s daughter, Maude, and has a sexual intercourse with her only to find out she is using him to procreate. Later he discovers that the kidnapping of Bonnie was faked by Mr. Lebowski in order to steal money from Maude's foundation. The film ends with him returning to his daily routine of leisure and apathy. The theme of the film is hard to pin down, but is perhaps a metaphoric contemplation of the

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1 Fargo, Ethan Coen, and Joel Coen, perf. Frances McDormand
American outlaw. Jeffrey's aim throughout the film is to gain compensation for his destroyed rug, and through coincidences and zany misadventures this rather original story unfolds as he meets his disabled yet ostentatious namesake with a missing gold-digging trophy wife, his detached, ambitious and feminist daughter and a myriad other unusual and exaggerated characters.

The most notable female characters in the film are the no nonsense and feminist Maude, along with her counterpart and younger stepmother, Bonnie. The latter is an important part of the film as well as a fascinating character. Bonnie's appearance is in large part the sum of her presentation. As Mary Ann Doane puts it:

Spectatorial desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression. The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging – framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. She is thus, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths, its constructed 3 dimensional space which the man is destined to inhabit and hence control. (Doane, p.43)

Bonnie’s character does indeed fit this limitation. Her portrayal involves her lying in a bikini by the poolside, the camera lingering on her body, establishing the male gaze which most movies adhere to. (Mulvey).

Although a stereotype and a caricature of sorts, namely a gold-digger, she is shameless in her pursuit of financial gains. Her short time on the screen involves her offering sexual services to the Dude for money, despite the presence of her husband’s sycophantic right hand man, memorably played by the late character actor Philip Seymour Hoffman. The assistant's extremely awkward reaction hints at this behavior being one of many, and Bonnie's shamelessness regarding her infidelity is notable. She later on becomes a catalyst for most of the film's events, as her apparent kidnapping is a driving force for the films incoherent or deliberately convoluted plot, which certainly creates a slap-stick effect. Bonnie has limited screen time, the first scene is the aforementioned, and the latter involves a brief explanation of what her fate has really been. The camera pans over her feet as a proof of her being unharmed –since her husband had received “her” toe as a threat- and she is seen driving away happily
singing “Viva Las Vegas”. Her behavior in the film portrays her as a narcissist with no care for anything but herself. She knows her place in society as a pretty young female and decides to make the most of it by marrying a rich old man. Furthermore, she is aware of how small of an impact her words have on her companions, and is therefore ready to talk bluntly. Anneke Smelik wrote how

> It is the female subject who is made to bear the burden of castration in order to provide the male subject with the illusion of wholeness and unity… this displacement is enacted not only through the gaze and the image but also through the auditory register and apparatus… the female voice can hardly reach a signifying position in language, meaning or power and is hence all too easily reduced to screams, babble or silence in dominant cinema. (p 18)

Bonnie's voice is rendered silent by the male characters of the movie through dismissals and by the film itself since she is intentionally kept outside of the spotlight for most of it. She therefore never appears to say anything of significance and her aspirations remain a mystery throughout. However, her actions speak louder than words. Even though her views of gender roles and marriage are antiquated and she is willing to objectify herself, her husband is unable to control her and she furthermore celebrates her sexuality without shame. She is therefore partially autonomous and rebellious towards the Patriarchy.

The other notable female character, and most memorable, is the character of Maude, portrayed by Julianne Moore. She is the daughter of Mr. Lebowski, an artist and a feminist with a hidden agenda. When the Dude decides to take a rug from Mr. Lebowski's mansion she reclaims it and explains how her father is not the man he claims to be. He has presented himself as a man of immeasurable wealth but in reality he takes an allowance from his daughter since the wealth is in her name. Maude appears rather tired of her father misrepresenting himself as the family's patriarch and her willingness to share her woes with the Dude serves as an implication of her strained relationship to him. Maude is presented as an exaggerated archetype of the extreme feminist; She is simply fed up with her male-dominated society and therefore lets go of her assigned role as a female with the goal of finding a man.

Smelik has also described how “In the case of fetishism, classical cinema reinstates and displaces the lacking penis in the form of a fetish, that is a hyper-polished object. Fetishizing the woman deflects attention from female “lack” and changes her from a dangerous figure
into a reassuring object of flawless beauty. Fetishism in cinema confirms the reification of the female figure and thus fails to represent “Woman” outside the phallic norm.” (p. 11) The CBs seem aware of this tendency in movies to “fetishize” the woman to present her as non-threatening, and they played with this trend when creating the character of Maude. Her presentation of her naked form to the Dude is as sudden and unexpected to him as it is to the audience, as is her exclamation for him to “take her”. This scene is both odd and disorienting – and Maude's complete control all throughout is unique. Maude's authority remains threatening to the normative male gaze since she remains active throughout the sequence – and her revelation of having fornicated simply in order to conceive a child baffles the Dude. Her behavior is most certainly shocking and her actions paint her as a woman completely unimpressed with the male-dominated society she is forced to take part in. Her decision to “trick” a man who she knows will not want, nor be able to bring up a child, is one of a kind. She is the sort of a woman who actively pursues the taboo role of a single-motherhood. Her actions are therefore directly against the normative way of thinking and she is fearless when going against the Patriarchy.

However, like Bonnie and even Marge in Fargo, Maude is helpless when it comes to changing the attitudes of her male contemporaries. Furthermore her apathetic nature and monotone throughout the film make for a less compelling character – or even a tragic one. Her attitude seems like that of a detached and fed up individual. The film therefore has an underlying message on female oppression. Even the Dude himself ineptly comments on the treatment of women when he says: “Treehorn treats objects like women, man”². The Big Lebowski does therefore in a way present a world wherein women are aggressive towards their subjugation, all the while relatively ineffectual in changing the prevailing status – a similar tone as Fargo contains.

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² The Big Lebowski, Ethan Coen, and Joel Coen, perf. Jeff Bridges
5. O Brother, Where Art Thou? & the Mother-figure

*O Brother Where Art Thou* came out in the year 2000 and starred recurrent stars of the brothers, such as the talented George Clooney, John Turturro, John Goodman and Holly Hunter. The comedic fantasy film is based on Homer's *The Odyssey* with a modern twist. Its plot follows Ulysses Everett, Pete and Delmar from the moment they break out of prison. As they try to find their way to Everett's home, since he has promised them riches if they help him break out, they get involved with many strange events and folks. The film starts with the three protagonists, Delmar, Pete and Everett breaking out of prison. Their journey is both eventful and unusual, starting with them hitching a ride with a blind gentleman, getting their cuffs cut off and being chased by an intense man of authority, Sheriff Cooley. They are then greeted by a singing religious group and two of them decide to get baptized. After meeting a black man who claims to have sold his soul to the devil, they are faced with three “sirens” and Pete is convinced that they have turned Delmar into a frog. It turns out the sirens gave Delmar to the authorities to claim a reward and Everett and Pete break him out of jail. Everett confesses his lies; he has no money to share and his companions are distraught. Everett's real motives are made clear; he is trying to gain back his family. His wife refuses to acknowledge him until he, along with the others, perform a song they had earlier recorded and are absolved of their crime in a political move. The film ends with the antagonist, Sheriff Cooley, who has been chasing them the whole time, catching up to them and trying to hang them despite their absolution. They are finally saved by a flood and Penny insists on Everett retrieving her wedding ring. The film presents an, on the surface, hyper-real and fantastical situation with references to witches and devils, and its themes have a lot to do with the exaggerated truth and deadly consequences. Holly Hunter plays the part of Penny, Everett's wife, who mostly presents herself as the protagonist's obstacle, whilst ultimately being a part of his real objective.

In Penny the audience finds a difficult character to root for, as her stubbornness is exaggerated to a point of hilarity. The problem with the character of Penny is whilst the other men are fascinating and jovial, she is difficult and one sided. Most of Penny's identity has to do with her children. They are the main reason for her current relationship and why she has refused to allow her husband, a man willing to go to extremes in order to gain her affections, back into her life. As main love in Everett's life and the female representative in the film,
Penny therefore leaves much to be desired. The audience is able to enjoy Everett’s character, whilst they experience her stubbornness and fierce nature as an annoying hindrance to the protagonist’s desires. She is not as much as a character than a person who has fulfilled her true destiny in producing offspring. This she regards as her assigned role in life in accordance to the representation of mothers in films which dictates how her role should be limited, in comparison to other family members. (Kaplan, p. 128) Penny’s portrayal is a symptom of the misrepresentation of mothers which sometimes has negative effect on the audience – alienating them from the characters or any chance of identifying with them. It was Kaplan who wrote of how “Young mothers do not want to be identified with the construct “mother”, and express even more hostility toward their own mothers.” (p. 141)

These are the consequences of limiting the role of the mother in films. They are far from autonomous, and so is Penny. Her decision to end her relationship with Everett, telling their daughters that he has died and getting engaged with the uppity Mr. Vernon, seems to be solely based on practical reasons and her interest for the children, rather than her own happiness or fulfillment. She explains to Everett how Vernon is able to take care of them, repeatedly describing him as “bona fide” and refusing to even consider Everett’s side of the situation or his parental rights. She furthermore influences her children negatively towards their father, asserting control which society decrees is forbidden, and is therefore framed in negative terms, as is the custom.

Penny is furthermore presented as a rather asexual being by implication of her assigned role. This is a common occurrence in films – by presenting the Mother outside of sexuality the filmmakers remove the threat she might present, since female sexuality is typically regarded as hostile. (p. 54, Von Sternberg/Kaplan) Her agency has been removed by simply objectifying her and giving the man power of control where he becomes the subject while she remains an object. This tendency to reduce and repress the needs of the mother is a part of the larger problem; the suppression and oppression of women. According to Kristeva and Sternberg, the Patriarchy sees the mother as having, “without fail a desire to bear a child of the father (a child of her own father). The father … is thus assimilated in the child and the child becomes an implementation of reproductive desire.” (Kaplan, p. 54) However, despite Penny’s influence and obstinate nature, the film is unable to portray an important factor of the mother adequately, it unfortunately becomes one of the many films which tend to repress or misrepresent realistic motherhood.
The film’s counterpoint to the rigid and stubborn Penny are the “witches” whom the protagonists encounter on the way. A clear reference to the sirens in *The Odyssey*, these women are presented as such. They are extremely seductive and therefore dangerous – presenting the viewer with the typical correlation between female sexuality and the reason to fear it. They even go so far as to seduce the men with their “siren song” managing to pull in Pete and Delmar. They end up turning Pete in to the authorities for reward, revealing their treacherous nature. This film therefore presents its viewers with an antiquated notion of the role of the Female as the devoted mother or the seductive siren. This is however probably due to it being an homage to an ancient literary work rather than being a part of the brother’s real ideology. The film's tone is therefore more satirical towards the usual presentation of the Female.

6. A Serious Man & the Religious Woman

In 2009 the CBs produced the “dramedy” (drama/comedy) film *A Serious Man*, which is for some reason one of their lesser known works. It tells the tale of Larry Gopnik, a hapless Jewish teacher who finds his life spinning increasingly out of control, starting with a separation from his difficult wife, Judith, on her behest. He is forced to move out of his home, garnering his children’s disrespect, his religion is failing him and his work as a teacher being unfairly questioned by his superiors. In short, his life is going down the drain. After Larry finds out his that wife has a lover, he is forced to live in a motel with his difficult brother. When a student of his threatens his career because of grade-issues, he feels as if his life is spinning out of control. He struggles to relate to his family and regain their love, and after repeatedly visiting his rabbi, the answers to his dilemmas remain completely ignored. He is later involved in a car crash and after facing serious consequences in his career for accusations made by an anonymous threat, he decides to change the student’s grades after all, to save himself. The film ends with an impending hurricane. The main theme of the film relates to how unfair and unjust life can be, or furthermore the difficult reality of being Jewish (Coen interview).

The character of Judith in *A Serious Man* is a difficult representative of the autonomous, feminist woman. Although she appears at first to contain power over her husband – deciding to divorce him out of sheer frustration and conflicting indifference towards him – she lets herself be controlled by her new fiancé Sy, citing him as her decision maker, “Sy said…” she
repeats endlessly. Her decision to leave her husband is also in part dictated by her role as the mother; as she, rather unfairly, asks him to leave their home for their benefit. She bears similarities to Penny in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* since she seems dissatisfied with the protagonist’s performance as a provider, father and a husband and therefore seeks to disown him and provide her children with a more acceptable father-figure. She is therefore on the surface more akin to the problematic portrayal of the mother so common in films. The comparison between *A Serious Man* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is appropriate in many aspects.

In both these cases the mother decides to rid herself of the father in a radical way; Penny tries to convince her children of his death, while Judith wants to have a “get” – a Jewish religious ceremony that allows the participant to remarry – and seeks to rid herself of his presence (begging him to leave her place in consideration for the children). In both these instances the fathers (i.e. Larry and Ulysses) are far more sympathetic than the mothers, since they are not the ones threatening to break up the nuclear family they have built. However, the mothers are in a way performing as the patriarchal society has ordered them to; to become the ideal woman through motherhood, and furthermore maintaining a passive facade by allowing their new husbands a degree of control over them. (Kaplan, p. 127–128) Mothers are in a way bestowed with a conflicting power; i.e. while they do have a limited power it is their lack thereof that defines it. This is the reason for their confusing status within society, films and feminism. Furthermore, this explains the characterization of the mother archetype whom the CBs have chosen to portray in these films; i.e. why this portrayal is lacking certain qualities in accordance to most films.

However, Judith does display genuine emotion when faced with the death of her would-be husband. Her despair might be related to her uncertain role as a newly separated woman, or simply true anguish over having lost the love of her life. The rest of the film she spends inconsolable and sobbing uncontrollably, her voice and thoughts having disappeared – reminiscent of how Smelik wrote of the silencing of women in film by presenting them as unintelligible in manner, since her hysteria is mostly presented as comical. (p. 11)

*A Serious Man* has a rather puzzling short film at its beginning, where the female protagonist therein foreshadows what is to come and thus sets an unusual tone for the film as a whole. The story takes place in a nineteenth century Eastern Europe, presenting the audience with a Jewish couple arguing (the dialogue completely in Yiddish) over whether their intended and soon-to-be arriving house guest is a ghost. When the guest arrives the wife proceeds to stab
him in the chest in order to prove her conviction. The guest's reaction is to laugh over his predicament, then appear to be dying despite himself and finally wander off into the night. The husband is horrified over the wife's actions, the wife is certain she saved them both and the audience is puzzled and slightly unnerved by this strange start. The CBs described in an interview with *Time Out* how their intention with this beginning was precisely this: for the audience to feel “discomfited”. The wife in the story appears to be an extremely strong-willed, authoritative woman who fits the stereotype of Jewish females. The CBs background is of importance in this context; “In briefly examining the myths of woman… making use of findings and insights derived from auteur analysis, it is possible to see that the image of woman assumes very different meanings within the different texts of each author’s work… What Peter Wollen refers to as the “force of the author’s preoccupations” (including the obsessions about woman), is generated by the psychoanalytic history of the author.” (Johnston, p. 26-27) It seems clear therefore that the CBs, who were raised Jewish, were influenced by their religion when portraying their characters – especially in this film.

Religion and feminism are in many ways incompatible due to how women were portrayed in religious texts. In the Old Testament the females were described to have received punishment for their “submission to temptation” and involving their husbands in the sin, i.e. the original sin of eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge (Doc. 1 -1, Browning, Green, Witte Jr, p. 3). The Woman is therefore perceived as sinful by default; her sin is evident with her gender and the punishment must fit the crime (i.e. subordination and shaming). This is the case with many religions; therefore females have had to endure suffering and oppression through religious reasoning and the patriarchy is furthermore established by religious decree. Films portraying extremely religious characters therefore contain poor portrayals of the Female. When the CBs decided to produce such an overtly Jewish film they were nervous to see the response of the Jewish community, and were surprised when the feedback proved relatively positive (*Time Out* interview). *A Serious Man* is a film containing primarily non-secular Jewish characters, so religion will inevitably be involved in the portrayal of women within the film. Judith is a character constricted by her environment and dependent upon the men in her life. Her autonomy is compromised by allowing herself to be influenced to an extreme extent by her lover. Furthermore, since her religion is such an important part of her (her name even having the meaning “Jewess”) she presents another aspect of the problematic representations the CBs constantly play with, include unwittingly or even mock.
Conclusion

The Coen brothers can be said to be feminist filmmakers in the way they readdress, exaggerate and even mock the historical misrepresentation of women in mainstream Hollywood films. In their repertoire the woman is represented in multifaceted, often in paradoxical ways. She is an ornament, an object and a desirable goal to strive towards. She is subjugated, manipulated and abused. She is full of spirit, kind, autonomous and defeated. She is the stereotypical mother or sultry siren sent to wreak havoc among men. She is intense, aggressive but ultimately resigned to her fate. And lastly she is religious, and probably restricted by that fact. This begs the question of whether or not the films which Joel and Ethan Coen offer to the public are in fact patriarchal or matriarchal. Since their religion does represent certain qualities for Matriarchy, inherited through the mother, Jewish females have had more control within Judaism than history and society have overtly acknowledged and Jewish mothers are believed to hold a high level of control in their family. The CBs films which entail females as protagonists (or at least secondary protagonists), do in fact present them as being able to fend for themselves when opposed with male characters, therefore creating at least an illusion of Matriarchy. However, the films ultimately mirror reality as it is; the females are inevitably living within a patriarchal society. The Matriarchy is therefore present within the Coen universe, however implicitly, yet is mostly suffocated by the all too real and imposing Patriarchy. Unfortunately, the most iconic and memorable characters from CBs body of work remain in the hands of their reoccurring male actors such as Jeff Bridges, John Turturro, Steve Buscemi and John Goodman. And my personal opinion is after admiring the films for the audacity, inventiveness and sheer brilliance, I always find them lacking when it comes to the full – fleshed role of a “real” woman.

One would hope that the next step for sympathetic non-misogynist Hollywood filmmakers, akin to the versatile Coen Brothers, would be able to sufficiently give representation to the hitherto mostly misrepresented gender, to portray them as autonomous, with fleshed out personalities involving hopes and dreams and fully developed relationships. The analysis and examination of films is important to this end. “It is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected” according to Claire Johnston. (p. 30) If one were to apply the fabled Bechdel test to these films I find that
unfortunately only one of them passes it, and that is *Fargo*. For in the words of Anneke Smelik:

“Female filmmakers have to undo the spell of culturally dominant fantasy of the eternal feminine by showing the “real” life of “real” women on the silver screen. In opposition to the glamour of a Garbo, a Dietrich or a Monroe, for instance, female directors should film the everyday life of a “normal”, that is unglamorous, woman.” (p. 8)

Though the Coen's have done a marvelous job in presenting autonomous women, women whose separation from the male is actually to their benefit, their portrayals are by no means perfect. But maybe such a demand is unattainable given the male-dominated reality we live in. I do however believe that the evolution of the female role in the film industry for the last decades has been such that one should be mildly optimistic in these matters.
Works Cited


