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**Maniacal Hijinks:
The Coen Brothers & Cartoon Humour**

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ABSTRACT

The Coen Brothers have established themselves as film auteurs, managing to work within the Hollywood film industry and outside of it. Their unique style, their ability to blend multiple genres into one cohesive film, is what sets them apart from their contemporaries and many filmmakers through out. But this thesis sets out to investigate the foundations of the Coens' filmmaking abilities within an animated context, to see if the Coens have taken inspiration and influence from the animated cartoons of Warner Brothers' *The Looney Tunes* and Metro Goldwyn Mayer's *Tom & Jerry*.

ABSTRAKT

Bratři Coenovi se ve filmovém světě etablovali jako autorští režiséři, kteří se zvládli prosadit jak v hollywoodském filmovém průmyslu, tak mimo něj. Jejich jedinečný styl a schopnost v jednom filmu soudržně kombinovat více žánrů je to, co je odlišuje od jejich současníků a mnoha dalších filmových tvůrců. Tato práce si však klade za cíl prozkoumat základy filmařských schopností bratrů Coenových v kontextu animovaného filmu a zjistit, zda se Coeni inspirovali a nechali ovlivnit snímky společnosti The Warner Brothers – „*The Looney Tunes*“ a společnosti Metro Goldwyn Mayer's - „*Tom & Jerry*“.

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Introduction

Maniacal Hijinks: Warner Brothers, Coen Brothers and MGM

When Joel and Ethan Coen broke into the movie industry, with their debut feature *Blood Simple* (1984), a tale of murder, affairs and blackmail, they launched themselves as a surprising new talent. Over the years, a wide-ranging career has showcased an equally wide-ranging talent. Brooker claims, “The Brothers Coen are two of the most original and distinctive American filmmakers of the past three and a half decades” (Brooker: VII) Their career has seen varying criticism in regards their films, such as being “all surface and no substance” (Ebert: *The Hudsucker Proxy*), “deftly clever and irrepressibly goofy” (Kenny: *Hail Caesar*) or “airless but ingeniously nasty” (Jones: 29). The Coens plant homages in their films to many other films, as well as art, literature and cultural references. On certain occasions, they have, from time to time, gone as far as to reference cartoon characters in their movies such as Elmer Fudd in *The Ladykillers* (2004) and Woody Woodpecker in *Raising Arizona* (1987). But this thesis wants to further explore if the pair owe a deeper debt of gratitude to the cartoons, such as *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*, beyond the usual homage they pay to different subject matter. This thesis wants to examine the comedic merit of the Coens’ work in part and see if such merit is based on a foundation of gags that is, in turn, based in cartoon comedy. There is an absurdist thread running through their comedies; *Raising Arizona* (1987), a story about an unlucky couple unable to conceive a child of their own leads the couple on a path of a kidnap, theft and regret; *The Big Lebowski* (1998), a case of mistaken identity that leads to trouble; and *Burn After Reading* (2008), about a simple misunderstanding that leads to murder, espionage and confusion. Absurdity, being “extremely silly or ridiculous” (Merriam-Webster) has been a cornerstone of comedy since *ab ovo*, but the Coens’ work strikes a strong resemblance to the animated short films of the late 30s to 60s. All animated shorts, like Walt Disney’s creations, Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck or

other lesser known cartoons, owe a good deal to absurd comedy too, but there is something unique to *The Looney Tunes*' exploits, Tom's hungry taste for Jerry (and Jerry's subsequent revenge) that are commonplace and at home in the Coen Brothers' filmography.

In this thesis, I wish to explore this similarity between the Coens and cartoon humour. I intend to identify and analyze what makes these selected cartoons (*The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*) and the Coens' comedies funny, absurd, and special and examine the relationship that exists between the two. I want to see if at all, the Coen Brothers owe a debt to the cartoon comedies of the post-World War Two era, which have managed to become a staple in the comedic diets of young and old, generations after their initial release. It has been said of these directors that, "Joel and Ethan who are manifestly unconventional, cast unconventional actors in unconventional roles that they write in their unconventional stories and somehow they get them made" (Tim Blake Nelson: Peter Travers Interview). I contend that their unconventional success is due, in part to absurdity, which is a reliable comedic style to fall back on and they do so quite often. Even their more serious dramas do contain elements of comedy.

While the Coen Brothers have not spoken about any conscious influence of cartoons on their early development, or indeed on their filmmaking style, this thesis posits to show that there does indeed exist a comparative relationship, between their style and animated shorts. They may not have been directly influenced by such animations, but they do share a stylistic oeuvre and similar comedic traits.

The Coens approach each film as a new stylistic challenge according to the nature of the setting, the period, and the plot, yet there are always certain stylistic devices that crop up in a Coen movie such as wide-angle lenses, complicated tracking shots, creative sound, color, and art direction (Bergan: 29)

I would add to Professor Bergan's observations on the stylistic devices in a Coen movie that when the funny scenes appear, they are, more often than not, absurd

in their content. Whether it's The Dude dropping off a ransom demand in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) or Jean Lundegaard running around her home, screaming hysterically, covered in a shower curtain, trying to escape a kidnapping in *Fargo* (1996), they offer not just absurdity, but present it in a cartoonish nature – that which is “like a cartoon, esp in being one-dimensional, brightly coloured, or exaggerated” (Collins).

In examining both the Coens' opus and *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*, I want to offer some background, both historical and sociological, to explain how both the filmmakers and animators found a niche in the market in which to exploit. I want to examine the idea of cartoon comedy and see what makes it funny, and how Joel, Ethan, Bugs and Tom successfully use it to make audiences laugh.

This thesis will explore the commonalities that exist between the Coen Brothers' work and that of animated comedies, examining the tropes, “a common or over used theme or device” (Merriam-Webster), the styles and characters of both. Finally, I will look at the use of violence in the Coens' comedies and compare it with the cat-and-mouse adventures of Tom and Jerry, or the lunatic antics of Bugs, Daffy, Porky as well as their violent loving, cartoon colleagues.

Nihilism is a repeated accusation that has been made against the brothers for their representation of violence and meaning (or its meaninglessness) in their films. In *Raising Arizona*, when, Dot and Glen's children run riot in Hi's trailer “words cannot do justice to the nihilistic comedy of this scene as these children spin off into a frenzy of lunatic destruction” (Russell: 36-37), or in *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), a film about marriage, divorce and love, where the Coens show a disregard for marriage by “adopting a vantage on the nihilism of modern marriage” (Buchner 60-61) by focusing on divorce. But these quotes do not clarify the nature of the violence of their films. In *Burn After Reading*, the characters are killed, ultimately without meaning or purpose. It is a bloodbath but without a point.

The violence in their movies tends to be quite brutal and rather a difficult vision to witness, whatever the case, cause or situation may be. It is true violence, raw and illicit at times. Yet, the violence is undercut by the way it is portrayed. The motivation for such violence is unjustly imbalance. In many of the Coens' films, the punishment for the crime is not fairly distributed.

The philosophical debate about the representation of violence in cinema, while an important topic to be discussed, is not an aim of this thesis. Instead, I want to show that the violence that does occur in their films is cartoonish in nature, albeit, bloodier and far more graphic than anything Elmer Fudd could ever imagine, by drawing examples between the cartoons and the Coens in on-screen portrayals of the violence itself.

To prove this point and to show a comparable relationship between the Coens and cartoons, I will draw primarily from the Coen Brothers' comedy films, *Raising Arizona*, *The Big Lebowski* and *Fargo*, while making reference to many of their other films, as well. The primary films are so chosen because, as I will prove in this thesis, they not only share the same tropes, style, themes and characters as the cartoons mentioned, but they are also emblematic of cartoonish violence as well.

After the dark *Blood Simple*, the Coens wanted to do something different with their next feature, "as different from *Blood Simple* as possible – galloping instead of languorous, sunny instead of lurid, genial and upbeat instead of murderous and cynical" (Allen: 17-18). This was *Raising Arizona*, the Coens' second feature. Roger Ebert professed that, "the movie cannot decide if it exists in the real world of trailer parks and 7-Elevens and Pampers, or in a fantasy world of characters from another dimension. It cannot decide if it is about real people, or comic exaggerations." (Ebert, 1987) In this comedy, the brothers came across tropes that they would use in later films – absurd characterizations, wacky plot lines and themes – that fit the mold of cartoons, as many of their other films do too.

While *Blood Simple* is by no means a comedy, much of their later work falls into that category despite having influences from many other genres and themes. As this thesis will explore, *The Big Lebowski*, *Burn After Reading* and many other of the Coens' work utilizes the comedic trends of cartoons to add something specific and unique to their own brand of comedy. It is within the remit of these dimensions that we see the Coens' style come to light. While these comedies are violent and graphic at times, they still fulfill the nature of cartoons, from slapstick violence to zany antics.

While *Blood Simple*, *True Grit* (2010), a western about a little girl searching for her father's killer, and *No Country For Old Men* (2007), which sees a hit man tracking a man who stole his money, are in the Coen Brothers' repertoire, they are not comedies and will not be discussed. The *Ladykillers* (2004), while a remake of the superior Ealing classic, about bank robbers plotting to kill their landlady, is far removed from the quaint England in which the original took place, the Coens' version is so renovated and rebranded to be fully within their own style and so in keeping with that of cartoonish imagery. Their original work, *Intolerable Cruelty*, *A Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), about a barber caught up in a murder, and *Miller's Crossing* (1990), charting the lowly existence of a gangster, do show the ability of the brothers to work different genres together and separately. While *Intolerable Cruelty* is the brothers' attempt at a screwball comedy, it has its moments of cartoonish humour, and will be discussed in this manner later. *Miller's Crossing* and *A Man Who Wasn't There* are more film noir like *Blood Simple*, rather than the absurd humour we expect of cartoon comedy. Despite the fact that slapstick humour is present in these films, on the whole, they are not relevant to the thesis's analysis of cartoon comedy and so will not be referenced. *Barton Fink* (1991), a film about a screenwriter suffering from writer's block, as a black comedy has connections to the cartoon world and its practices and will be discussed. Yet, while their laugh out loud comedy *O, Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), which tells the story of three escaped convicts, is more in keeping with the

slack jawed yokels of Cletus and Brandine Spuckler from *The Simpsons* than *The Looney Tunes* or *Tom & Jerry*, there are some interesting similarities to examine. *The Big Lebowski*, *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* and others do have this similar genre-melding tradition that audiences have come to expect from the Coens. As Ronald Bergan describes their filmmaking style:

Many of their movies are fundamentally films noir... Yet, however different they are on the surface, each of the films contains elements of the other, horror edging into comic strip farce, violence into slapstick and vice versa. One thing is clear: The Coens have little interest in what passes for "realism" in Hollywood mainstream movies (Bergan: 26)

The bridging of these genres, and the brothers' treatment of realism are something associated with the Coens' style and filmmaking abilities. Cartoons, likewise, use absurd humour and scenarios to mock and make fun of other genres like, film noir, musicals, or romance, while at the same time belittling the reality of the cartoon's world.

Like cartoons, the morality of the Coens' tales is blurred. Revenge instead of justice seems to be the order of the day and so, the punishment far outweighs the crime. Like Bugs Bunny's revenge on Elmer Fudd, the character of Julian Marty (Dan Hedaya), the unfortunate husband from *Blood Simple*, murdered and buried in the desert, does not merit the consequences that befall him. Just like Wile E. Coyote's efforts to catch Road Runner, it seems that the world is against Goldthwaite Higginson Dorr, PhD, the Tom Hanks character in *The Ladykillers*, as he tries to kill Mrs. Munson, fate intervenes.

It seems, that the best place to start this thesis, is at the beginning, not just at the beginning of the Coen Brothers, or *The Looney Tunes* or *Tom & Jerry*, but at the beginning of animated films, and explain why and how absurd comedy plays such a large role in animation. Firstly, the history of animation is an important issue to discuss, as it gives this thesis a background to the landscape of the Coens' filmography and the cartoons too, and how they have evolved to become what they

are. Once achieved, the thesis will be better equipped to delineate the specific characteristics of the cartoon genre and compare them to the work of the Coens' film catalogue.

Chapter One

Animation: A History

The 20th Century was the dawn of a new era in art. Cinema was still in its infancy and the creation of the moving image was still an innovation. “During ten years, from 1895 to 1905, man’s achievements affected all spheres of human activity and were to have a profound effect on the future” (Sorell: 178).

Pioneering forces such as August and Louis Lumiere, Georges Melies and Alice Guy explored this newly discovered territory, and permanently changed the landscape of cinema for the next century. Documentaries intrigued audiences, by showing the unseen world, outside their window. Fantastical magical stories fueled people’s imaginations, while the emergence of narrative filmmaking gave fictional characters and plots the semblance of reality, engaging audiences in a pseudo-theatrical space.

Cinema became the warped reality of the real world. A new art form had come to the masses’ attention: the visual medium. This allowed beloved source material - books, real-life stories, cartoons and comic strips to be adapted to the big screen. In recent years, this phenomenon has reared its head in the form of Marvel Comics’ big screen adaptations but in the 19th and very early 20th centuries, cinema was still finding its feet. In 1908, animation would make its debut on the silver screen.

Emile Cohl, originally Courtet (1857 – 1938) made *Fantasmagorie* in 1908, ushering in the creation of animated stories in cinema. Following the literary traditions of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and William James, Cohl makes use of the “stream-of-consciousness” narrative mode. At one minute and seventeen seconds, the short is the first hand-drawn film. It follows the adventures of a stick-figured man dealing with objects morphing into different objects – a bottle, to a flower, to an elephant, to a door, etc. As Gordon Arnold explains “Fantasmagorie is a jumbled, dreamlike parade of transformations” (Arnold: 11)

“Melies was the first to view cinema as the realm of the imagination” (Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema*: 11), and he allowed for the magic of the optics to capture the audience’s attention. Cohl inherited this and introduced true animation to the cinematic world. Cohl was influenced, as well as associated with, *The Incoherents*. Arnold explains further that, “The Incoherents group was very nontraditional in its aims” (Arnold: 11). But nevertheless, Cohl had, based on the influence of *The Incoherents*, in *Fantasmagorie*, fashioned the template for which all other cartoons would follow; absurd satire.

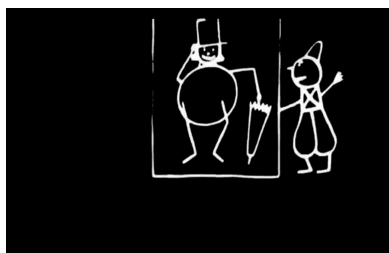


Fig 1.1



Fig 1.2

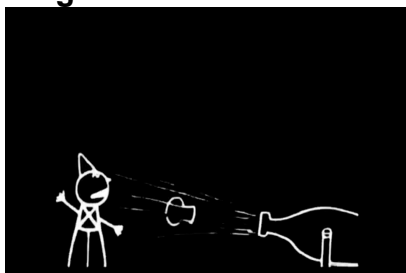


Fig. 1.3

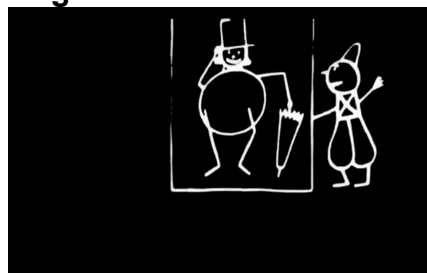


Fig. 1.4

Fig. 1.1-1.4 show the absurd and surrealistic elements of early animation.

The Incoherents were founded and led by Jules Levy, a publisher and writer, who opened an exhibition in his Parisian apartment dedicated to the artists with little talent. It sought to satirize and denigrate the status of art and all its forms. Levy created the Incoherents as a means to make people laugh, and that it did. He held exhibits which “carnavalesque inversions of the art establishment, which outrageously parodied, not just the conventions of the official Salon, but also the aesthetics of impressionism” (Gluck: 117)



Fig 1.5 An Incoherent movement masterpiece making fun of the art that had gone before it.

But, the Movement was short-lived and is now long forgotten. Even by 1908, it had wound down and become obsolete, although it was a precursor to Dadaism and influential in the work of Marcel Duchamp. Despite its lack of ubiquity in Parisian society or in the Zeitgeist of the time, the Incoherents left their mark on the world of cinema, not least (due to Cohl setting the standard) for animation. The Incoherents abhorred seriousness and rebuked it in all its (ironical) seriousness. Parodies of famous artworks, such as Mona Lisa smoking a pipe (**Fig. 1.5**) puns and homophony, used comedic elements for the public to question the underlining morals of contemporary art. Nearly one hundred and thirty years ago the Movement finished, but the comedic methods that they practiced have become the traditional recipe for a successful cartoon – to mock and subvert culture and its references.

The modern Walt Disney Empire had humble beginnings for an animator who worked for Universal Studios. We know Disney is synonymous with his most famous creation Mickey Mouse, who first appeared in 1928's *Steamboat Willie*. But it is a precursor to Mickey, Oswald The Lucky Rabbit, which launched Disney fully into the world of animation. Before that he had created *Alice's Wonderland*, a series that was

“based on the idea of a live child in a world of animated images” (Bendazzi, *Animation A World History*: 51).

Disney introduced Oswald to the world in *Trolley Troubles* (1927). Oswald was the property of Universal and did not travel with Walt when he started his own ‘House of Mouse’ later, but Oswald was present in the characteristics and physical appearance of Mickey and the future of Disney.

Like Cohl’s work (inspired by the *Incoherents*), Disney’s early films seemed to feature absurdity. Oswald, during his adventures in *Trolley Troubles*, manages to navigate various obstacles by bending and breaking the laws of physics. Oswald’s train is cognizant, the goat’s aggressive attack does not hurt Oswald or injure him, and Oswald himself is capable of removing his leg without a second thought. The creativity of such an image is indebted to the surrealistic practices first shown in *Fantasmagorie*. The realm of the cartoon is a place of little pain but plenty of mutilation. As Daffy Duck confesses, squeakily, with Bugs Bunny’s paws wrapped around his throat – “No sweat. This is Looney Tune Land” (*Space Jam*, 1996)

Uniquely positioned, this dawning of the cinematic age coincided with the dawning of a new century, and the twentieth century would not disappoint. Oscar Wilde had quipped that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life” (Wilde: 10), but to examine its inversion with the 20th century in mind is a complicated topic.

Adventures of cowboys taming the Wild West and the heroic deeds during war, provided filmmakers with endless hours of stories to entertain. As the world became more aware of its own history and geo-politics, Hollywood and the film industry used this as inspiration for movies, television and, of course, the cartoons.

The 1930s was not a happy time. Economies still reeling from The Wall Street Crash saw the emergence of war in Spain, Germany, and China and the rise of Fascism and Communism which caused a schism in European and global geopolitics. The rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s, led to the emigration of the Jewish

population, many of whom had worked in the Weimar Republic's film industry, as directors, producers, writers, animators and musicians. "Between 180,000 and 220,000 refugees emigrated from Europe from 1933 – 1945" (US Holocaust Memorial Museum) This exodus caused a stir on the American economy as there were too few jobs to go around, and little employment for those with specialized skills.

Vincent Brook gives an account of the early years of Hollywood: "mounting antisemitism, fueled by their largely lower-class immigration, which blocked their rise in more established industries and shunted them into what was then a lowly, if not wholly disreputable, motion picture business" (Brook: 4). This led to a large number of Jews becoming exhibitors in the film industry, as well as film studio heads.

But that was a different era. "The Hollywood majors throughout the 1930s, a period Henry Popkin later termed the "Great Retreat" in Jewish cultural representation, tended to deracinate Jewish characters or eliminate them entirely, and to downplay or ignore the Nazi threat" (Brook: 7). The United States, scarred from The First World War, had inverted itself into isolation. This meant hard times for those immigrants looking for work. For the classically trained musicians the talent pool was deep, but they found little opportunity. To survive this drought, the musicians worked themselves into small orchestras that could be hired cheaply to perform classical and original music. Hollywood studios and the wider American industry saw the potential in this. Warner Brothers was one of these studios. Such cheap music allowed the budgeting of animated films to become more feasible. Clear from the name, *The Looney Tunes* (and its sister series) *Merrie Melodies* was a homage to the music, "cartoons designed to plug the music in Warner Brothers' cartoons"(Samerdyke, *A Historical Introduction*). Warner Brothers paid tribute to such classical music in episodes like *The Rabbit Of Seville* (1950) – a playful mockery of Rossini's opera, or *What's Opera, Doc?* (1957), which showcases Elmer Fudd singing the immortal line "Kill The Wabbit!" to the

rhythm of Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries. Even earlier, *Sinkin' In The Bathtub* (1930), *Congo Jazz* (1930), *Hold Anything* (1930) were among the first of the *Merrie Melodies*.

The immigration of Jews into the US had an influence on the Coens as a novel, *City of Nets* by Otto Friedrich, had inspired them to write *Barton Fink*. Although Warner Bros. had commissioned *The Looney Tunes* three years before and the wider animation industry had been at work for years, this possibility to hire cheap labour must have been a welcoming element in production.

It is reasonable to assume that the flood of European refugees fleeing tyranny and terror could not have gone unnoticed by the American storytellers. As if such an occasion could be ignored, now meeting these European issues face-to-face, was too close to avoid recognizing the truth of what was happening on the global stage. Cohl had captured the spirit of the Incoherents in the early part of the century, and Disney the airs of surrealism in the 20s, animated films now took a turn into darker themes of violence, greed, anarchy and even nihilism, mirroring the horrors that the world was experiencing in reality. "The cartoons of the early thirties, like vaudeville acts, were woven together from isolated bits and gags" (Sartin: 70). But in later thirties and onwards, cartoon humour was going to change. "Modes, morals and manners underwent a great change after World War II. The experiences of the prewar period and wartime precluded all thoughts of man as innately good. The mood was somber" (Sorell: 223).

Films have been seen as an escape from such torments, allowing audiences respites to re-energize.

Just as Chaplin could not be dismissed as a children's neither could the Walt Disney of the thirties be patronized as a children's filmmaker. It was adult admissions that lifted *Three Little Pigs*, *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* to enormous success and it was adult audiences, and especially young men in uniform, who responded enthusiastically to the Warner Bros. and MGM cartoons a few years later. (Barrier: IX-X)

It may have been an outlet to laugh away the strains of the time, and the strains of the time would find their way into cartoons. *The Ducktators* (1942) was a Warner Brothers' short that openly mocked Nazism. They also made propaganda films about the war effort, *Confusions of a Nutzy Spy* (1943) and *Daffy The Commando* (1943). But, while these were soft hearted, cartoons at the time were verging into darker territory. *Curtain Razor* (1947), where a character dies and his ghost returns, but, contrary to the nature of most cartoons, he remains dead forever. Another, *Hare Ribbin'* (1944), has two endings: one where Bugs kills a character, a dog, outright and another where the dog does the deed himself – both are equally dark.

This is an interesting point. The theme of cartoon violence, its mechanisms and traditions are well known in the world. Its impact on society has been incalculable. We see these cartoon characters are as synonymous with the studios that produce them. Mickey Mouse could be more famous than Walt Disney. Bugs Bunny unveils a new Warner Brothers release with prestige every time its logo is shown – he is Warners' mascot. Such societal and cultural innovations must have an affect on the public. Many draw inspiration from cartoons and the characters we have known since childhood. Their presence in our cultural lexicon now incurs an immediate reference and meaning to us. "What's up, Doc?", "I tat I taw a puddy tat", and "th- th- that's all folks!" are universally known, just as "Tom & Jerry" are interchangeable with "Cat & Mouse".

In the wake of the Second World War, questions of existential angst and meaning came to the fore. When "the boys brought home with the smell of Zen Buddhist incense whatever it may have meant to them. Jazz turned cool, conversations revolved around Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and Henry Miller and smoking marijuana became a habit" (Sorell: 224). Among them was added

Kierkegaard, who said, “Existence itself – the act *of* existing, is a striving, and is both pathetic and comic in the same degree” (Kierkegaard: 84).

Later still, postmodernism came into the cultural consciousness as well, examining everything under a new scope, mixing ideas, styles and conventions from earlier periods. These new thoughts in the 20th century muddied the social waters of the world. “Out of this ambience arose the tragicomedy – the grotesque, dark, or sick comedy of the second half of the century” (Sorell: 181). This was the result of existential questions raised about life and meaning that we see in cartoons like *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*. Violence is meaningless, pain is indifferent, is there purpose to anything. Whereas action and violence affect other cartoon characters, the violent and pain were more dreamlike and therefore painless. When we see Tom get hurt or Sylvester suffer, it is the suffering that makes us chuckle. “In the 1950s, the critic John Culshaw traced true violence in animation to the cartoons released during and especially after World War II, pointing specifically to *Tom & Jerry*” (Goldmark: 60). With such a viewpoint our existence is considered pathetic and comic. Futile existence is something that the cartoons latched on to where crimes are not punished justly but unjustly. This is a trait mirrored in the Coens’ films as well and will be discussed later.

In the world of animation, Disney is the behemoth, but both Tom, Jerry and Bugs, et al. deserve some praise and recognition for competing against Mickey for global fame. Due in part to its longevity, but also its themes, animated films like *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*, are trans-generational, uniting all age groups. Despite the level of violence, the manner in which it is dealt with seems, like the *Incoherents*, to take the seriousness unseriously. *The Looney Tunes* at its core has this in its mind. Its portrayal of such violence is painless in the same way it was in the beginning of cinema, yet it also clings to the audience’s pathos when the characters suffer. There is an interesting combination of the two emotions at play.

The cartoons “escape from reality while adding a comic touch to the heroic action, in order to compensate for the absence of the real” (Sorell: 117). The Coens copy this approach, as we will see later. Their films, despite being real, are made farcical and comedic to distract from the serious drama at work.

The far-reaching effects of such comedic traditions, such as cartoon humour, given time, work their way into the traditional storytelling, in much the same way that they do with cultural awareness. *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry* have not changed their comedic formula. The cartoons are still violent and absurd. Like true art, animated humour has found a way to inspire others. It is the humour that generations have grown up with, watching on television, among them are The Coen Brothers.

In 1984, Joel and Ethan Coen released their debut film. It had all the hallmarks of a 40s pulp novel and the markings of a promising career. The brothers are well documented as fans of gritty pulp novels – “most of the movies are influenced, in one way or another, as much by other films as by the holy trinity of American crime writers: Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain” (Bergan: 26), yet their films do tend to incorporate other genres into their pieces of work, making it difficult to define the brothers by any one specific genre. But “one thing is clear: the Coens have little interest in what passes for “realism” in Hollywood” (Bergan: 26) Like *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*, the brothers substitute realism with a comic touch.

Since their debut, they found their style in the form of giving characters likeable whims and wacky personalities. The Coens have found a niche in the market to mix the ideas of the Incoherents, existentialists and the postmodernists and incorporate them into their own work. Their films work in shade and light, serious and comic, to echo the aforementioned Kierkegaard quote. It is their style – a way to make sense of a nonsensical world – that makes their work so similar to *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*. These cartoons, like the Coens communicate with the audience through

humour because “the existing individual can communicate with another individual only indirectly. This is effected by a proximation through irony and humor” (Kelly: 97).

Their filmography continued to grow with *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), *Barton Fink* (1991) – awarded the Palme d’Or – and *Fargo* (1996) – which led to the brothers winning The Best Screenplay at the Academy Awards. Now recognized as genuine auteurs, “the Coens claim to take responsibility for everything in their movies as true auteurs do” (Bergan: 25), who “from their very first film, were interested in working inside the rules of a genre, and then breaking them from within” (Bergan: 25), the brothers’ childhoods coincided with the second half of the 20th century, when the grotesque humour rose in the post-World War Two environment. Growing up in the world of small town America, the brothers focused their stories on the little guy in a little place. But there is a humour to the brothers too, a prankster nature, such as Joel’s claims, “I can beat him up so I get to direct” (Bergan: 2). They seem to navigate a narrow route in maintaining comedy and violence. Their humour is dark and absurd and the brothers appear to be the products of the society they were raised in and influenced by.

Chapter Two

Characters

In an interview with Charlie Rose, when asked if their films are character driven, Joel and Ethan hesitated a response. Frances McDormand retorted “caricature driven maybe!” (*Charlie Rose: The Man Who Wasn’t There*). This joke is probably more serious than originally meant as the characters in the Coens’ film do fall into archetypal characteristics that are invariably shared by those archetypes present in cartoons.

In this chapter, I wish to look at some of the characters that appear in the Coen Brothers’ films, and compare their characteristics and personality traits to those who occupy the wacky world of *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*. In analyzing these characters, I will examine what connects the characters from animation to those in the Coens’ catalogue and also examine what sets these protagonists apart from the other characters and the context of their environments.

“Shakespeare relied, of course, on the conventional image of the fool to project certain features of his heroes” (Sorell: 89) The Coens and the cartoons, in fact, do the opposite. They combine the hero and the fool together to make a comedic protagonist at the heart of the story. The underdog character is present in every *Tom & Jerry* cartoon, as Jerry battles like David against Tom’s Goliath. Porky is always hard pressed in some adventure, while Daffy’s quest for vainglory leads him nowhere. As Doom writes, “all their lead men can be classified as idiots, people who believe they possess more intelligence than they do” (Doom: XIII). Here, the thesis will examine some of the characters that fit the hero/fool description. But first, it is time for the intelligent characters.

The Dude, The Dog & The Wabbit

In an interview with Sam Jones, on *Off-Camera*, Jeff Bridges quoted his daughter's analysis of Bridges' most famous character. "What makes the Dude so special? ... Oh well, because the Dude doesn't do anything. He's Dude. He's been done!" (*Off Camera Interview: Jeff Bridges*). Compared to other heroes in literature, film or theatre, the Dude is not exactly eager to act. He finds himself thrown into an ordeal not by his choosing, wish or plan. He searches for reimbursement for a soiled rug that "really tied the room together". There is no noble act or big dream in the Dude's life. "The Dude is a potheaded loser, another lovable inept. According to the narrator, the Dude is the laziest man in Los Angeles, "which would place him high in the runnin' for laziest world-wide." Nonetheless, the Dude survives beatings and danger to solve the case" (Davis: 16). He is content with his lot and his apathetic ambition extends only as far as winning a bowling tournament.

As a solitary character, the Dude is removed from the world. His friends, while as successful as he is, are the movers and shakers of his environment, pushing him into decisions. Walter is abrasive where the Dude is mellow and demanding where he is suggestive. Walter Sobchak, played by one of the Coens' staple actors, John Goodman, is the ying to the Dude's yang. Donny, played by Steve Buscemi, is the put upon friend, who is ignored for the vast majority of screen time, or bullied into submission. These two will be discussed in greater depth later, but it is important to mention them now, as their presence in the film causes a sharp contrast between the Dude and his contemporaries. The Dude has protested against the war and violence and is looked down as a bum by others of influence and power. He has no job and no source of employment. This does not bother him in the least. He is content within the confines of his world, happy to let the world be the world. He needs to be provoked into action.

In much the same way, the other Lebowsky, Jeffrey 'The Big' Lebowsky, played by David Huddleston, is set apart as an example of the environment and the context of the story. He is a judgmental billionaire, ranting about hippies and lazy ungrateful people.



Fig 2.1 *Jeff Bridges as the cool, suave contemplative Dude.*

Having been wounded in Korea, he is the opposite of the Dude's pacifist ways. He has an army of servants who bend to his every whim and fancy, but the Dude does not. He has to be convinced to act in this world, where inaction is his normal behaviour. It is only with Bunny's mysterious disappearance that the Dude becomes willing to participate. The money offered as a broker's fee, is not looked on with greed, but as a delightful bonus.

In a world of chaos and jarring opinions, the Dude's cool, calm, relaxed demeanour shines through. Even when Woo urinates on his rug and the Dude's face is shoved down a toilet, he does not lose his temper. He only speaks to his assailants in sarcastic disbelief. It is out of character for him to be vindictive, or nasty, but he does (rarely) break character and get infuriated. This anger comes as a surprise to the audience as it juxtaposes the true nature of the Dude. He only loses his temper when he is under pressure from Walt's eagerness and vocal aggression during the ransom hand-off, or Lebowsky's tyrannical demands. He rages when Walt gives a half-hearted eulogy to Donny at the film's close, but even that is out of character for a man who has been, for the most part, the clear headed, mellow Zen master. He later reflects, when the barman sympathizes with him over Donny's death, "oh yeah, well, you know, sometimes you eat the bar and..." before he gets distracted by Sam Elliott's cowboy.



Fig. 2.2 *Dude is covered in ash, just before he loses his cool.*

Within the world of animation, we can see clear similarities between the Dude and many characters. But there are two that spring to mind immediately. The first is a loveable, melancholic, basset hound named Droopy. To look at both these characters side by side, there is an interesting aesthetic occurring. The Dude is a stoner, and on-set, before filming, Jeff Bridges would ask the Coens “if we figured the Dude burned one on the way over” (Baville, *The Making Of The Big Lebowski*). Then, in order to make him look stoned, Bridges would rub his eyes red. Droopy, with a similar physical trait has puffed eyes.

Droopy first appeared in an MGM short film, named *Dumb-Hounded*, in 1943. From the start of Droopy’s career in MGM animation, the similarities between Droopy and the Dude are evident. The two are mirror images of each other in terms of characteristics and temperament. The Dude is cool and calm, as mentioned before, and so is Droopy. *Dumb-Hounded* tells the story of a wolf who has escaped from prison. The warden has released the bloodhounds to sniff out the convict and return him to prison. The bloodhounds are eager to catch their quarry and so race out of the prison with zest. Droopy takes up the rear at a gentle, unchallenged pace. Despite this nonchalant walk, the wolf cannot outrun him. After hailing a taxi, hopping a train, taking a boat and an airplane to a remote cabin hidden from the world, Droopy is still there to capture the convict.

He succeeds. Droopy is the quintessential example of perseverance and quiet determination – the little hound that could. Much like the Dude, it is his melancholic

attitude that sets him apart from the others in his world. He is content, as he knows that success is waiting for him. He need only hang in there.

But that is not to say that Droopy cannot lose his cool. He does. In *The Shooting Of Dan McGoo* (1945), Droopy, a cowboy hero, saves the damsel in distress and is rewarded a kiss. Breaking character, Droopy flies around the room in a frenetic fit, his face ablaze with blushes and steam protruding from his ears. Even in his debut, *Dumb-Hounded*, Droopy is awarded a medal for his duty, and he explodes in triumphant cheers and yells.

These examples are not in keeping with the same emotional anger that the Dude exhibits in *The Big Lebowski* – they are more passions than anger – but in certain episodes Droopy presents some strength and anger, never before seen.



Fig. 2.3



Fig. 2.4

Droopy in between his regular melancholia and his rip-roaring berserk mode

In *Señor Droopy* (1949), Droopy wrestles a bull by grabbing it by the horns and slamming it repeatedly into the ground. *One Droopy Knight* (1957) recycles this gag but the angry outburst and subsequent surprise of Droopy's mood swing remains the same. When angered his demeanour changes.

This berserk mode that Droopy steps into from time to time, is a similarity with the Dude, as anger for both of them is a foreign feeling that is a rare occurrence in their lives. It is a result of their world getting interrupted. It is their calm demeanour in the face of challenge surrounded by frantic and eager characters that makes them stand out as the oddities within their own stories.

Of course, another character shares these same traits. He is the most popular and famous of *The Looney Tunes* – so famous in fact, he became the mascot of Warner Brothers' Studios. This character is Bugs Bunny and he is the king of cool calmness.

1938 saw the emergence of Bugs Bunny, then known under the short-lived identity of The Happy Rabbit. Coincidentally, Droopy's original name was Happy Hound. In analyzing these two characters together with the Dude, it strikes me as interesting that 'happy' was used to describe two of them. It is fitting, therefore, that both should be examined together and against each other, as even their creators meant for these characters to have similar – if not the same – personality traits.



Fig. 2.5.



Fig. 2.6.

Bugs Bunny's unofficial debut in Porky's Hare Hunt (Fig 2.5) and his official debut A Wild Hare (Fig 2.6)

Ever since his debut in *Porky's Hunting Hare* (1938), Bugs (or The Happy Hare) was set up in a scenario that would become his archetypal adventure. Here, Porky is hunting hares. Later, it would be Elmer Fudd or Yosemite Sam "hunting wabbits", but Porky was the first hunter to point a rifle at Bugs and attempt to fill him full of lead. As a set up to what would become a fixed staple in Bugs' adventures, he and other rabbits are innocently eating crops, when Porky shoots at them. This threatening interruption gives Bugs the opportunity to unleash maniacal revenge on Porky and teach him a lesson. It gives the audience the first glimpse into Bugs' smarts as a character, as he manipulates Porky into regretting hunting him in the first place.

Unlike Droopy, who was the silent pursuer in his own debut, Bugs is the prey, hunted and targeted by an aggressor. In this sense, Bugs lives a tranquil life,

untroubled by the outer world, munching carrots and keeping his warren tidy. Like the Dude, Bugs' call to adventure comes from someone intruding on his life, interrupting his domestic happiness and threatening to kill him – in other words provoking him. “It was very important that he be provoked, because otherwise he would be a bully.”

(Emmy Legends Interview: Chuck Jones)

All three of these characters are clever in some way. The Dude seems to be lucky but intelligent enough to solve the mystery of Bunny Lebowski's disappearance. In the beginning he can understand the nature of his contemporaries, claiming that Bunny Lebowski was not kidnapped. She just left her husband and wanted some money. No matter how confusing the mystery becomes, the Dude is capable of staying on point, focusing on confusing elements within the mystery – a strange ability for a stoner – and see the mystery through to a solvable conclusion. When the Dude realizes the truth, it is because of his intelligence, his understanding of people, and their nature, in particular Jeff ‘The Big’ Lebowski.

Both Droopy and Bugs are lucky, in a cartoonish sense, as both have some limited power over the reality of the worlds they occupy. This does not extend to the Dude, obviously. They can abuse and manipulate nature, in such a way that the Dude cannot, but this is due to the fact that they inhabit a cartoon world and not the weird but science friendly world of the Dude's Los Angeles. This power leads the audience to see the characters as intelligent as they understand the psychology and behaviour of the people around them, to think through to a successful ending of their story. In the balance of power, Bugs has the lion's share. While Droopy can muster strength and teleport to random places, Bugs can change costumes in a heartbeat, pull props from thin air, use the appropriate named ‘hare removal’ to turn invisible, and even change the environment of the setting to confuse his antagonist.

While all of these powers are contained within the reality of cartoons – and this is something that will be analyzed, in depth, in a later chapter – to wield these powers

successfully means using the right power at the right time. That requires intelligence. All three protagonists discussed in this sub-chapter are intelligent, but Bugs, again, comes off as the superior example. Bugs, alert to human nature, psychology and how to escape difficulties, dresses in drag to seduce Elmer Fudd, uses mind-boggling logic to avoid getting shot, and uses his antagonist's stupidity against them so that he may prosper and continue in his carefree lifestyle.

That is not to say, that Bugs' temper is unlike Droopy or the Dude. Bugs can get angry, much like the Dude and Droopy do. The same mellow, laidback lifestyle that exists for Droopy and the Dude, is countered by the rage that we sometimes see blaze away inside of Bugs. This usually happens in the rare occasions when the antagonist has the upper hand, or when the world (which Bugs manipulates to a limited extent) fails him. In these moments, we hear him say phrases like "I'll be scared later. Right now, I'm too mad" in *Lumber Jack-Rabbit* (1953), "Of course, you realize, this means war!" in *Bully For Bugs* (1953). We see Bugs lose his cool when a gremlin has gotten the better of him in *Falling Hare* (1943). Here he smashes a window in vexation.

Surprising instances to see when we know Bugs to be the calm and collected rabbit we have always seen him to be. But when he was originally christened 'Happy', like Droopy, it is surprising that a character that exudes this emotion can swing to the opposite emotion so fully.



Fig. 2.7. *Falling Hare* (1943) Bugs about to lose his cool, like his counterparts.

But like the Dude and Droopy, Bugs has a strange collection of traits that connects him to the other two. These traits individualize these protagonists and isolate

them as such. In worlds where every other character is the opposite of the protagonist, there needs to be some trait or oddity that separates the protagonist from the world. These examples, Bugs, Droopy and the Dude are the isolated heroes, the reluctant heroes, and quietly determined to succeed, happy to be lazy or enjoy the simpler things in life, yet intelligent enough and wile enough to function in the world when it requires it of them.

The Three Amigos: A Triangular Friendship

Before writing the script for *The Big Lebowski*, the Coens were inspired to create the character of the Dude, based on a man named Jeff Dowd, “a guy we’ve known for about fifteen years” (The Making of The Big Lebowski 1998) Dowd called himself the Pope of Dope and was actually known as the Dude.” (Bergan: 177). He, like the fictional the Dude, was part of an antiwar group, writing a peaceful manifesto “and did time in jail for conspiracy to destroy federal property” (Bergan: 177) Walt is based on “Walter, a fellow vet who knocked around the movie business” (Bergan: 177). In reality, joyriding teenagers stole Walter’s car and left their homework behind as a means to identify them. This and the subsequent home visit are adapted to the film. Joel and Ethan Coen seem to take real life instances and place it in a fictional framework. But the zaniness of the adventure is the veneer they put over the true events. Despite the oddities of reality in a fictional film, it does not tarnish the similarities between the Dude and the cartoon counterparts mentioned in the previous sub chapter. As Jeff Bridges himself claimed, “I took stuff from him for the Dude, and also from some of my own friends like that. But, to be honest, it’s mostly just me” (Bergan: 178).

For Walt, “it was all on the page... everything is right on the page and I find I am in better hands if I trust material like that” (*The New Yorker Festival Interview: John Goodman*) and so it was the Coens’ creation. The real life inspiration for these

characters does not degrade or take away the qualities of the cartoon characters from their Coen counterparts. The characters in *The Big Lebowski* are comical to the point of cartoonish, regardless of their factual footing. The characters exhibit quirks and crazy traits that are present in cartoons. They fulfill the archetypes of cartoon characters. The counterpart to Bugs and Droopy is the Dude. But there are others as well.

In creating the character of the Dude, the Coens fell into the archetypal comic roles of previous trailblazers, giving Jeff Lebowski the misfortune of having his quaint happy life interrupted, although his coolness perseveres through. In creating a Bugs-like character in the Dude, the Coens then proceeded to give him cartoonish allies in his adventure.

Having diagnosed the Dude to be a Coen Brothers version of Bugs Bunny, the similarities do not die with their laidback lifestyle and apathetic plans, or indeed their tendency to anger. It extends to their choice of friends and the friendships they have within their own environments.

Interestingly, what we see in *The Big Lebowski* between the Dude, Walt and Donny is mirrored in *The Looney Tunes* with the personalities of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and Porky Pig.

In *The Big Lebowski*, the two friends of the Dude, Walt and Donny, all differ in their characteristics yet at the same time maintain a close-relationship. The glue that holds them together is their mutual love of bowling, but still they interact outside of the bowling tournament.



Fig. 2.8.



Fig. 2.9.

The Triangle of Friends

Walt is always there to drive the Dude from place to place, at times, reluctantly when such a favour falls on the Jewish Sabbath. Donny is the present put upon young man oppressed by the dominant Walt and looked after by the somewhat indifferent Dude. The Dude talks to Donny and treats him like a member of the group, he is shocked and saddened by Donny's death, but his grief is short-lived.

Within the structure of this friendship, we see an interesting triangle form. Each, in a strange way, supports the other. Walt, as the dominant character wants everything done his way but manages to excuse himself whenever his actions lead to disaster. Donny, as the quiet, reclusive, shy character, is need of guidance, protection and support from friends to grow. Unfortunately, Walt does not fulfill this need as he repeatedly tells Donny to shut up. But the Dude gives Donny leeway to find his own feet in the world. While the Dude is the leader of the pack, Walt mistakenly believes he is, which ends in chaos as efforts cross and crash together, resulting in failure when the ransom drop turns into a disaster.

When we look at Bugs, Daffy and Porky, we see the same triangular friendship exist in their structure too. Porky is Donny's counterpart. Daffy is Walt's. Just like Walt, Daffy is, at times, dismissive of Porky. Porky's shyness manifests in his trademark stutter. Whereas Donny is quiet, Porky stumbles over his words. The presence of such speech difficulties for both of these characters – Porky's inability to speak without impediment and Donny's quiet disposition – not only tells us so much about them as

characters but also shows us how they act around other characters and what they think of those other characters. The dominant personalities of Walt and Daffy push them down and make them uncomfortably uncertain in their own skins. In *Robin Hood Daffy*, a short with Daffy Duck and Porky Pig from 1958, Daffy is intent on proving that he is Robin Hood to Porky Pig's Friar Tuck. He refuses to allow Porky to leave Sherwood without knowing the truth and becomes quite demanding of Porky, grabbing him and dragging him around the forest.

In *Porky Pig's Feat* (1943), Daffy's misbehaviour causes upset, which results in Porky getting dragged down with him. The examples mentioned do show both personalities to be at war with each other, although, normally the two interact as real friends, helping and assisting each other, when necessary. In other shorts, the friction between the two is less evident and more visually acknowledge. In *Porky Pig's Feat*, Daffy and Porky slide down a rope made of blankets from a hotel window. For a period during this escape, Daffy's posterior nestles perfectly on Porky's head, giving a visual reference to the pair's relationship. But when the context and setting is right, the two personalities do spark, just like Walt and Donny in *The Big Lebowski*.

Walt, equally, blusters through life, threatening to start a fight with the nihilists, which ultimately ends – unintentionally – in Donny's death. In this sense, Porky and Donny become victims to Daffy and Walt's actions. It is left to the Dude and Bugs to offer some consolation, whenever the need is called for, to Porky and Donny. But, interestingly for both Bugs and the Dude, their consolation is not full of succor, as one would expect. Bugs and Dude are normally concerned with their own issues, and instead tend to leave Porky and Donny respectively to their own devices in order to navigate the world as they see fit.

Bugs and the Dude, though, are a foil to Daffy and Walt. They deflect much of the oppression from Porky and Donny, by outsmarting, ignoring or standing up to Daffy and Walt's over inflated expectations. For Walt and Daffy, they are firm friends

to the Dude and Bugs, but in many shorts, Daffy's greed gets the better of him and his friendships are sacrificed in the pursuit of gold. In *Ali Baba Bunny* (1957), Daffy sees a cave full of gold and gems, but before Bugs can even see for himself, Daffy stomps him into the ground with avid passion. Walt does not follow this route, however. Instead, he boosts his own ego by extolling his successes and virtues, mainly by belittling those of others and claiming the Vietnam War as a marker and the making of Walt as a man. He uses it as a shield to defend his behaviour from attack, talking about his friends who died in Vietnam. But yet, at the same time, it is the symbol of the thing that is missing in his life. He seeks adventure because his life no longer has any. That same emptiness that exists in Walt exists in Daffy. Both are empty and unfulfilled. They want what others have – authority and respect.

As mentioned earlier, Walt demands a leadership role that he is incapable of and Daffy has a similar wish with a similar handicap. Daffy is eternally at odds with Bugs, as he feels he deserves some recognition and higher status over Bugs. It is a competition that leaves Daffy in desperate conditions, as it almost never works out for him. Chuck Jones, a director of The Looney Tunes said it best, "Bugs is a comic hero. Daffy is a comic hero" (*Emmy Legends Interview: Chuck Jones*). This shows the conflict between the two.

In *Space Jam* (1996), when *The Looney Tunes* teamed up with basketball legend, Michael Jordan, to defeat aliens, *The Looney Tunes* collide with the real world. Bugs and Daffy visit Michael Jordan's home in "3-D Land". While there, they disagree on the correct direction to take. Because he is unable to accept orders from someone he views as inferior, Daffy ends up in the doghouse, the prey of the Jordans' domestic pet. In *The Big Lebowski*, during the ransom drop, Walt, ignoring the Dude's wishes to stop, throws the satchel of cash out on the road and drives away. This is a failure that both Walt and Daffy share, due to large part to a character weakness, a

fatal flaw which neither can overcome – acceptance that they are unable to receive the right and responsibility of leadership.

When compared to the rightful leader, the two characters of Walt and Daffy can be spiteful, misgiving and often times they outright ignore any order given to them. But still they are good friends with the other two in their respective trios. Walt comes to the fore and defends Donny when the nihilists burn the Dude's car. Steve Buscemi was uneasy about playing Donny until "I saw the relationship, I saw how much Walter really loves Donny and how they're like brothers." (*Today Extended Interview: The Big Lebowski*) The fraternal bond between them is interesting as it is mirrored in Daffy and Porky's relationship. In *Daffy Doodles* (1946) Porky chases Daffy, a notorious saboteur around a fictional city. Daffy is a menace and makes a mockery of Porky. But when Porky's life is in peril, Daffy saves him. When paired together, Daffy has his arm wrapped around Porky in the introduction's image – they are friends despite their imperfect relationship, just like Donny and Walt are. Daffy has sufficient wiles and maturity to accept Bugs' position as leader, as we see in *Ali Baba Bunny* and even *Porky Pig's Feat*, Daffy begs and requests help from Bugs to save him from the situation Daffy has found himself in.



Fig. 2.10.



Fig. 2.11.

True friendship.

The Disney Dilemma

Another triangular friendship pops up in a different animation: Disney. The three *Looney Tunes* characters are mirrored in the presence of Disney's famed trio, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy (The Dog). Here, is a good opportunity to

discuss the reasons that this thesis chose *The Looney Tunes*, as counterpoints to the Coens' characters, and not Disney. *The Looney Tunes* fit these characters like a glove. While Disney does have similar characteristics to the aforementioned characters, their presentation of humour and relationship is different. Daniel Goldmark already mentioned the critic, John Culshaw and his study into cartoon violence, but here, he continues:

A devoted Disneyophile, Culshaw did not believe that the Disney cartoons (which he used as a benchmark) were violent, interpreting all the violence propagated by Mickey Mouse himself in the early 1930s as slapstick-style funning... Believing that violence for its own sake in the Warner Bros. and MGM cartoons had replaced the charm of the Disney cartoons (Goldmark: 60).

Violence is an important topic of discussion that this thesis will address later, but it is important to recognize the significant difference between Disney, Warner Brothers and MGM. Similarities, in regards characters, are identifiable, but the means in which the characters are presented, differ hugely. This is why the Disney troupe is not referenced in this thesis regarding the Coens or their characters.

The Hack & The Quack

“In tragedy men aspire to more than they can achieve; in comedy they pretend to more” (Kronenberger: 195).

Walter Sobchak is not only the Coen counterpart to Daffy Duck. He shares many similarities with another Coen creation – Barton Fink. A writer with writer's block who cannot survive the new world of cinema, Barton Fink muddles through existence trying to find the perfect story that will encapsulate him as the writer of the working man.

But unfortunately, like Daffy, he does not look far behind the remits of his own fantasy. Barton, unlike Daffy, does not want gold and gems and money, but he does want glory, recognition and authority for his true genius, something that eludes him. He is given fake recognition; the public applauds him, the critics adore him and his

superiors at Capitol Pictures worship him (quite literally by kneeling and kissing his shoes). Instead the authority he wants, along with the fame is to capture the essence of something which he himself cannot describe – to capture something beautiful, true and honest in the working man.

But the goal he seeks is as elusive as the description he gives it. The dominance and the recognition that Walt wishes for in *The Big Lebowski* is clear but where Walt hides his real wants under a mask of pseudo-authorial anger, Barton's, like Daffy's, own inadequacy shines through. Daffy lives in Bugs' shadow. Barton lives in the shadow of a world that does not recognize him for his true genius. Instead they compliment him with empty plaudits – the married couple in the restaurant, “I don't pretend to be a critic but Lord knows I have a gut and my gut tells me it's simply marvelous”, Jack Lipnick “the writer is king”, and Charlie “my hat's off to anyone who can manage it” – are all insincere and add to Barton's own insecurities – clearly because they are not of his stature.

If W.P Mayhew, the drunk, former writing legend and now story editor, in *Barton Fink*, were to praise his work, Barton would be delighted. Yet, Mayhew is outside the world of respect. Everyone devalues him as a drunk and a write-off, something Barton is soon to become. For Daffy, something similar is at play. While Walter fought in a war and felt a buzz of importance in his duty, he is now a hen pecked, dog sitter for his ex-wife and suffers from this emasculation. The driving force for him to succeed is so he can feel a semblance of what he felt as a soldier. Daffy seeks glory, riches and power – the hallmarks of shallow respect. Barton has this, but seeks genuine respect and fulfillment. Daffy, if he ever achieves his goal would probably feel the same as Barton – empty and unfulfilled.

Daffy and Barton are from different time zones in this respect. Barton is ahead of Daffy, despite the fact that both are on the same route to the same destination. They have some inner turmoil, a dislike for something inherent in themselves. In short,

they want to be better. For Daffy, he has set his mark on Bugs as the goal to reach but never quite reaches it. Instead, he pretends, and fights against Bugs to make himself feel worthy and equal to the rabbit. For Barton, the enemy is the society around him. Those who cannot recognize or depict the state and emotion of the world are foils to his necessities to document the workingman, to speak for him, to somehow liberate the working class through speech and drama. He clashes with soldiers, in part due to his own frustrations, but also, on a deeper psychological level, because they are doing something in the name of a greater cause, that he can never obtain. Like Daffy with Bugs, Barton also pretends to be doing something noble and worthwhile. The best approach Barton has in dealing with these soldiers is to berate them and boast about his own abilities and talents, comparing himself and his work to them and their duty.

Yet while Daffy is boisterous and energetic, Barton is reserved and inactive. They seem to be at opposite ends of a spectrum in this regard, but that it is not the case. In *The Henpecked Duck* (1941), Daffy is a miserable sight to behold. He has been ordered by the authorial figure in his life, his wife, to duck sit an egg. Daffy loses the egg, leading to his wife demanding a divorce. The duck we see in this short is not the Daffy we think of when we hear his name. It is a solemn, downtrodden, repentant fowl, much different to the Daffy described earlier. But it does mirror Barton Fink in his dower moments of despair as he tries to find a solution to the screenplay he is writing, asking for one more chance, like Daffy does in *The Henpecked Duck*.

The character of Barton Fink falls between these two stools that the characteristics of Daffy occupy. On the one hand we see him as the put upon character, lost for inspiration and withdrawn, but, on the other hand, we also see the energetic spirit take hold of him, when he gives Charlie a speech about the working man and capturing something beautiful, or when he dances with the beautiful woman at the USO after he has created something beautiful, he takes an energetic lead.

We see the conceited character of Barton, bringing him into the realm of the typical ‘Daffy’ persona. When challenged, Barton is threatened and shows his teeth to the aggressor, not out of fear but it is a strange coincidence that both Barton and Daffy bare their teeth when they are in a position of power, power they have not earned. They are still pretending, but have convinced themselves otherwise.

The characters of Barton and Daffy are ultimately flawed. Their motives are not pure and so they can never achieve what it is that they want. Both are dimwitted, unable to understand the people around them.

They paint Fink as an ineffectual and impotent left-wing intellectual, who sells out while telling himself he is doing the right thing, who thinks he understands the “common man” but does not understand that, for many common men, fascism had a seductive appeal (Roger Ebert: 1991)



Fig. 2.12.



Fig. 2.13.

When things are looking good, they take the lead in their lives.

Yet, for all his grandstanding, Fink is unaware of the geopolitical landscape that is changing around him, the impending war, the system within which he works. He is ignorant and arrogant in much the same way Daffy is, too full of his own importance to humbly undertake the rigorous work he needs to. “Although Barton spouts about the common man, he doesn’t really give a hoot about them” (Bergan: 126). He does not listen to Charlie’s stories, the common tales of the common man. He interrupts him and speaks over him, ignoring him until such a moment as Charlie’s word trigger some fire within Barton. Daffy is the same. In *The Prize Pest* (1951), Daffy treats

Porky in exactly the same way. When Daffy starts to throw out Porky's possessions, he ignores Porky's protestations. Only when Porky is about to be thrown out does Daffy listen – but half-heartedly, just like Barton. He drops Porky begrudgingly, exclaiming, “all right, if you want to spoil the whole effect!” showing that Daffy lives in an illusion of his own making, like Barton who has proclaimed himself the writer of the common man. Neither listen, they only hear what they want to hear. But this trait was something Daffy had from the very beginning. In discussing the creation of Daffy Duck, his creator, Chuck Jones had based it on the producer, Leon Schlesinger, who had a slight lisp, but as Jones says:

We knew he wasn't listening to us. So we'd say we were working on a story about Daffy Duck, where it turns out that Daffy isn't a duck at all, he a transvestite chicken. Leon couldn't understand that but he'd say “that's it, boys, put in lots of jokes!” So one of the boys suggested to Tex we use Leon's voice... (*Emmy Legends Interview: Chuck Jones*)

Another display of Daffy's character, his spite in particular occurs, is in *Drip Along, Daffy* (1951) that sees Porky elevated to a frontier town's sheriff in the Wild West. He had previously played second fiddle to Daffy, the wannabe sheriff. But instead of being humble and happy for his friend, Daffy is outraged, demanding that he be made sheriff instead. One cannot help but feel that Barton would display the same spite and plain disgust if some other writer were to capture what he wanted to write, since he ignores Charlie's suggestions and stories of common people.

The topics of conversation and the situations in which they are discussed do not interest Daffy or Barton until, that is, such a time as they can take the lead or be the topic of discussion. The wind in Barton's sails is taken away when he realises that Charlie is not what he seems to be. Charlie has ruined Barton's life. Charlie's motive for this is Barton's refusal to listen to Charlie's stories. When his life crumbles, Barton retreats to his former self, a doppelganger to Daffy in *The Henpecked Duck*. He is genuinely apologetic and remorseful, offering limp excuses to explain away his mistakes.

While the Coens are more eloquent in their portrayal of Barton Fink, Warner Brothers give Daffy less room to manoeuvre through his own adventures. But nevertheless Daffy is as demanding as Barton, if even more so. When Barton and Daffy are challenged, they do not have the strength of their own convictions to fall back on. Instead, they try to prove their worth by speaking of their worth, instead of showing it. Barton with his uniform of the mind: “I’m a writer! Celebrating the completion of something good! Do you understand that, sailor! I’m a writer! ... This is my uniform (*tapping his head*). This is where I serve the common man.” And Daffy with his aggression to Bugs and the genie in *Ali Baba Bunny*, when he stomps both characters into the ground or lamp, returning them to where they came from, so that he may take control of the treasure. Their own inadequacies – Barton’s self denial that he is doing something worthwhile, and just in the face of men about to fight a war, and Daffy’s sincere suspicion that people are as greedy as he is – and their attempts to mask those flaws are the causes of their own downfalls.



Fig 2.14.
Both Barton and Daffy show their teeth when they show conceit.



Fig. 2.15.

The Heroes & The Zeroes

Characters in both the Coens’ movies and *The Looney Tunes* (not to mention *Tom & Jerry*) rarely progress or grow as the story does. It is not the character’s journey but the story arch that is important. The Coens’ method to making unique characters has become a trend in their movies, making their creations synonymous with themselves. Characters like the Dude, Everett in *O, Brother Where Art Thou?*

(played by George Clooney), or the pregnant Marge in *Fargo* fulfill the Coens' formulaic trajectory because they do not change; the environment changes around them. In this area, the Coens' characters mirror cartoon characters, not as identical counterparts, like the Dude and Bugs, but generally, the Coens' characters have airs of cartoonishness about them. This will be discussed more in the next chapter, but while focusing on characters, it is important to recognize the mode the Coens employ when making their creations.

Due to the absurd locations and events, and based on the whimsical portrayals that are given in the movies, the Coens' characters do often fall into the arena of pastiche as "situations, imagery and characters that are often borrowed, share the same space without any apparent logic" (Mathijs & Sexton: 228). Their version of *The Ladykillers* is a stellar example. Transplanted from the 1955 version of England, Tom Hanks' character, here named (quite eccentrically) Goldthwaite Higginson Dorr, PhD. is the paradigm of the Southern gentleman. Dressed neatly in a Colonel Saunders' suit, and the air of Edgar Allan Poe, he has the sweet southern lilt of Foghorn Leghorn from *The Looney Tunes*.

With hums of Campton Races, Foghorn Leghorn may not have inspired the southern beau of Dr. Dorr PhD, but the similarity is noticeable in the heightened absurdity of the Coen's comedy. Since both are comedic, one cannot be blamed for drawing parallels from *The Looney Tunes*. For the Coens, giving these characters bravado and ego in regards a false intelligence like Dorr, Everett or Norville Barnes. The heroes either come from zero or amount to it. They seem foolish enough to convince those around them or to think they can. The loveable idiot, with an inflated ego is an interesting character archetype that is shared with the characters in the cartoons. Tom, Sylvester, Daffy are these characters, as their frivolous attempts to succeed are repeatedly defeated, over and over again. Yet the characters do not change or divert from their path.

Many of their other characters fulfill cartoonish archetypes as well, from H.I. McDunnough (Nicolas Cage in *Raising Arizona*) to Jesus Quintana (John Turturro in *The Big Lebowski*) because these characters are over pronounced and shocking, tipping over into absurdity. But characteristics are not the only connection that the Coens have to the cartoon world. There are many more still to examine.

Chapter Three

Style

Ronald Bergan remarks that:

Many of their movies are fundamentally films noir... Yet, however different they are on the surface, each of the films contains elements of the other, horror edging into comic strip farce, violence into slapstick and vice versa. One thing is clear: The Coens have little interest in what passes for “realism” in Hollywood mainstream movies (Bergan: 26).

In this chapter I will examine the zany style, nutty themes and wacky tropes that exist in both the world of the Coens’ comedies and those of *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*. In doing so, the thesis will discuss what is meant by words like “cartoon” and “cartoonish”. In defining these terms, the thesis will show how the Coens’ works fulfil the meaning in general and how they connect to *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry* specifically.

In light of Ronald Bergan’s quote above, I will analyse the Coens’ films in regards their blending of genres, and how elements of comedic behaviour and tropes make their films seem cartoonish in style and spirit.

In examining The Coen Brothers’ catalogue, there is plenty of action and behaviour that can be categorized as “cartoonish”. The exaggerated, stereotyped behaviour of Jack Lipnick, the overbearing producer in *Barton Fink* (1991), is a perfect example. The caricatured, unexpected people in the car in *Fargo* (1996) who come across a murder on the roadside and are then promptly killed, is another. Everything about them is exaggerated, from their size and colourful attire to their expressions as they drive passed. Even when Grimsrud (played by Peter Stormare) finds the car, crashed, it is as if reality and nature has worked against the couple so that a comedic moment could occur.



Fig 3.1. *The unfortunate witnesses to an unfortunate murder – cartoonish in their presentation and in their deaths*



Fig. 3.2. *The car crashes, not because of a character's action, but due to a natural event.*

The car is on its roof from the crash, everything is silent and still, except for the one single wheel spinning from the momentum of the crash. This works in opposition to the exaggerated element of the couple in the car, but the quick change from exaggeration to minimalism is so shocking and unnerving that the audience cannot help but smile in the face of so horrific a crash. It is a force majeure by the Coens to make such an incident happen.

Arguably the most cartoonish of all the Coens' work must be *Raising Arizona* (1987). As Simon Pegg remarks "This is a living breathing *Looney Tunes* cartoon in every way, in the way that [sic] the dynamism of it, the way that it moves, the way that the performances are... very heightened" (*BFI presents Raising Arizona*).

While there are passable trope comparisons to the drunken stork in *The Looney Tunes*, delivering the wrong baby to the wrong couple, *Raising Arizona* goes

beyond this. The characters within are exaggerated to their own limits, leading the drama to descend into absurdity quite quickly.

Here, we see tropes, used by Ethan and Joel, as are used in *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*. As H.I (or Hi) walks into prison for the first time, a fellow inmate growls at him, showing intimidation. This is a usual technique of the more aggressive characters in the cartoons – characters like Spike in *Tom & Jerry*, and (another) Spike and Hector in *The Looney Tunes*' collection.

These three characters are bulldogs – gruff, aggressive and intimidating. Their gnarled features and ruffled skin give an extra layer to their character. It is no surprise then, when looking at the prisoner in *Raising Arizona*, that he is also gruff, aggressive and intimidating with gnarled features and ruffled skin. Hector and Spike (of *Tom & Jerry* fame) will be mentioned later in this chapter, but for the moment I would like to return to *Raising Arizona* and focus more on the characters within that film and the style in which they are presented to the audience.

Cartoonishness: The Exaggeration Of The Normal

When reviewing the Coens' movies, particularly *Miller's Crossing*, the film critic Mark Kermode made the statement that “a lot of the movies cannot be described by the narrative, even though the narratives are quite strong, but by single images” (*BAFTA Archives* | The Coen Brothers: A Life in Pictures) In many of the Coens' comedies the images that audiences picture when they think of the film, the most prevalent image, presumably, would be the exaggerated.

Exaggeration is the order of the day for the characters within *Raising Arizona*, as Hi, played by Nicholas Cage, has a hairstyle that looks like it was achieved by a dynamite blast and a heavy mustache that is quite distracting.

Nathan Arizona is a caricature of the businessman, ramped up to the extreme, as he makes a commercial out his own son's disappearance. The character of Ed is morally

driven, yet her moral compass is overpowered by her maternal wishes to become a mother. The reality that the Coens present to us is believable, but the consequences of their actions are undercut by absurdity.



Fig. 3.3. *The cartoonish character H.I McDunnough, where exaggeration the key to comedic effect.*

In reality, all the characters who see a couple with a new child would ask obvious questions about the child's origin, how and where did they adopt the baby, how long such a process took. Here, these questions are asked, but the vague lies given to cover the kidnapping are glossed over by the exaggerated characters of Dot and Glen, caricatures of the 1950s nuclear family.

The cartoonish nature of *Raising Arizona* does not stop with the characters, yet exaggeration plays a role in everything.

Another trope is the absurd violence. For example, Ed slapping Hi in the face, causing Hi's eyes to cross from the force conjures up images of cartoon imaginary birds floating around a dazed victim's head, or examples of the cartoon character's eyes darting back and forth from the shock of the slap's impact, much the same as Hi reacts here.

"I think that their style has gotten more simple over the years. They don't like floral shots for the sake of floral shots" (Roger Deakins | DP/30: A Serious Man) But *Raising Arizona* is from their early days and it is incredibly cartoonish with plenty of floral shots.



Fig. 3.4. *The cartoonish reaction to a cartoonish slap.*

In his biography on The Coen Brothers, Ronald Bergan talks about *Raising Arizona* under the appropriately titled heading “Looney Tunes” (Bergan: 89). Ethan Coen spoke about their post *Blood Simple* period, “we were labelled film noir, so we wanted to try something faster and lighter” (Bergan: 89). To break from the mould, they created a film with “a Road Runner Coyote-like indestructibility to some of the characters” (Bergan: 91).

The set design lends itself to an illustrated book, but also, to the practice of *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*, as the décor is mainly one colour, clashing with another, quite garish and pronounced. The design is shockingly colourful. The Coens’ style also lends itself to remove unnecessary props, to de-clutter the frame, so that there is cleanliness to images just as there is cleanliness in the cartoon frames. This seems to draw more focus on to the foreground, which the characters tend to occupy.

The babies’ room in the Arizona household is full of bright colour on a sea of blue carpet. It is reminiscent of the typical carpet one would see Tom and Jerry run across as the cat chases the mouse – no intricate detail, only a single colour – or the desert home of Hi and Ed. Their trailer looks as if it were constructed on a sound stage. The bright blue sky is in stark contrast to the yellow sands and green vegetation, in much the same way that Warner Brothers animated their locations of the Arizona desert in *The Road Runner* cartoons.

This is repeated in the Coens’ film *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), their first major flop and cinematic failure. The elongated hallways and corridors, the vaulting

ceilings and high windows step over the line of realism and journey into the cartoonishly absurd – it is Art Deco inspired with a hint of sinister comedy. The décor, again, like the Coens used in *Raising Arizona* is stark at times, in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, creating almost animated atmosphere over the image, adding to that pencil coloured veneer that is synonymous with cartoons. Yet this, in part, is owed to the cinematographic style the brothers employ in their films. They use wide-angle lenses and shots. The purpose of such camera work was “germane to the farcical and cartoon nature of the film” (Bergan: 100).



Fig. 3.5. *Mussburger’s office. The size, the shade, the shadow of the clock’s hand on the wall, all lend themselves to something sinister, but cartoonishly so.*

In the cartoons, the background is static, so that the characters are given more presence and attention within the frame, since they are the only things moving. Here, in the Coens’ work, it is the same practice at play. “The look the Coens wanted for *Raising Arizona* was “sort of pop, like opening an illustrated children’s book. Everything’s sharp and bright” (Bergan: 91)



Fig. 3.6.



Fig. 3.7.



Fig 3.8.



Fig 3.9.

The static background and clashing colours make the characters appear more animated.

Another trait of the cartoonish apparent in the Coens' work is the use of the unexpected, the subversion of expectation. This is a typical gag in every cartoon.



Fig. 3.10. *Warring Hudsucker falls to his death in the film's beginning. His suicide is a success.*



Fig. 3.11. *But when his board member follows suit later a new pane of unbreakable glass subverts the expected suicide from taking place.*

While characters do not die in cartoon shorts (it would be too graphic for a child to watch) there is nevertheless much reference to death and mortal danger in every episode.

The ploy of the unexpected is seen in the moments when Tom or Wile E. Coyote initiate a plan, something the audience realises will work. But the presence of some unknown force or object hinders their success.

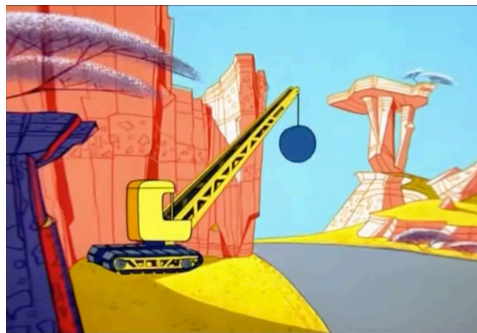


Fig 3.12.

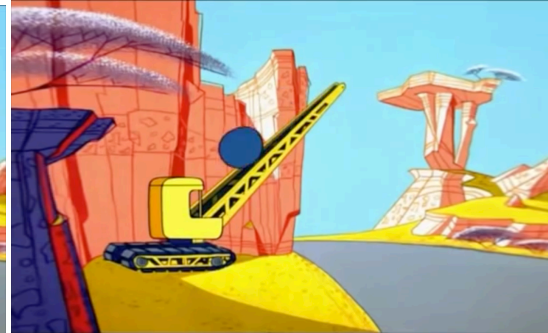


Fig. 3.13.

The plan of attack is to crush The Road Runner, but gravity instead crushes Coyote in the crane's cabin.

In *Space Jam*, when The Tunes Squad are losing desperately to the violent Mon Stars, a tracking shot along the substitutes' bench shows Michael Jordan the remaining options he has to choose from. Among them are the injured, some bound in bandages, nursing bruises, others receiving defibrillation, while one character is kept in the Acme's go to product, 'The Iron Lung'. This joke is quite tongue-in-cheek and breaks the tension of the situation for the audience while at the same time adds to the seriousness of Jordan's dilemma, in a comedic effect. The motif is repeated in *The Big Lebowski*, when the Dude and Walter discover the identity of the teenager, Larry, who stole the Dude's car and the assumed ransom money. The pair go to his home with a plan of action and ready to implement it. But when they go inside the home, they are halted by the presence of an unconscious dying man, a man being kept alive with the assistance of an iron lung. The use and presence of such equipment serves the same purpose as it did in *Space Jam*. It is tongue-in-cheek and gives the audience an unexpected guffaw when they see it. Its outlandish appearance without

announcement manages to break the tension of Walter's violent scheme, yet, like *Space Jam* and Jordan, it adds more pressure to the Dude and Walter as they try to find the money, while regrouping after a shock. This is something that Mark Kermode has remarked upon "you seem to enjoy sort of wrong-footing the audience. You're not sure sometimes, whether to laugh or to be appalled" (*BAFTA Archives | The Coen Brothers: A Life in Pictures*) The appearance of the iron lung is one way to wrong foot an audience, and the subversion seems to cause a laugh.



Fig. 3.14.



Fig. 3.15.

The introduction of the iron lung breaks the tension of the situation with some gallows humour.

What's In A Name?

When the McDunnoughs read of the "Arizona Quints", they choose as the family to kidnap a baby from. The "Arizona Quints", Garry, Larry, Barry, Harry (all rhyming names) are undercut and halted by the last child, Nathan Jr. He is the odd one out and the one that is ultimately kidnapped. But it is important to view this in terms of comedic style. While the odd name out does individualize the baby apart from his siblings, again, it is subversively surprising.

The audience is lulled into a false sense of security with this practice, as logically the audience would follow the rhyming scheme and complete the "Arizona Quints" with Ari or Cary, but the abrupt introduction of "Nathan Jr." brings the audience to a stop and makes them laugh as the name is so far removed from the other four, that the illogic of the naming scheme is now seen to be useless and laughable.

The Triple Chase: (A Dog) A Cat & A Mouse (or Bird)

While the tropes already mentioned are connected to cartoons in a general sense, no direct similarity has been drawn between either *The Looney Tunes* or *Tom & Jerry*. Here, the thesis will connect both cartoons directly to the tropes shown in *Raising Arizona*. That trope is the archetypal chase, which is the bread and butter for many cartoons, but it is one that both *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry* are known for. In *The Looney Tunes*, characters like Sylvester and Tweety are mirrored in Tom and Jerry, as the character, hungry for a snack, pursues the victim (the snack). The gag usually takes the form of the pursuer being outdone by the pursued, as Jerry or Tweety use their own intelligence or external forces to subdue and punish Tom and Sylvester for their aggression.

Not only do we see glimpses of this in *Raising Arizona*, we see something far more unique: the introduction of a third character to the chase. As mentioned earlier, Hector and Spike are intimidating bulldogs, introduced to be a foil to Sylvester and Tom's attempts to capture and eat Tweety and Jerry. Usually disturbed from a nap, the two bulldogs are enticed into the chase, pursuing the original pursuer (Tom/Sylvester) and stopping them in their own pursuit of the originally pursued (Jerry/Tweety). This usually ends with the bulldogs beating the cats to a pulp while the mouse/bird can escape. The bulldogs act as a saving grace to the victims and a foil to the pursuers – in such shorts as *Love That Pup* (1949) *Fit To Be Tied* (1952), *Pet Peeve* (1954).

In an overly long chase sequence in *Raising Arizona*, we see the same exact thing happen. In need of diapers, Hi holds up a convenience store in order to procure those diapers for Nathan Jr. He escapes, but without Ed there in a getaway car, he is forced to run. He disturbs a plethora of people, a driver minding his own business, an eager policeman and a dog disturbed in his own yard by Hi. This leads to an absurd chase as one character Hi (in place of Jerry/Tweety) is chased by the policeman

(Tom/Sylvester). In the end, when the policeman has Hi dead to rights at gunpoint, the disturbed dog, escaped from the yard, and acting as a saving grace, bites the policeman, subduing him and giving Hi an opportunity to escape.

But the chasing trope and its similarities do not end there. Wile E. Coyote and The Road Runner are famed in *The Looney Tunes*' history just as much as Sylvester and Tweety. Their feud runs on similar motives to Sylvester and Tweety – Wile E. Coyote is hungry and The Road Runner is his dinner option. But the motifs are different when compared to Sylvester and Tweety. The Road Runner burns up the road with his speed, either with fire, smoke or simply rolling the asphalt into a mislaid carpet.



Fig 3.16.

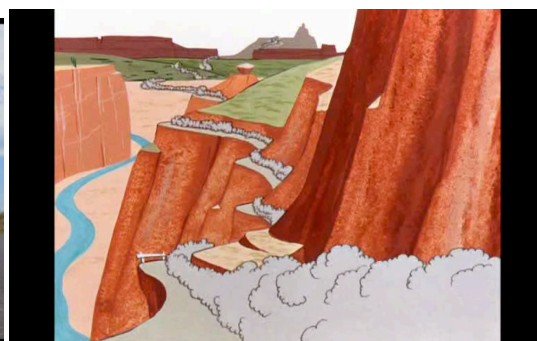


Fig 3.17.

When Leonard Smalls rides his bike at high speeds, the exaggeration of the speed is captured in flame on the road. Much like the dust that Road Runner leaves in his wake.

The Road Runner's (and in fact Wile E. Coyote's) counterpoint is that of The Lone Biker of the Apocalypse, Leonard Smalls, in *Raising Arizona*. Similarities abound the three characters together. Despite the fact that Hi dreams of The Biker in a surrealist fashion, that surrealism is brought into the real world of the film. He may burn up the road in Hi's dream, but he crashes through doors, in reality, as if they are not there, just like The Road Runner would. He is the pursuer, the Coyote character after Hi, Ed and baby Nathan, and nothing seems to quell his eagerness to hunt them down. He is unstoppable, no matter what Hi does to cease his advance. This leads the way for wacky action sequences that are textbook Road Runner tropes. Chuck Jones, who will be discussed later, was interviewed about the characters he helped

create, “The Road Runner was intended as a parody of all the chase cartoons” (Harrington-Hall: 8) and in *Raising Arizona* there is a chase worthy of *The Road Runner Show*. The Biker runs down a narrow alleyway on his bike, before a plank of timber knocks him to the ground – reminiscent of Wile E. running down a tunnel and into a wall on the far side. Even The Biker’s downfall is something the audience would expect from Wile E.’s efforts to catch The Road Runner. Wile E.’s genius is to use technical machinery from Acme Corporation to catch The Road Runner. These are elaborate plans that fail, and the comedy comes from the ever-growing elaboration and their abrupt failure.

In his final tussle with Hi, The Biker pushes Hi away from him. Hi, who had managed to pull a pin from one of The Biker’s many grenades, holds the pin in triumph. We, the audience are then given a brief moment as realization dawns on The Biker. He looks to the camera, in the same spirit Wile E. would, hovering in the air over a cliff, before gravity kicks in and pulls him down to the ground.



Fig. 3.18.

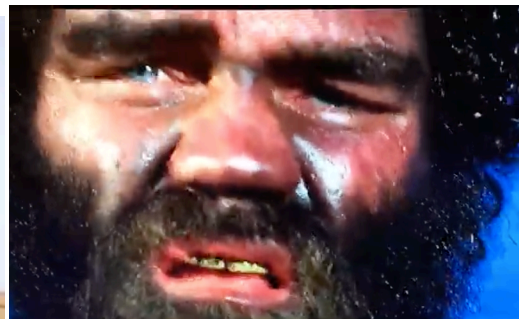


Fig. 3.19.

Foiled by their own equipment: grenades.

Repetition, Repetition, Repetition, Repetition, Repetition...

Another trope that seems to draw parallels between the cartoon world and that of the Coens’ creations is repetition. Released in 1951, one of *The Looney Tunes*’ most famous short films, *Rabbit Fire*, is famed not for its visual gags, but for its dialogue – a comedic technique by Warner Brothers.



Fig. 3.20.



Fig. 3.21.

The repetition here is mirrored in some of the Coens' films.

The dialogue gag in question is “Duck Season, Rabbit Season” spoken by a feuding Bugs and Daffy as both try to convince the gun-toting Elmer Fudd that the other is his chosen target. The dialogue of “Duck Season, Rabbit Season” is repeated ad nauseam and shows the perfect example of Bugs’ mastery of manipulation (as discussed in Chapter Two). Here, he dupes Daffy into convincing Elmer that Daffy is in season and worth hunting. This Bugs manages to do with wordplay, intelligent reasoning and manipulation.

It is a clever and fun gag, one that the Coens employ quite a lot in their own films. In *Burn After Reading*, an uncertain Brad Pitt calls John Malkovich’s character (Osbourne Cox) to inform him, he has found Cox’s “shit”. Pitt, unsure of what to say when the conversation leads into unforeseen territory, keeps asking if he is speaking to Osbourne Cox, to such a point that Malkovich explodes down the line at him.

In *Fargo*, the gag is used to make a mockery not only of the characters’ Minnesota accents, but also to show that the characters do not have a clue about what is happening or how they can react to it. Repeated use of the word “Yah? Yah!” is used as a crutch for the characters when they themselves enter into unknown conversational territory. This territory is, of course, Minnesota, the Coens’ homeland. As Bergan writes, quoting Frances McDormand (who played Marge) “Many of the actors are from that area... so the regional mannerisms were very familiar to them” (Bergan: 157) Despite this, many locals were offended and an article in *Time* magazine asserted that “the Coens’ attitude toward the Minnesotan characters was

condescending” (Bergan: 157). Nevertheless, whatever the motive the Coens had in mind for setting the film in such a place with such a dialect, the repetition adds humour to the film. “We invented the characters and they’re really sort of our creations and those of the actors who played the parts” (Charlie Rose: 1998 | The Coen Brothers and Frances McDormand Interview) It is through repetition that the characters are elevated to near absurd levels.

In *Hail, Caesar!* (2016), a story about a day in the life of a man and a film studio, Ralph Fiennes’s highbrow director meets his match in a Western cowboy actor with no training. While instructing the boy on how to deliver a line (“would that it t’were so simple”) of dialogue properly, the two repeat the line (again) *ad nauseam* until the cowboy can perfectly repeat it. Sadly, he cannot and it drives Fiennes into a frenzied fit, in much the same way it does Daffy Duck. The repetition is an annoyance for the characters, but for the audience it gets funnier the longer it continues. While in *Intolerable Cruelty*, Gus Petch’s catchphrase “I’m gonna nail yo ass!” is used so often, it becomes the tagline for his reality television series at the film’s conclusion.

Stereotypes and Archetypes

Joanna Smolko notes that, “though Leghorn has a Southern accent, the setting is a standard farm- yard. There are a few exceptions to the unspecific farm location found in most Foghorn Leghorn cartoons” (Smolko: 350). It is the same with the Coen Brothers and the cartoons at large. We do not know where Tom and Jerry live – their setting is typical house. We do not know where the action in the cartoons takes place. We rely, in part, on the stereotypes that surround them to set them properly in a place and in a time. This has been captured by the Coens in many of their films, from *The Big Lebowski*, *Raising Arizona* and *Fargo* to beyond. The settings enforce the stereotypes, as the stereotypes give us the setting of the film. Although like Molière’s dramas, the weakness and vices are in the human being in spite of location. “By the

same token the social conditioning of the characters is evident, but it is never an essential point” (Sorell: 130). It simply gives the Coens, *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry* more subject matter to subvert, since stereotypes and archetypes are well known to audiences.

But the Coens tend to focus on the lives of ordinary America. *Fargo* showed the world and even the United States what people from Minnesota sounded like. The locations in their films are not popular, as Christian Long explains, “thus to tell a story about people in a setting they are likely to inhabit limits the possible narrative locations quite drastically, leaving most of the United States out of Hollywood’s imaginative geography.” (Long: 232) Yet, the stereotypes are wide ranging, from location, to race, to time period, giving the populace an idea of the world they are seeing, in spite of it being hyper stereotyped.

Running from 1950-1965, Jack Benny hosted a comedy television series named *The Jack Benny Program*, which featured many sketches and running gags with various guests. One of these guests became famous for his vocal and impersonation abilities and was known as “The Man of 1000 Voices”. This was Mel Blanc and he, apart from other shows, is famed for voicing every character that *The Looney Tunes* created, and many from *Tom & Jerry*. During his guest appearances on *The Jack Benny Program*, he would use his talents in plenty of sketches, but one of “Mel’s most popular (and Jack’s favorite [sic]) verbal duets with Jack was probably the infamous precursor to Speedy Gonzalez done at slow speed” (Ohmart: 68).

While Speedy became known for his expedient vocal style, his lesser-known cousin, Slow-Poke Rodriguez is probably more in keeping with Blanc’s character, in this sketch. He is named Sy, a Mexican. The sketch is as follows:

Benny: Excuse me, sir?

Sy: Sí?

Benny: Is the train coming in on time?

Sy: Sí.
Benny: You're waiting for someone on the train?
Sy: Sí.
Benny: What's your name?
Sy: Sy.
Benny: Sy?
Sy: Sí.
Benny: This person you're waiting – is it a lady?
Sy: Sí
Benny: A relative?
Sy: Sí
Benny: Your sister!
Sy: Sí.
Benny: What's her name?
Sy: Sue.
Benny: Sue?
Sy: Sí.
Benny: Does your sister work for a living?
Sy: Sí.
Benny: What does she do?
Sy: Sew.
Benny: Sew?
Sy: Sí.

While this would be a very appropriate addition to the sub chapter on Repetition, it is an important conversation to start the sub chapter on Stereotypes. Both *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry* availed of the stereotypical American culture of the 1940s and beyond, making cartoons about Hitler and Nazism while increasing the stereotypes to insane levels of absurdity, such as the example given in the introduction, *The Ducktators* (1942) They also delved deeper into national and cultural stereotypes marking their episodes in the era they were made.

The Coen Brothers do it too, albeit in a nostalgic homage to some non-specific time period, where modern meets old and cultures combine. Nevertheless, stereotypes are used. In the above conversation, we see the makings of Speedy Gonzalez – the fastest mouse in all of Mexico. But his English is not very good. Just like Speedy, Sy is a man of few words. But there is a counterpoint to the Mexican Speedy/Sy in the Coen Brothers' catalogue – Manolo in *Burn After Reading* (2008). In a scene, reminiscent of Sy's appearance on *The Jack Benny Program*, Manolo finds a CD of "secret" files for an unpublished memoir, and financial reports. Mistakenly, Brad

Pitt's character Chad, believes that it is top-secret files concerning the CIA. To keep the secrets secret, Chad tells Manolo "that you did not find this" disk. Manolo misunderstands the subtle subtext and thinks that Chad means literally. Manolo corrects Chad and tells Chad that he did find it, "on the floor there".

Since the two incidents contain foreign Hispanic men, it can be argued that it is nothing more than a coincidence. But it is not. The wordplay that features here is well written in both contexts and relies heavily on someone (with poor English) to complete the joke. One is about misunderstanding a hint. The other is about a wordplay that causes one person, asking questions, to doubt whether the other person, answering the questions, really understands the questions. While Mel Blanc's sketch does not and is not connected to *The Looney Tunes*, the voice is nevertheless associated with Speedy Gonzalez and in a way is a proto Speedy voice, if not directly linked to Slow Poke Rodriguez.

But the stereotyping does not end there. The brothers are native Minnesotans, and (as discussed in Repetition), they used the local dialect to illicit comedy. But they themselves fall into the stereotypical dialect. John Turturro refers to them as "The Yah-Yah Guys" (Coen Brothers on The Dick Cavett Show) in association with the Minnesota accent. The stereotype that they fall in to is the one that they try to mock in *Fargo*.

In the 1940s and early 50s, William Hanna and Joe Barbara employed Lillian Randolph to voice the character of Mammy Two Shoes. This character, a black woman, usually took the role of Tom's owner in *Tom & Jerry*.

She would kick start the plot by warning Tom not to act against her wishes, warning him that she would kick him out of the house if he misbehaved. Inevitably, Jerry would irk Tom. She would find Tom misbehaving and admonish him appropriately. In true and sincere cartoon fashion, the character of Mammy Two Shoes was elevated to absurdity, playing on the stereotypes of a typical southern black woman, with

exaggerated African American parlance. She is large, opinionated, animated and vocal. In his biography on the Coen Brothers, Ronald Bergan picks up on a similarity between Mammy Two Shoes and their version of the film *The Ladykillers* (2004).

Discussing the character of Mrs. Munson (played by Irma P. Hall) “in a way that sometimes recalls the black maid in *Tom and Jerry* cartoons” (Bergan: 231), Mrs. Munson has all the traits (albeit stereotypes) of Mammy Two Shoes, but again, she is not alone in that. Tom Hanks’ Goldthwaite Higginson Dorr III PhD seems to exude every air of the southern gentleman, and his Colonel Sanders’ costume draws a Kentucky connection to Foghorn Leghorn with a touch of Yosemite Sam for good measure – both Dorr and Foghorn are happy-go-lucky types with a sinister streak underneath a happy demeanour, just like the rage filled Yosemite. Even the Coens are aware of their own cartoonish mentality. When Dorr meets Mrs. Munson, she mispronounces his name by calling him, Fudd.

Munson: You mean like Elmer?

Dorr: Elmer, ma’am?

Munson: Elmer... Fudd.

In the 1930s and 40s, the sub-genre of the “singing cowboy” in Western films was a niche of the cowboy story. It was so popular that actors such as Roy Rodgers, Tex Ritter and Bob Baker managed to make careers out of it, while others like Clint Eastwood or John Wayne would dabble in it in their careers.

Both the Coens and *The Looney Tunes* pay some referential service to this cinematic archetype, by using it as the backdrop to their own stories. In *Daffy Duckaroo* (1942), we see Daffy, riding through the American wilderness, on a donkey, playing guitar. In the Coens’ *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018), the same image is used, this time the donkey is substituted for a white horse.

Mocking the singing cowboy films does not in itself unite these two productions, as many have mocked the sub-genre before, but the Coens manage to make a

cartoonish film out of the subject matter in much the same way *The Looney Tunes* do with *Daffy Duckaroo*.

In *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, an anthology film dealing with death in the West, we see many tropes and themes that are taken directly from cartoons. These will be discussed later. For now, the discussion will stay with stereotypes of the Western and how *The Looney Tunes* and *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* exploit the stereotypes for humour.

In *Daffy Duckaroo*, Daffy runs afoul of a local Indian chief, whose girlfriend has taken a shine to Daffy. The treatment of this character is very much in keeping with the stereotypes of Native Americans in film and literature at that time, representing the chief as an educated man, well dressed and mannered, but at the same time, lacking a formative grasp of English, normally associated with the “noble savage” Indian of old movies. “Me lovah you! Youah divine!”

The language of *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* also maximizes the stereotypical language associated with westerns, proclaiming “adios, amigo” after shooting a man and leaving him to die, or singing a song with the lyrics “yippee-ki-yay” which was Roy Rodgers’ signature catchphrase. Yet, the Coens undercut the seriousness of the drama with the lyrical jargon and wide vocabulary that Buster exercises in contrast to the other characters’ less formal conversation and short sentences. Taking pride in his famed reputation as “The Tennessee Tit”, it lends him fame no matter where he travels – in much the same manner as the western outlaws and their fearsome notoriety make them well known wherever they travel in the frontier.



Fig 3.22.



Fig. 3.23.

The Coens and The Looney Tunes both mocked the stereotype of The Singing Cowboy.



Fig. 3.24.



Fig. 3.25.

They did the same with gritty 30s detectives in the pulp detective novel era.

The trickster characters populating *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* cartoons create space for multiple meanings. These characters employ stereotypes (some of them very offensive), yet within the alternate spaces of animation are able in some way to transcend them or transform them (Smolko: 367).

When analyzing the characters of Buster, along with the character of Hi, or Marge, there is a feeling that some of these characteristics border on the offensive, just as Daffy and Sylvester or Porky may be seen as hurtful to those who have speech impediments. The language they use and the stereotypes employed to give the characters the necessary placing in time and space can indeed cause offense when it means to cause laughter.

Chuck Jones: The Minimalist & Human Behaviour vs. Logic

Geoff Dyer explains the perfect joke as, “the hallmark of the truly great joke—mean the wisecrack, the wonderful remark, not the narrated story—is that there is often a slight delay before you realize a joke has been made” (Dyer: 17). In terms of

cartoons, the mantle of such comic genius would be handed to Chuck Jones, who besides Walt Disney, as Maureen Furniss writes, “is probably the most famous practitioner of the art of animation in America” (Furniss: IV)

Chuck Jones (1912-2002) started his career at Warner Brothers in 1933, just in time to see *The Looney Tunes* take shape, nearly from the beginning. During his tenure there, he made some of the most famous *Looney Tunes* episodes, directing more than two hundred cartoons for Warner Brothers. His foresight and understanding of animated comedy is one of the reasons that cartoons like *The Looney Tunes* have remained so beloved and can still be enjoyed in modern times, by modern standards. The reason for this is simple. Jones posited that comedy relied on two things to be in conflict with each other: human behaviour and logic. In using such a method, he ensured that the cartoons and their humour would be timeless. As discussed in Characters, Bugs and Daffy were created to be the comic hero and fool. Since Bugs has some control over the environment he occupies, Daffy as his counter does not. So whenever Daffy is in a situation where Daffy wishes to succeed the comedy comes from his futile efforts to succeed. His want goes against the nature of the world. This is the formula for the gag. Coyote does this too. He manages to glide through the air in *Gee Whiz-z-z-z* (1956) with ease, until he flies into a cliff face.



Fig. 3.26.

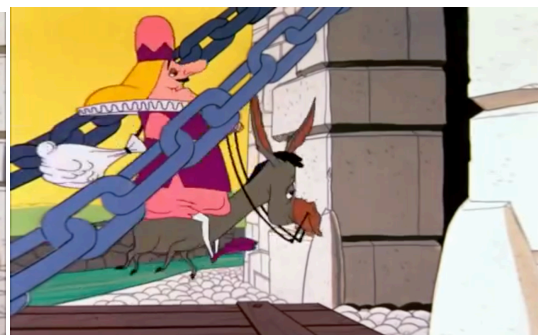


Fig. 3.27.

Human Nature vs. Logic: Daffy tries to stop a drawbridge from falling, it nevertheless falls and crushes him.

In *Fargo*, Jerry Lundegaard’s clever plan and innocent motivations collide with reality as logic goes against his human behaviour and those of his fellow crooks. The

plan was so simple and fool proof, but logic did not factor in human behaviour and the plan unravelled. The same thing occurs in *Burn After Reading*, as Linda Litzke's (Frances McDormand) desire for cosmetic surgery goes against the logic of the world, because her human nature does not pause to think about the logic of the world, which results in countless deaths for no purpose. Even in the end, when Jerry is arrested, desperation has caused him to react against the smallest kind of logic. He is discovered escaping through a window too small to get through, while in his underwear. While this is a real desperation for a real character, there is still the hint of a cartoonish nature about it that causes some to smirk at his situation.

As an animator Jones was a minimalist and urged his animators to employ the same philosophy. This can be seen in later episodes such as *What's Opera, Doc?* (1957). In such episodes, characters' expression change seldom, but remains fixed in one expressive manner. Joel and Ethan exercise the same method in some of their films to either elevate the comedic value of the scene or to show the characters as lacking in human compassion. The top example of this is Peter Stormare's Gaear Grimsrud in *Fargo*.



Fig. 3.28.

Bugs and Wile E. Coyote use one expression to convey a scene



Fig. 3.29.

He kidnaps, kills and holds a conversation while at no point changing his actual expression. While this shows his psychopathic tendencies, the Coens contrasted his expression with so many external events, that his non-reaction appears oddly funny and scary at the same time.



Fig. 3.30. Peter Stormare's Gaear Grimsrud's expression does not change in the entire scene. While this adds a darker side to his character, it is also mirrors Chuck Jones's minimalist philosophy.

It can also be seen in the other *Fargo* characters who react with little exaggeration when the scene calls for it, whether it is Jerry finding out he is in trouble with the law, Marge seeing dead bodies and getting morning sickness or even her reaction to Mike Yanagita's tears at dinner.

Jones's advice to his writers and animators was "reading. Read everything. It doesn't do you much good to draw unless you have something to draw... the only way you can exercise the mind is by bringing new ideas into it" (*Emmy Legends Interview: Chuck Jones*). Therefore literature, paintings and operas were used as inspiration for many of storylines, and served as subject matter for cartoonish and zany antics. The Coens "have included a vast range of intertextual references in their films" (Mathijs & Sexton: 230) among them literature, art, music, much in the same way as *The Looney Tunes*. One example is *The Looney Tunes'* short inspired by Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen – What's Opera, Doc?* (1957). In using this opera as a backdrop, the characters manage to sing their way through the story. It has become such a memorable episode, that Elmer Fudd's lyrical voice matches the rhythm, that "kill the wabbit, kill the wabbit, kill the wabbit!" has entered our cultural lexicon.

But it is the part dedicated to Siegfried and Brünnhilde, which is of particular interest. Elmer, dressed as the Viking hero Siegfried, intoxicated by the beautiful Brünnhilde (Bugs in disguise) serenades her. Bugs (Brünnhilde) uninterested in his advances, ascends a white staircase and waits for Siegfried to follow.

“The Coens sometimes give the impression that inside them is a musical straining to get out” (Bergan: 185). *The Big Lebowski* gave them such an opportunity. The Dude is knocked unconscious and dreams of a dance sequence, one that could have been choreographed by Busby Berkeley himself. In this particular sequence, the Dude finds himself atop a black and white staircase (not entirely white) where, at the bottom, stands “... Maude Lebowski, with braided pigtails, dressed in an armored breastplate and horned Norse headgear, and carrying a trident, the philistine’s first image of what operatic prima donnas look like. Whether it is the Dude’s or the Coens’ philistinism is unclear; as is whether it is merely a recognition of the cliché as seen unforgettably in... Chuck Jones’s cartoon *What’s Opera, Doc?* in which Bugs Bunny dons the Brünnhilde gear.” (Bergan: 185).

It may be neither philistinism nor a clichéd recognition. Instead the Coens could rely on the comedy of the past to build upon in their own work – using what was funny before to help them to be funny now – by referencing *What’s Opera, Doc?*



Fig 3.31.



Fig. 3.32.

Cultural references are made and mocked by Joel and Ethan Coen and The Looney Tunes.

Throughout the film, there is no mention of or hint to, either symbolically or physically, Vikings or Norse mythology. To reference such a symbol without any previous acknowledgment is strange and may be a direct tribute to *The Looney Tunes*. *What’s Opera, Doc?* is quite famous and it seems too coincidental to be a mistake in *The Big Lebowski*. While the staircase is not purely white, the position of the female Viking is switched, it does bring up referential memories of *The Looney*

Tunes. While paying homage to Busby Berkeley, the Coens pay some obeisance to Bugs Bunny too.

Cartoons & The Coens: The Day Physics Was Made Retire

One of the defining features that tears cartoons away from reality is that, like all stories, they exist in their own reality. While the worlds of all fiction are based on such sort of logical laws of physics, the worlds of *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry* exaggerate it, as they do everything, to absurd levels. As discussed in regards Bugs and Droopy in the chapter on Characters, the protagonists are imbued with a limited power and control on the world they occupy. This can be seen in many areas and wielded by many characters.

This is because comedy functions in a peculiar way, “[It] is a game, a game that imitates life. And since, in the games of the child, when working its dolls and puppets many of the movements are produced by strings” (Bergson: 222) as if the creators, the Coens and the animators guide the plot through controlling the nature of the world. When *The Road Runner* outsmarts Wile E. Coyote into running off a cliff, Coyote suspends in mid air for a few moments, as if gravity has ceased to exist, only to fall once the realization of the situation dawns on him. Other times, Coyote paints a tunnel opening on a cliff face, only to have the Road Runner run through the tunnel as if it was real. When Coyote follows suit, he smashes into the cliff.



Fig 3.33. Coyote paints a tunnels opening on to a cliff face. The Road Runner denies physics and runs through.



Fig. 3.34. When Coyote follows suit, physics returns and Coyote slams into the cliff face.

This trope is continued in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, when Norville Barnes jumps from Hudsucker Industries to his expected death. Yet, physics and time have other plans for him. He is frozen in midair as time is paused. Like Wile E. Norville hangs in the air for a moment until the realisation of his fate and destiny dawn on him. But unlike Wile E. Coyote, Norville lands to the ground with his life still intact, without harm or foul done to his person. Sadly, and funnily, the same cannot be said for Wile E. Coyote.

As J. Madison Davis observes in *Idiotically Criminal*, “though the characters think they have everything figured out, unforeseeable twists endanger the schemes, as if to say that the universe has no inherent order, at least none that humans are capable of predicting” (Davis: 15).



Fig. 3.35.

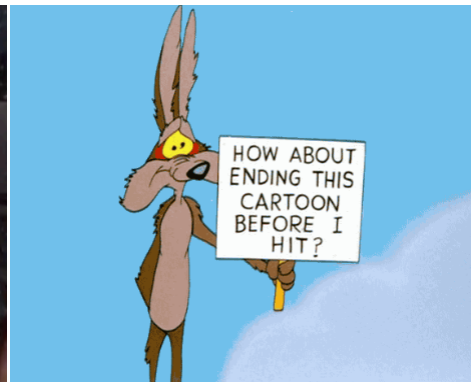


Fig. 3.36.

Gravity fails until it doesn't.

Goldthwaite's plan is foiled by a sequence of unfortunate events. When they attempt to murder Mrs. Munson, one by one the universe punishes their greed. Goldthwaite's death ultimately comes as a result of a broken statue falling on his head, ordered by cosmic chance, or the Coens manipulating the world to punish him. Norville's plan to die is interrupted. Jerry's (*Fargo*) and Linda's (*Burn After Reading*) plans crumble under the actions of other people. This is a source of situational comedy for the Coens and it is one they use often, but it is clear that the physics at play in their fantasy worlds are the same as those in the cartoons – those of the

storyteller creating the world's natural laws to serve the situation rather than the reality of the world.

When the dam water floods the valley, in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the water washes away metaphorical sins, the damned and saves the repentant. Yet, in reality, by rights, everyone should be dead. Just like Tom should be dead in *Filet Meow* (1966) he survives, siphoning water into a room already full to the brim.

When the hula-hoop is thrown out in *The Hudsucker Proxy* it seems to have a mind of its own, predestined to find the young boy who makes it famous, operated by an invisible hand. Elmer and Yosemite's guns seem to take on minds of their own as they can bend and twist around corners and through rabbit warrens looking for their intended targets.



Fig. 3.37.

When the lonesome valley floods, the dog survives the tidal wave, just as Tom can siphon water while under water.



Fig. 3.38.

This trope is not alien to the worlds that exist in the Coens' films. Characters in their films can bend the law of physics too, or simply break them. In *The Ballad Of Buster Scruggs* (2018), the titular character is a gunslinger and a good one. His talents with the gun border on the absurd and sometimes fall right over the line into wacky territory.

During the cantina gunfight, the first where the audience sees his skills, there are little zany actions, fluttery movements and expert shots with the gun. In one instance, he shoots the bartender leaving a hole through him and the wooden wall. The Coens create such a perfect hole that light shines through Buster's adversary, in

a cartoonish touch of comedy, a tongue-in-cheek moment that is common in their work.

Later, when he enters a saloon, he is made leave his gun at the door. He does so and leaves himself unarmed against the aggression of another cowboy.

When this cowboy draws his gun on Buster, Buster has nothing but his own cleverness but also, like Bugs or Droopy he has command on the physical nature of his world. He kicks at the table separating the two men.

Using the table as a fulcrum, a plank from the table pops up, hits the cowboy's gun hand and pushes the gun back into the cowboy's face. The cowboy pulls the trigger, killing himself. This trope of using a plank of timber to stop an assailant is not an original thought, as it has been a *Looney Tunes* gag in the past.



Fig 3.39. *The sunlight shines through the bartender's wound like a cartoon death.*

Yet, despite all the absurdity, the world does not implode on itself due to a lack of physical laws to govern its nature.



Fig. 3.40.
The old plank trick beats both opponents.



Fig. 3.41.

Later still, during his next duel, Buster uses a mirror to showcase his natural talent with a gun – out of character for a cowboy whose life depends on the fatal

shooting of his opponent, but yet, such a gamble pays off, even though these odds would (realistically) be stacked against him. It is as if “more obvious miracles are needed for comedy to exist in a world in which evil also exists, not merely incipiently but with power” (Summers: 262). The creators of the world, Joel and Ethan, like Chuck Jones, Tex Avery and the many animators and directors who made these cartoons gave their heroes a helping hand in combating the conflict within these fictional realities.

Chapter Four

Violence

The Fun, The Dumb & The Violent

The issue of graphic violence is a perilous talking point in light of such violence in the Coens' films. In the case of cartoons, the impact is not so bad, as Daniel Goldmark claims, "The bigger the set-up for a violent act, the bigger the laugh. Audiences know that such violence cannot exist in reality, and they laugh because of its outlandishness" (Goldmark 60-61) The humour, therefore seems to be connected to the violence.

In their presentation of violence, the Coens do not shy away from true violence. *Fargo* and *Burn After Reading* have plenty of references from Showalter's (played by Steve Buscemi) body entering a wood chipper, to Ozzie (John Malkovich's stressed, out of work spy) hatcheting Ted (Richard Jenkins' innocent gym manager) to death. As McGraw explains, "cartoons like *South Park* and *Looney Tunes*, demonstrate how extreme violence and biting satire is often funny when it is not real" (McGraw et al: 603). For the Coens, it is different. Since their films are live action, while fictional, the representation of graphic violence can be quite grotesque compared to cartoons. Bradley Herling argues their films have, "violent struggles that oscillate between choreographed slapstick and grisly realism" (Herling: 130-131). The Coens' comedies sometimes, as with *Raising Arizona*, are slapstick in their comedic makeup. With *Fargo*, it is different, because the brothers wanted to make it a comedy and a serious drama. Carter Burwell, the Coens' music collaborator spoke of it, "In this one [*Fargo*] they felt that the problem was that it's a comedy but they wanted the violence also to be completely believable" (Suozzo: 19). But later is there reasonable bloody gore, during the woodchipper scene. We see the grotesque, but as Laura Finley writes, about *Fargo*, "the violence is so quick it appears to be cartoonish" (Finley: 38). The

Coens, it seems, have a limit in regards portraying such violence. In the two examples of Showalter and Ted, from above, neither death is directly shown on screen. “Rather, in the tradition of Alfred Hitchcock, viewers know but do not see bodies being fed into the woodchipper” (Finley: 38). The Coens seem to know how far to take the violence before it makes the audience uncomfortable.

As Walter Sorell writes, “When the Greeks separated the serious from the comic to achieve an harmonious effect, the medieval theatre combined both to accomplish a unity reflecting life in its tragic and comic aspects” (Sorell: 89). It appears that the Coens have followed the medieval world in this regard. They mixed the ultra-violent moments of their films, such as the woodchipper scene. The violent scene is tongue-in-cheek, equally shocking and funny. Daniel Goldmark alludes to this in the cartoons: “the barbarous extreme of a take itself became the joke; to keep that joke fresh, the directors had to surpass the existing limits with each new cartoon” (Goldmark: 60). But even though the scene is tongue-in-cheek, the film still keeps a serious tone to it, as Finley continues, “there’s no mistaking the fact that this tale is fundamentally grim” (Finley: 38).

While we sense that semblance of a morality in the Coens’ universe, it is not fully just. Hi and Ed deliberate over the theft of Nathan Jr. in *Raising Arizona*, Marge gives Grimsrud a speech over his crimes “all for a little bit of money? There’s more to life than a little bit of money” in *Fargo*, and Warring Hudsucker (played by Charles Durning) and Moses (The Clock Man played by Bill Cobbs) save Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. But it is not a universe that always delivers justice. The elimination of justice allows the characters to treat each other in any way they so wish. Bugs can beat up Yosemite Sam because Yosemite is a bad character; Jerry can torture Tom, because Tom wants to eat him. Hi and Ed, despite their delegating, decide they can steal a baby because they cannot conceive a child and the Arizonas have plenty. All the characters can be killed off without reason in *Burn After Reading*.

Third parties do not exist in these worlds to delegate just judgment. The characters have the freedom to do what they want, and in *The Looney Tunes*, *Tom & Jerry* and the Coens' films, violence tends to appear.



Fig. 4.1. *The non-chalant nature with which Grimsrud treats the deceased Showalter is so crazy and remorseless, it feels like a cartoon character is being fed into the wood chipper and not a human. It wrong foots the audience and so they laugh, gasp or screech in equal measure.*

The violence the brothers choose to showcase in their films is, as already mentioned, very graphic, they hearken back to the same mode of violence that is featured in cartoons, albeit with more blood and gore. As Ethan proclaimed, “It’s about time at that point to shed a little blood. The movie’s in danger of becoming tasteful, you know?” (Bergan: 117).

In this aspect, both cartoons and the Coens’ movies have similar violent modes. When Jean Lundegaard, the kidnapping target, is assaulted, in *Fargo*, the setting is her home, during the day. She has settled down to watch television with no fear. When she sees the masked Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) appears at her window, she does not move. Her action is in complete contrast to what someone would expect a normal person react. She does not run, she does not speak, until he shatters the window with a crowbar. She runs into Gear Grimsrud (the ruthless, emotionless killer, played by Peter Stormare) who grabs her. She manages to bite him and run upstairs (in that stereotype of horror films). Neither of Grimsrud or Showalter is disturbed or disgruntled by her escape. Grimsrud is more concerned with his bleeding hand.

While injured, he does not show any pain or distress about the wound, except for a grunt of pain when Jean inflicted the injury. This is an important point in the discussion, as cartoon violence, while causing animated characters pain there is very little anguish or genuine agony displayed that would be associated with such an act. While an audience can empathize with the character suffering, the pain is not genuine so the empathy is short lived and laughed away.

In *Hare Trimmed* (1953), when Bugs Bunny fills a glove with a brick and slaps Yosemite Sam across the face, in a challenge to a duel, blood does not spill, Yosemite does not screech, there is no death. Instead, there is a painless reference to the pain that should exist, in the form of shattered teeth, shuddering heads or the stereotyped imaginary birds circling over a concussed victim.

The Coens reuse this in their films. When Chad (Brad Pitt) has his small brains blown out in *Burn After Reading* or Carl Showlater gets shot in *Fargo*, there is plenty of blood. But the characters do not react in the traditional manner that is expected of such pain and violence. The violence is outright and short in *Burn After Reading*, and prolonged in *Fargo*, but both are comedic. The preceding moments of the scene, before Chad meets his doomed fate, is quite tense, as Harry Pfarrer (George Clooney's character), walks around a room, oblivious that Chad is hiding from him in the closet. Harry has been introduced as a crack shot, a professional who is trained for any situation – “twenty years of Marshal Service, I never discharged my gun” – yet “from the outset, we see Harry Pfarrer (George Clooney) as something of a loser... (Browning: 159) and “a moral coward” (Browning: 160) so when we see him and Chad in a situation as they are, there is tension, and mystery as to what will happen next. “Although he has spoken of his job and his gun, there is nothing about Harry that would lead us to expect the reaction of shooting Chad in the face” (Browning: 164), he hurtles down the stairs in shock and fear, as the audience reflects his reaction. But since his goofiness goes against the training he spoke about previously, it seems to

relieve the audience and remind them that despite being graphically violent, there is a current of subversive comedy underneath.

Fargo has a prolonged shootout between Carl and Wade, Jean's father (played by Steve Buscemi and Herve Presnell respectively), constantly returning fire for a comically long time – longer than one would naturally expect. Both are hurt, but not enough to stop shooting. Not until, that is, Wade is dead. It is almost as if Yosemite Sam and Elmer Fudd decided to have a shootout themselves. While both of them moan and groan with the pain of each shot, it is nothing compared to the agony that they would experience in reality. This has been discussed earlier in the chapter on Style, in regards Ed slapping Hi in *Raising Arizona*. He shows no pained reaction to the incident.

Like the hapless Roadrunner antagonist, Wile E. Coyote, Hi endures endless physical abuse without ever suffering serious injury. He is punched in the face (by Ed), shot at (by police and town-folk), hurled against and through walls (by Gale Snopes) and dragged over highway asphalt behind a motorcycle (by Smalls) without suffering so much as a scratch. (Adams: 35).

The same can be said for the characters in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. The victims of Amy Archer's (Jennifer Jason Leigh) violent kicks and slaps are unhurt also. Their only reactions are shock or overacted yells. The sounds of such assaults are manipulated in such a way to exaggerate the actions, making the violence feel all the more slapstick and absurd.

When Jean escapes from the bathroom, in *Fargo*, wearing the shower curtain, the absurdity of the moment causes the audience to laugh. When she falls down the stairs, there is an ambiguity, as the laughter still continues, but the seriousness hangs in the air. The comedy turns into a melodrama. When the Coens change the atmosphere of the film to a darker tone, they change the genre as well. In the scene with Jean Lundegaard's kidnapping, they seem to use real sound effects to bring the absurd back to reality. As Jean runs around the house, wearing a shower curtain, it

seems to be so cartoonish that it is funny. But as soon as she falls down the stairs, the noises used are not the over-the-top sounds from *Looney Tunes* or *Tom & Jerry*. The sounds of her fall on the timber staircase do sound realistic and genuine in contrast to the cartoonish chase and fall.

As discussed in Chapter Three, using minimal expressions in a situation, Peter Stormare's (*Fargo*'s chief villain) expression in his scenes is two-fold. It adds to the brevity of his psychopathic behaviour but it also helps to dumb down the impact of the violence. When he kills the policeman, there is little reaction. When he kills Showalter, there is little reaction. When he feeds Showalter's corpse through the wood chipper, there is little reaction, even when he uses a lump of timber to force the leg in further, it seems that he is more frustrated with the task than repulsed by the deed. Marge's reaction of shock is the only one who acts appropriately to such a strange situation yet at the same time it is only one expression again, in keeping with Chuck Jones's minimalist approach to comedy.

In *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, after he has been fatally shot, Buster examines his Stetson for damage before dying, and becoming a stereotyped angel with a harp ascending to heaven. He shows no signs of pain or strife as he notices the wound. Violence in *The Big Lebowski* is quick and painless too. The Dude is beaten and punched unconscious, without any signs of trauma or distress. Only Donny's death is in any way painful, but that is to show the character's strain and heighten the dramatic tension of his dying. When the nihilists cut off the girlfriend's toe, it is done off screen, out of the story. This, the toe mutilation, is the most gruesome act and is left unseen, to keep the comedy from getting too dark. When Buster (in *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*) shoots the fingers off his opponent's hand in his penultimate duel, the man screams in shock. But his screams are elaborate and overbearing, like Wilhelm Screams (the exaggerated fake screams associated with cartoons) as if emphasising the man's acting over conveying true emotion. The same can be seen in *Tom & Jerry*.



Fig 4.2. *Marge's face (Fargo) does not change, despite the fact that she witnesses a body in a wood chipper.*

When pain is real and shown in vocal exclamations, it is overacted to mellow the sincerity of the pain itself. Whether Tom is stuck with a pin, has trapped his hand or tail in a mousetrap or even had his foot hit with a hammer, his exaggeration is overkill and seems to take away from the true nature of the violence. Instead, it is made funny.

This trope, the exaggeration of violence is almost at a preposterous level, and so it gets funnier with each exaggerated instance. In *Filet Meow* (1966), Jerry, saving a goldfish in distress from Tom, stabs Tom with a pin. Tom discovers that by wearing a trashcan as armour, he is invincible against any form of attack and assaults Jerry with an axe. Jerry manages to slip Tom's tail in the path of the axe, so Tom chops his own tail to smithereens. He later cries over his mistake, not out of pain or torture, but out of fear that his tail would be lost forever.

Such a preposterous instance is easy to find in the Coens' films, as the bank clerk in *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* could, possibly, take inspiration from Tom in *Filet Meow*. Eager to dissuade any would-be robbers, and intent to apprehend the criminals, he dresses himself in pan and pots, to protect him against bullets. In real logic, this is insane, but in the world of the film, in its cartoonish nature, the pan-chested armour works successfully.

It is clear that if his pots and pans can stop a bullet, they can stop a pin. While neither pot, pan nor trashcan is an effective defence against bullets or any sort of weapon in reality, the laws of nature and the cartoonish motifs that exist in the realm

of the Coen Brothers' imaginary world, make it plausible and comedic as many of the tropes from *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry* are reflected in their own work, and are successfully used to bridge a gap from animated comedy to live action fiction.



Fig. 4.3.



Fig. 4.4.

The laws of physics are broken regularly in these instances, and normally result in a smile.

Conclusion.

Chuck Jones once quipped; “creation, of course, is a mysterious thing.” (*Emmy TV Legends: Chuck Jones*). For Joel and Ethan Coen, it seems that their process is to merge many genres into one unique style, which is quintessentially their own. As Doom writes, “as the brothers’ careers progressed, the name Coen became synonymous with quirky characters, inventive scripts, witty dialogue and black humor” (Doom: XII).

This has led to an enduring career for both the filmmakers and it seems like it will not stop. *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*, despite the fact that their golden age is long gone, seem to still enjoy the fame and popularity they did at that time. When asked about references in his cartoons, Jones declared, “why do our cartoons hold up? For four, five, ten generations? Because of that stuff [references]” (*Emmy TV Legends: Chuck Jones*). The cartoons are enduring snapshot of moments in history, moments that they (and the Coens) have incorporated into their work.

Both the filmmakers and the animators have availed of cultural and historical references, and in so doing have become part of the culture they reference. The Dude and Bugs, despite having many similarities are also stellar examples of Americana, icons in American culture. Like *The Looney Tunes*, The Coen Brothers have permeated American culture and found a home within it.

The comparisons between The Coen Brothers, Warner Brothers and MGM do not end with this legacy. As has been demonstrated in the previous chapters, many similarities between the two parties (the Coens and the cartoons) can be found in regards to characterization, humour, and approaches to violence.

While the Coens have not publically declared any influence or inspiration from such cartoons as *The Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*, based on the number of similarities in their work to cartoon characterization and tropes pointed out in this thesis, it is reasonable to consider that these auteurs too, like the rest of global

audiences, have guffawed or chuckled at Daffy's quaked schemes and Jerry's feisty escapes from certain peril.

In such a case, the potential inspiration owed to these animated comedies may be incalculable, considering from the many examples given within this thesis. In both Coen and cartoon characterization, subtle vocal inflections provide characters with unique identities separating them from each other. Catchphrases that have become synonymous with those characters, allow people to hear the catchphrase and identify the associated culprit, like "The Dude abides" (*The Big Lebowski*).

The tropes, tones and motifs of the Coens' catalogue does give the audience a sense of cartoonishness, even in their bloodiest films, yet there is something unique to the type of cartoonish behaviour they employ. The characters are not human in the way we expect them to be. As Ronald Bergan points out:

They have found a visual language (and a verbal one) that translates the past into the present. The ironic inverted commas that inevitably cling like crabs around most postmodernist movies are restricting (especially to audiences not as steeped in American movie history), while the Coens find them liberating. (Bergan: 26)

Within this "visual language" is the wacky slapstick and black humour that we expect to see from *The Looney Tunes*, with external forces contributing to the outcome of the story, by subverting the natural order of the world, in order to assist the protagonist in their ordeal. These are moments to upset the rhythm of the story, a means to subvert the serious tension of what is happening on screen and to remind the audience that the film they are watching is, not of this world.

Tom & Jerry and *The Looney Tunes* have availed of this type of comedy by satirizing the world around them, employing the same methods as the Coens. As Bergan writes of the brothers, "it is in the nature of the Coens that they are willing to shift gear at any moment from drama to comedy, sometimes sacrificing the dramatic impact for the sake of a joke" (Bergan: 122-23). They mocked the film noir subgenre and made audience laugh with propaganda pieces about beating Adolf Hitler in the

Second World War. Ethan Coen, despite being a fan of Chandler, “had no qualms about spoofing Raymond Chandler... in his short story “Hector Berlioz” (Bergan: 27).

But in using the same methods, the inspiration for a character, a situation or a solution to an impossibly improbable scenario, the practices overlap. Returning to the question raised in this thesis’ introduction, it appears likely that at least in part, *The Looney Tunes*, *Tom & Jerry*, the maniacal hijinks and the wacky adventures they had, played some part in inspiring Joel and Ethan Coen in finding their own unique style of filmmaking in the present day. As Chuck Jones said when speaking about copying other artists, “all this is open... we all stand atop every artist who ever lived” (*Emmy TV Legends: Chuck Jones*). But the funny thing about inspiration “is you can find it any place. Find it any place.” (*Emmy TV Legends: Chuck Jones*) and perhaps the Coens did find inspiration in the cartoons of their youth.

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