

# The Coen Brothers Reshooting America: Genre, Regionalism, and the Cinematography of Detail

FILM #484 02  
T/R 11:30-1:50  
Instructor: Katie Kane  
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Fall 2016  
Office: LA 111  
Phone #: NONE  
O. Hours: M 12:00-3:00  
& By Appointment

## Policy Statement

### Required Texts and Films:

Conrad, Mark, ed. *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*. (NB: this text is available electronically through the Mansfield Library.)

Robson, Eddie. *Coen Brothers*.

Van Sijll, Jennifer. *Cinematic Conventions*.

N.B. You **MUST** bring the requisite text with you to class.

**Coursework:** Final grades will be determined by your performance in three separate categories of coursework:

1. Short Essays	50%
2. Abstracts/Participation/Reading Notes/ Quizzes	10%
3. Final Essay	<u>40%</u>
	100%

**Daily Response Essays:** Once a week (usually on Thursday students will submit a two to

three page paper. These writing assignments will be graded on a 1 to 5 scale for their engagement with the topic and on their demonstration of writing skills (spelling, grammar, etc.)

**Aspects of student writing that will be assessed in writing assignments:**

- voice that is consistent & appropriate to the audience & purpose;
- correct diction & sentence structure;
- sound judgments unified by a clear message;
- evidence or reasons supporting all judgments;
- logical linkage of judgments and evidence;
- transitions that connect a series of ideas and evidence;
- strong paragraph structure;
- correct spelling and punctuation;
- proper MLA style documentation

If writing is an issue for you – as it is for many of us – please do take your work to the writing center. Do NOT go under the page requirement.

- 1) Summarize either one or more important or interesting issue or problem that the film or article explores or a purpose that it serves in a way that explains what precisely what it is that you find important or interesting about the issue, problem, or purpose. In other words, what did you learn from this text or film about the topic? (e.g. What is the relationship between Film Noir and the Coen Brother’s films?”
- 2) Identify a scene from the film (from a single shot to a montage or a repeated image) or specific passage of the text (from a phrase to a paragraph in length) that especially piqued, delighted, irritated, challenged, or troubled you and explain in an engaged fashion what it is about the paragraph that effected you in this way. In other words, what is the thematic and/or formal work that the film is doing in the sequence you are analyzing, or what argument/aspect of an argument is

**Reading Notes:** On several days during the semester students will turn in a two page handwritten/typed set of questions, observations, research work, close readings in response to the readings. Three aspects: 1). Research on a topic germane to the film. 2) Serious and engaged questions of some length about the film (any topic) 3) Close reading of aspects of the filmic text – technical or narrative.

**THESE READING NOTES WILL BE GRADED ON A 4+/4/4- SCALE WITH NO ATTACHED COMMENTS. EXAMPLE NOTES WILL BE HANDED OUT TO HELP GUIDE YOU. THE NOTES WILL DOCUMENT YOUR RIGOROUS AND THOUGHTFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE TEXTS. THE NOTES WILL PROVIDE MATERIAL FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION. TAKE THIS ASSIGNMENT SERIOUSLY.**

**Schedule:**

Each week, will contain a film day (usually Tuesday) and a discussion (usually Thursday). The essays will usually be due on Thursday.

**Final Research Essay with Abstracts and Drafts:** This 10 to 15 (undergraduates) 20-25 (graduate students) page analytic and scholarly essay with attached bibliography represents the principal writing exercise of the semester. The essay will argue for the relevance of a distinctive, personal analysis of a text/set of texts and/or issues and will likely emerge out of one of the two page reading journals. You will both be free to and responsible for accessing and harnessing the larger debates surrounding Globalization and Culture. Here you must use outside research sources. (If you do not have the *MLA Handbook*, fifth edition, now is the time to consider making the investment. Proper MLA documentation – both internal and external – will be an important part of your grade.) You may also choose to submit a filmed response, but we will need to discuss this option before you commit to it, and you should bear in mind that often, given the constraints of the semester and of the form (which, by nature, is collaborative and labor intensive), usually takes more work and coordination than the paper option.

**Attendance:** Attendance is required and will be recorded: three unexcused absences are grounds for failure of the course itself. Late arrivals and early departures will, if they occur frequently, count as absences. If you do arrive late you will be responsible for letting me know after class that you were present for the day. Brief absences due to medical and family emergencies will be excused, provided you come and discuss the situation (**ASAP**) with me. Lengthy crises that require multiple absences will require you to drop out and enroll in 301 during another semester.

**Scholastic Dishonesty:** Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty – in as much as they keep the individual student as well as the collective community from learning – will result in an automatic F and may entail a variety of other sanctions up to and including expulsion from the University. FOR A DEFINITION OF PLAGIARISM SEE <http://www.lib.umt.edu/services/plagiarism/index.htm>. IF YOU ARE UNSURE ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES, PLEASE TAKE THE TIME TO CONSULT THE STUDENT CONDUCT CODE ON THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA'S WEB SITE.

**Disability Accommodation:** The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction through collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students (DSS). If you think you may have a disability adversely affecting your academic performance, and you have not already registered with DSS, please contact DSS in Lommasson 154. I will work with you and DSS to provide an appropriate accommodation.

**Moodle:** Minimal.

**UM Box:** Yes. PDF Documents will be shared on UM Box:

[https://umt.app.box.com/files/0/f/11073537157/Coen\\_Brothers\\_documents](https://umt.app.box.com/files/0/f/11073537157/Coen_Brothers_documents)

## Course Calendar

### August

#### Week One: Introduction and Beginnings. **Blood Simple.**

T 30: Introduction to the course. Screen *Blood Simple*: 99 minutes/1 hour and 39 minutes).

R 1: Essay on *Blood Simple* due (argue the case *Blood Simple* is or isn't Film Noir). 158; Robson, "*Blood Simple*," 9-40; Film Elements: Rembrant Lighting," Van Sijil, 196; "Dashiell Hammett, the Mystery Novel, and the Birth of Film Noir." Kelly, *Sydney Studies in English*, 2008; 34: 109-140, PDF; "My Noir: *Blood Simple*," Wood, *Film International*, 2013; 11 (5 [65]): 38-39. PDF.

### September

#### Week Two: **Miller's Crossing**

T 6: *Miller's Crossing*: 115 Minutes/1 hour 55 minutes.

R 8: Essay on *Miller's Crossing* due. Robson, "*Miller's Crossing*," 74-100; Film Elements: POV," Van Sijil, 158; Herling, "Ethics, Heart, and Violence in *Miller's Crossing*, from *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, 125-146. "Acting for Real: Coughlin, Paul; *Journal of Popular Culture*, 2008 Apr; 41 (2): 224-244, PDF.

#### Week Three: **Barton Fink**

T 13: *Barton Fink* 117 minutes/1 hour and 57 minutes.

R 15: Essay on *Barton Fink* due. Robson, "*Barton Fink*," 100-129. "Film Elements: Dissolves," page 62, Van Sijil. Conrad, "Heidegger and the Problem of Interpretation in *Barton Fink*," from *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, 179-194.

#### Week Four: **Fargo**

T 20: *Fargo*: 98 minutes/1 hour and 38 minutes.

R 22: Essay on *Fargo* due. Robson, "*Fargo*," 160-187. Sharrat, Christopher "Fargo, a Bleak Landscape," *The Coen Brothers' Fargo: A Cambridge Film Guide*, 55-76; Probst, Chris, "Cold Blooded Scheming: Roger Deakins and *Fargo*," *The Coen Brothers' Fargo: A Cambridge Film Guide*, 119-127, both **PDFs**.

#### Week Five: **The Big Lebowski**

- T 27: *The Big Lebowski*: 119 minutes/1 hour and 59 minutes.
- R 29: Robson, "The Big Lebowski," 188-215. "Takin' 'er Easy for All Us Sinners: Laziness as a Virtue in *The Big Lebowski*," from *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, 147-162; Comentale, Edward. "I'll Keep Rolling Along: Some Notes on Singing Cowboys and Bowling Alleys in *The Big Lebowski*," 228-251, *This Year's Work in Lebowski Studies*, **PDF**.

**October:**

**Week Six: The Big Lebowski Redux & O Brother Where Art Thou?**

- T 4: **No Reading Essay due, but Reading Notes are to be turned in.** Klinger, "Becoming Cult: The Big Lebowski: Replay Culture and Male Fans," *Screen (2010) 51 (1): 1-20*; "New Shit Has Come to Light": Information Seeking Behavior in *The Big Lebowski*," Dill and Janke, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 2013 Aug; 46 (4) 772-778; **Both PDFs**.
- R 6: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*: 108 minutes/1 hour and 48 minutes.

**Week Seven: O Brother Where Art Two—Act Two & No Country for Old Men**

- T 11: **Reading Essay Due.** Robson, "*O Brother Where Art Thou?*" 224-249; Ruppensburg, "Oh, So Many Startlements. . .": History, Race, and Myth in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*" *Southern Cultures*, Volume 9, Number 4, Winter 2003, pp. 5-26. **PDF**; McFarland, Douglas, "Homer Meets the Coen Brothers: Memory as Artistic Pastiche in *O Brother Where Art Thou?*" *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 49-62, 2009 Fall. [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/film\\_and\\_history/v039/39.2.toscano.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/film_and_history/v039/39.2.toscano.html)
- R 13: *No Country for Old Men*: 123 minutes / 2 hours and 3 minutes

**Week Eight: No Country for Old Men, Part Two & Burn After Reading**

- T 18: **Reading Essay Due.** Flory, Dan, "Evil, Mood, and Reflection in the Coen Brother's *No Country for Old Men*," 117-134 IN: Spurgeon, Sara L. (ed. and introd.), *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*. Continuum Press, New York: New York, 2011 **PDF**; Gilmore, Richard, "*No Country for Old Men*: The Coen Brothers' Tragic Western," from *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, 55-78.
- R 20: *Burn After Reading*: 96 minutes / 1 hour and 36 minutes.

**Week Nine: Burn After Reading Twice & A Serious Man**

- T 25: **Reading Essay Due.** Tyree, J. M. "League of Morons," *Sight and Sound*, 2008 Nov; 18 (11): 36-38. **PDF**; McFarland, Douglas, "Philosophies of Comedy in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, 41-54.

R 27: *A Serious Man*: 106 minutes /1 hour and 46 minutes.

## November

### Week Ten: A More Serious Man.

T 1: **Reading Notes Due.** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burn\\_After\\_Reading](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burn_After_Reading). Denby, David (September 15, 2008). "Storm Warnings: *Burn After Reading* and *Trouble the Water*". *The New Yorker*; [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2008/09/15/080915crici\\_cinema\\_denby](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2008/09/15/080915crici_cinema_denby); Pulver, Andrew (August 27, 2008). "A Tightly Wound Triumph," London: *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/aug/27/venicefilmfestival.coenbrothers> Weston Sabo, "Serious Joke: The Coen Brothers as Jewish Humorists," *Bright Lights Film Journal*. <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/67/67coens.php>, and Denby, David. "Gods and Victims: "A Serious Man" and "Capitalism: A Love Story."". *The New Yorker*. [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/10/05/091005crici\\_cinema\\_denby](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2009/10/05/091005crici_cinema_denby) Lewitt, Ido. "The Kafkaesque Cinematic Language of The Coen Brothers' "A Serious Man," *Journal of the Kafka Society of America: New International Series*, 2009-2010; 33-34: 4, 29-38, **PDF**.

R 3: Screening of *Hail, Caesar!*, 1 hour and 46 minutes.

### Week Eleven: Election Day &

T 8: No class: ELECTION DAY

R 10: Presentation of Abstracts and Video Sequences. 12-14 a day. 10 minutes per presentation.

### Week Twelve: True Grit

T 15: Presentation of Abstracts and Video Sequences. 12-14 a day. 10 minutes per presentation. .

R 17: Kane at ASA. Screening of *True Grit*: 111 minutes / 1 hour and 51 minutes.

### Week Thirteen: True Grit

T 22: Presentation of Abstracts and Video Sequences. 12-14 a day. 10 minutes per presentation.

R 24: HOLIDAY: No Classes

### Week Fourteen: Grittier & Inside Llewyn Davis (and Meetings over Rough Draft)

T 29: **Reading Response Due.** Fletcher, Judith; "The Catabasis of Mattie Ross in the Coens' *True Grit*." *Classical World*, 2014 Winter; 107 (2): 237-254, **PDF**;

Campbell, Neil, et al. "From Blood Simple to True Grit: A Conversation about the Coen Brother's Cinematic West." *Western American Literature*, 2013 Fall; 48 (3): 312-340, **PDF**.

R 1: *Inside Llewyn Davis*: 119 minutes / 2 hours less one minute

## December

### Week Fifteen: Inside Llewyn Davis

R 6: **Reading Notes Due.** "The Art of the Score: The Mind, Music, and Moving Images," (video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8TqjA-iMD0>; Romney, Jonathan; "Songs of Innocence and Experience," *Film Comment*, 2013 Nov-Dec; 49 (6): 18-22; Jacobson, Harlan, "Three Kings," *Film Comment*, 2014 Jan-Feb; 50 (1): 60-63; James, Nick, "Inside the Wheel," *Sight and Sound*, 2014 Feb; 24 (2): 23-26.. **PDFs**

R 8: Screening of Documentaries and Featurettes about the Coen Brothers.

### Week Sixteen: Finals Week

M 9: Final Paper Due: 5:00. My office.

## Credits

### Filmography\*

1984 *Blood Simple*  
1987 *Raising Arizona*  
1990 *Miller's Crossing*  
1991 *Barton Fink*  
1994 *The Hudsucker Proxy*  
1996 *Fargo*  
1998 *The Big Lebowski*  
2000 *O Brother Where Art Thou?*  
2001 *The Man Who Wasn't There*  
2003 *Intolerable Cruelty*  
2004 *The Ladykillers*  
2007 *No Country for Old Men*  
2008 *Burn After Reading*  
2009 *A Serious Man*  
2010 *True Grit*  
2013 *Inside Llewyn Davis*  
2016 *Hail, Caesar!*  
**\*directed by Joel and Ethan Coen.**

## Selected Bibliography:

### A. Books about the Coen Brothers work.

- Allen, William Rodney. *The Coen Brothers: Interviews*. Jackson: U Press of Mississippi, 2006.
- Comentale, Edward P. and Aaron Jaffe, editors. *The Year's Work in Lebowsky Studies*.  
Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 2009.
- Conrad, Mark T. *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*. Lexington: U Press of Kentucky, 2009.
- King, Lynnea Chapman, et al, editors. *No Country for Old Men: From Novel to Film*. Lanham,  
Maryland: Scarecrow, 2009.
- Korte, Peter and Georg Seesslen. *Joel and Ethan Coen*. London: Limelight, 2001.
- Luhr, William G., editor. *The Coen Brothers' Fargo*. Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2004.
- Palmer, R. Barton. *Joel and Ethan Coen*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2004.
- Robertson, William Preston. *The Big Lebowski: The Making of a Coen Brothers Film*. New  
York: W.W. Norton, 1998. (Not a terribly scholarly book, but still valuable.)
- Robson, Eddie. *Coen Brothers*. London: Virgin Books, 2003.
- Rowell, Erika. *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*. Lanham, Maryland:  
Scarecrow, 2007.
- Tyree, J.M. and Ben Walters. *The Big Lebowski*. London: British Film Institute, 2007.
- Woods, Paul A., editor. *Joel and Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*. London: Plexus, 2000.

### B. A Few Books from the Coen Brothers' Literary Canon

- Cain, James M. *Double Indemnity*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *Farewell, My Lovely*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- . *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- . *The Long Goodbye*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- Hammett, Dashiell. *The Glass Key*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *The Maltese Falcon*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *Red Harvest*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Vintage, 2007.

### C. Published Screenplays

- Collected Screenplays 1: Blood Simple, Raising Arizona, Miller's Crossing, Barton Fink*. New  
York: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- Raising Arizona*. New York: St. Martins, 1988.
- The Hudsucker Proxy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.
- Fargo*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- The Big Lebowski*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.
- O Brother, Where Art Thou?* New York: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- The Man Who Wasn't There*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2001.
- Intolerable Cruelty*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003.
- The Ladykillers*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004.
- Burn After Reading*. London: Faber and Faber, 2008.



*A Serious Man*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.