"It's a Problem of … Perception." The Coen Brothers' Constructivist Use of Genre

Allen H. Redmon

In what seems like something of a non sequitur at the time, the Coens leave the central narrative of *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000), to focus on a political conversation between Pappy O'Daniels (Charles Durning) and his staff. The sitting governor wonders what he has to do to gain a "constituency." His son, Junior (Del Pentecost), suggests they try to copy the campaign of their opponent, Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall), and get "a little fella even smaller than Stokes'." Pappy explodes. He cannot let his campaign seem like "a bunch of Johnny-come-latelies." Pappy explains that his primary problem is that people already think, "this Stokes got fresh ideas." Imitation of Stokes would only confirm this assumption. His two advisors agree: "It's a problem of," one of the two begins and then searches for the word that the other is ready to offer, "perception." The conversation carries with it an unexpected significance not only for this one film where misperceptions come with perilous consequences, but for those who try to work to make sense of such a film in the late twentieth century. The common perception of contemporary American filmmakers, the Coens included, is that they are "a bunch of Johnny-come-latelies." They can be little more set as they are within postmodernism.

Booker characterizes postmodernism with essentially six traits. To begin with, the postmodern period is marked by a "general crisis of belief" brought on "by a dizzying and accelerating rate of change" (xiv). All contentions become suspicious and dependence on any becomes impossible. As a result, the postmodern privileges playfulness over sincerity. It also champions pluralism over singularity. The individual work utilizes "multiple genres and styles" instead of relying on any one sense (xiv). All of this mirrors a "psychic fragmentation" of the individual that displaces lucidity. The argument is that "individuals no longer have a stable enough psyche" to realize "any real identity" (xv). Society, itself, in fact, loses any sense of "temporal continuity" (xv). An unpredictable present disconnects itself from both the past and the future. Reality is based as much on fiction as anything else. The lines between art and reality are irreparably blurred (xvi).

These traits cooperate to make a profound impact on the artistic expression of the postmodern period. Booker turns to Jameson to explain: "Jameson argues that postmodern art (especially narrative art such as cinema or the novel), is characterized by two central tendencies: formal fragmentation, and a reliance on styles that mimic those of earlier works or artists in a mode of pastiche" (xviii). Booker's subsequent discussion of the Coens' craft finds the highest expression of both traits. Booker catalogs the filmmaking duo's entire career in the way others would organize movies in a video store. He marks *Blood Simple* (1984) as a "relatively straight-forward neo-noir"; *Miller's Crossing* (1990) as a "gangster drama"; *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) as a "screwball comedy"; and *The Ladykillers* (2004) as "a remake" (97). Every film occupies another shelf in the store. Such arrangement suggests an assumed formal artistic fragmentation that necessitates the use of any and every generic expression.

Booker's assessment of *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) reveals the mode of pastiche Jameson predicts. Booker claims the Coens actually take "the practice of generic pastiche" to exceptionally new heights with the release of their ninth film. Booker considers the film the Coens' attempt to " literally […] recreate, from beginning to end, the classic film noir—in terms of both style and content" (97). While not entirely misguided in his assessment, one could claim that Booker's evaluation misses the fullness of *The Man Who Wasn't There*. And if it does, the problem is one of perception rather than acumen. Booker simply accepts both a postmodern view of the Coens' film and the limitations that go with it. Unfortunately, such a view overlooks the novelty the Coens exhibit in this film and in others.

The trouble with the postmodern designation is that, in keeping with Baudrillard's description of representations of reality like the ones being scrutinized here, they are "nuclear and genetic, no longer at all specular and discursive" (2). They create a closed system of reference that precludes

other ways of seeing. Natoli notes as much when describing the critical reaction to the Coens' oeuvre; he claims that once enough "postmodern qualities" have been found in so many Coen brother films that scholars have no choice but to return to earlier films in "search […] for [their] postmodern qualities" (88). Those qualities, of course, come to the surface: a "sly, witting parodying of mood […] a rush onto all paths and possibilities without fear of getting back […] an unraveling, deconstructive journey […] that has no clear beginning or end" (88). Pre-focused by postmodernity, the Coens' films become nothing but postmodern.

The present article proposes an alternative way to approach a Coen brother film grounded in a reconsideration of the Coens' use of genre. Rather than the fleeting flashes of allusion or sustained instances of generic pastiche that postmodern assessments would predict, the Coens routinely rely on the regular and sustained use of multiple genres in their film, which alters the manner in which viewers can respond to them. This article proposes that a constructivist rather than postmodern sensibility can better account for the Coens' structure and the response that structure encourages from its audiences. The shift from postmodern to constructivist logic hinges on the Coens' use of genre, which can be best understood when approached through Jean Piaget's psychological constructivism and the priorities of constructivist art prominent in 1920s Russia. The former reconstitutes genre as another individually productive and socially shared thought structure; the latter reassigns the work an audience must do when confronted with a work of art. Both depart from accepted postmodern assessments of contemporary filmmakers and the assignment such projects assign. By way of example, the paper closes with a look at some of the ways a constructivist reading of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, one of the densest projects to date, generically speaking, might work. The point is not to insist on the way *O Brother* is to be read; rather, it is to show the extent to which the film can take advantage of spectators' knowledge of the genres the Coens are using to participate in the on-going construction of the film. A brief discussion of the limited view afforded by postmodern readings and the alternative the constructivist sensibility offers is in order first.

Discussions of the Coens' films grounded in postmodernism misconstrue the Coens' unique use of genre and the way in which those uses of genre intend to engage audiences. Scholars under the influence of postmodern thought tend to treat the genres of Hollywood's studio days like items in a thrift shop. Still reminiscent of the associations they once evoked, individual markers of genre hang on racks throughout a store. Recognizable characters are set in one corner. Symbolic settings are placed in another. Culturally significant conflicts and ideologically loaded resolutions fill the others. Contemporary filmmakers desperate for the form and meaning these artifacts lend thumb through the broadly organized items. They gather the remnants with the most promise until they the right cultural weight for their own projects emerges. Once satisfied, the enchanted artisans leave the shop and begin the process of altering their random collection of generic artifacts to try to find some coherence. If their initial ensemble fails to find the balance, they simply return to the thrift shop for contemporary filmmaking where exchanges are free and easy. Neither the shop owner nor the filmmakers is terribly invested in any of the particulars anyway. The whole process is as whimsical as it is sensible, or so the story goes.

It becomes difficult to voice any other account of a project once the above account has been articulated if for no other reason than just about any film can be shown to borrow from the past in some way. In the case of the Coens, the temptation is nearly impossible to ignore. Their films rely so openly on established traditions. For some, like Walter Metz, the Coens can be charged with participating in what Metz calls "a blank postmodernism" that turns films like *Miller's Crossing* or *Fargo* into little more than "postmodern exercise(s)" (165). Erica Rowell reports much the same in her analysis of the Coens. Their work before *The Ladykillers* is dismissed as years of "unofficial remakes and postmodern cribbing" (327): familiar characters and actions, sets and images, all equally borrowed from the past, fill the Coens' screen. The postmodern director can simply do no better. To expect anything more than the "postmodern updates" is to misunderstand the current conditions for filmmakers.

The postmodern who accepts the six traits Booker identified would argue that the visions of the past are simply too mesmerizing for today's filmmaker to negotiate. The period represents what Fredric Jameson describes as "an increasingly closed and terrifying machine," that renders those who witness it "powerless" (5). The artists, like the populace for whom they work, lose their center. They

renounce their ability to forge any sense of unique style or to recognize any unique expression. The impulse shifts from artistic creation to what Jameson describes *à propos* Raymond Williams as "'residual' and 'emergent' forms of cultural production" (6). Imaginatively poor and hopelessly fragmented, artists "have nowhere to turn to turn but to the past: to the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (17-18). Enter here the cultural thrift shop for filmmakers above described. The most resourceful postmodern filmmakers enter such a shop to participate in "what architecture historians call 'historicism,' namely, the random cannibalization of all styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (18). They generate a film that approaches an otherwise absent past "through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation" (19). The "past" becomes a type of "pastness," negotiated through "stylistic connotation" shaped "by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion" (19). The most revered filmmakers, then, according to Jameson, are those who can use the "history of aesthetic style" to displace "real history" most efficaciously (20).

For many, the Coens achieve this feat as well as anyone can, and, so, they mark the Coens postmodern almost affectionately. Such a designation comes at a cost, though. The postmodern designation flattens authorial intent to but one thing, namely, a round of postmodern play. Worse, it assumes an equally uniform response from the audience. A Coen brother feature is treated like a scavenger hunt that asks spectators to tally in some ledger cinematic, literary, and cultural references as they recognize them. The proposal treats artist and audience like computers that first scramble messages and then decode the random and whimsical arrangement.

Both aspects of this proposal are unsatisfactory when applied to the films the Coens construct and that they ask their audiences to reconstruct. A discussion of the constructivist sensibility being championed herein yields a more satisfactory account one that not only highlights an unexpected inventiveness on the part of the Coens, but that explains the devoted fan following they have as well. In short, the Coens' popularity might very well be a direct result of their willingness to allow their audience to share authorial responsibility for the film they watch. Audiences delight in the way in which the film refuses to define its interpretative frameworks, and the way in which no aspect is left to free association; rather, it is prefocused through a consistent use of critical and popular genres. Every item can be commuted against these accepted patterns, which work like organizing principles across their (both the Coens' and the audiences') film. The result is a film that is not one thing, but several. The spectator is able to enjoy an unprecedented amount of control over the film as they watch it. A fuller discussion of the constructivist sensibility reveals the way in which this freedom is achieved.

The constructivist use of genre emerges from the ideas of Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology, which begins with a rejection of the objectivist ways of knowing reality. Piaget rejected the presumption of Kantian philosophy that views knowledge as "a copy of reality" (56). Such a proposal depends for Piaget on a logical fallacy: "in order to make a copy, we have to know the model that we are copying, but according to this theory of knowledge, the only way to know the model is by copying it, until we are caught in a circle, unable to know whether our copy of the model is like the model or not" (15). This idea implicates one in an infinite loop that is not only self-referential, but that also depends on a transfer that is highly problematic. Knowledge is not transferred from reality to subjects in Piaget's estimation; instead, it is constructed by subjects and constructed in personal ways. Ernest von Glasersfeld summarizes the process most succinctly: "the cognitive organism is first and foremost an organizer who interprets experience and, by interpretation shapes it into a structured world" (1). This shift in the way one accesses reality has important consequences not only on how one considers individuals situate themselves within any period, but on how artists work with the postmodern period as well.

As it relates to how individuals situate themselves in their society, Piaget's constructivist proposal erases the anxiety thought to paralyze artist and audience alike. Reality is what it has always been for the constructivist. "All knowledge," writes Piaget, "is tied to action and knowing an object or an event is to use it by assimilating it (or accommodating it) to an action scheme" (qtd. von Glasersfeld 633). Action schemes refer to viable constructs already accepted or being constructed so that an individual can act without constraint. These schema are the foundational pieces of cognitive

development. When confronted with information that is readily adaptable, an individual will simply assimilate that information into an existing action scheme; when the information fails to fit standing schema, the individual simply puts the new information through a process of accommodation until all is reconciled. Information that fails to be reconciled is dismissed. In this view, individuals are never left powerless. Nor do they suffer from some sense of fragmentation. To the contrary, individuals of all periods, including the "postmodern" period, negotiate their reality in the same way individuals from any other epoch would: by acting on it.

This constructivist view also encourages scholars to look differently at what the brand of postmodernism described by Booker as "cannibalization" or some "imitation of dead styles." The neo-noir film might be more than the evidence of a bankrupted culture; it could just as well be a formal and communal engagement with previously viable schema. Such a view is not entirely out of place within film theory. Genre theorists in film have recognized that the critical contribution a genre makes might be the discussion the forms occasion rather than the particular features that distinguish one from another. James Naremore suggests that "individual genre has less to do with a group of artefacts than with a discourse—a loose evolving system of arguments and readings" (14). In 1999 Rick Altman amended his earlier seminal semantic/syntactic description of genre to include a pragmatic component meant to account for the discourse around a genre that his earlier proposal had ignored. The addition of the pragmatic component allowed Altman to better examine "patterns of generic change—generic origins, genre redefinition and genre repurposing"—to more fully account for the "discursive nature of genres" (208). Attention was more squarely placed on "the diverse groups using [a] genre" so that the extent to which genres function "as regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single social fabric" might be identified more easily (208). A focus on the discourse a genre invites signals an appreciation of the way in which the utilization of a genre might be an attempt to connect ways of seeing and thinking to already acknowledged constructs rather than evidence of a an inability to create authentic or unique expressions. If it does, then it also shifts the discussion from postmodern to a constructivist framework.

Altman's amended approach to generic classification does more neatly align with constructivist ways of thinking than earlier proposals, but it also ultimately departs from the constructivist use of genre. The breaking point is Altman's abandonment of the text to focus on the reception of that text. Altman claims the text is simply too unwieldy to be given proper analysis. Audiences would be forced to watch a film with too many competing patterns in mind. They would have to compare every item in a film against one of the innumerable possible patterns. No item could ever be "limited to a single use pattern against which the lower level can be commuted" (210). The audiences' ability to "separate meaningful sounds from noise, words from jabberwocky, and textual structures from random patterns" would be lost (210). No definite meaning could ever be reached, and so Altman abandons the utterance in favor of the discussions users have to make sense of it.

As pleasing a response as this might be to the strictly reception-minded, it does little for critics who are intent on accounting for the relationship an artist might invite between film and audience. While not entirely misguided, Altman's preference for reception study leaves the text too quickly at least in the case of the Coens who can be shown to create texts that gain their greatest significance when viewers accept the task Altman rejects. The constructivist use of genre insists that the Coens create films with some hope that audiences will commute items against a variety of higher-level organizing principles—both those suggested in the text and presumably those embraced by different readers. The way in which they make this appeal is similar to the ways in which constructivist artists working in1920s Russia made their appeal, namely, by never concealing the fact that their works were obvious constructions.

Briony Fer points to the appearance of two metal constructions in a 1924 edition of *L'Esprit Nouveau* as the formal introduction of constructivist art. The first piece by Konstantin Medunetsky, untitled, presented an arrangement of five overlapping metal rods at various angles, some of them straight and others bent at 90-degree angels. The second by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, also untitled, stretched a nickel-plated coil from an iron post to a base at a 45-degree angle. Fer claims that the presentation of these pieces garnered the attention they did for at least two reasons. Firstly, the artists made "no attempt to mask the fact that they were [using] modern industrial materials" (88). Secondly, both pieces freely borrowed industrial elements for artistic purposes. By inserting

commonplace or other-placed items into an exhibit, these artists pushed the others to consider what one saw as art and how one should see something once it was deemed art.

This overt insertion of everyday elements into the world of art altered the perception of both the world and its art. More importantly, it adjusted the work one must do when confronted by these things. The items being circulated were not just unexpected; they were also obviously constructed. Artists openly spoke of their work as constructions rather than inventions. They made no attempt to conceal that their efforts were constructions. As Fer explains: "[T]he single most important quality of an art object, as a constructed object, was its *faktura*, its surface texture, the evidence of its having been made" (100). Drawing on the comments of Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, Fer continues: "faktura, or texture […] [was] set against 'recognition'" (122). The impetus for reception became reconstruction rather than recognition. An obviously constructed piece demanded analysis and dissection; it requested to be taken apart and reconstituted. The constructivists expected the "undoing or dismantling […] at the heart of the idea construction" to guide the viewing process (122).

This expectation returns the discussion to Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to genre with a new reason for completing the work that Altman rejects. The Coens craft films that are obvious (re)constructions of past formulas. Take the ritual scene in *O Brother,* for example. The scene is an obvious construction of a series of cinematic and cultural moments, which begin from the first shot. The camera frames *O Brother*'s three sojourners in a rough approximation of the Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion as they watch the witches' guards just before they rescue Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). *O Brother* borrows from this scene further when the soundtrack overlays the Klan's dancing with what very nearly matches the music in this moment in *Oz*, which makes the connection to that film virtually undeniable. The dance that follows relies on another as it has all of the exuberance, choreography, and synchronization of a 1930's Busby Berkeley musical number.

A third ingredient appears moments later when the dancing stops and the marshal of ceremonies breaks into an a cappella performance of Ralph Stanley's "O Death." The Coens' preference for song over speech in this moment aligns the film with non-integrated musicals of the studio days. The Coens inject a fourth ingredient when the singing stops and the Klan's grand-marshal is Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall), the front-runner in the gubernatorial election occurring in the film. Such a character sets what follows within the concerns of social problem films. An additional ingredient appears when the one-eyed Bible-salesman, Big Dan Teague (John Goodman), returns and the film reminds viewers of its admitted source, Homer's *The Odyssey*. This reminder not only alters the meaning of Big Dan, but it also reconstitutes the men dancing around in their white coats. The scene becomes a close approximation of the use of sheep to escape Polyphemus' cave. The whole ritual the Coens craft takes shape through items already constructed and in circulation, which could prompt the astute and willing viewer to begin looking for these elements in other parts of the film.

This one moment in *O Brother* isolates the two primary gestures embedded within a constructivist use of genre. On the production side of a film, the constructivist use of genre refers to a willingness on the part of the filmmaker to inject their film with more than one organizing principle. In the case of the Coens, these organizing principles are most often well-established genres. The ritual scene, which is at once an adaptation, a musical, a social problem film, and probably other things as well, bears this point out. The most surprising aspect of these elements, at least if understood from a postmodern sensibility that would expect they disappear as quickly as they appear, is that they extend beyond a moment. As such, these aspects can work in just the way constructivist art worked, namely, in prompting the viewer to participate in a reconstruction of the piece in front of them.

The constructivist use of genre contends that this is just the response the Coens permit and even encourage from their spectators. They insert their films with genres of the past in such a way that their use has less to do with that past or some present artistic crisis and more to do with an opportunity for creative and imaginative reworking of the final form of their film. Their films, then, can be read in multiple ways with many of those ways allowing a different sort of coherence. The final form of their films often remains open for negotiation so that audiences can hold in their hands several narrative threads at once. They can pull on one thread to align the elements in the film one way or braid together two or more threads to discover unexpected readings. Audiences end up

watching not one film, but several if their cinematic or cultural knowledge and proclivity to engage in such behavior will allow it.

A fuller discussion of *O Brother* should illustrate both sides of the constructivist use of genre being advocated. *O Brother* exists equally well as (1) at least two of the three types of adaptation described by Boozer; (2) a classical Hollywood musical as described in Thomas Schatz (186-220); and, (3) a social problem film as defined by Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy (*passim*). None of these ways are meant to be the way to read the Coens' film. A viewer happily unaware of the formulas being utilized will simply organize the film in one of the other ways (or in a way not mentioned here). The critical point is that each of the above noted ways of reading are embedded into the fabric of the film, which encourages a constructivist rather than merely postmodern reading of the film.

O Brother initiates the constructive watching being suggested here even before the film begins by taking its title from Preston Sturges' classic comedy *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). The eponymous character, John Lloyd Sullivan (Joel McCrea), is a film director who wants a break from making the escapist film's his audience craves in order to craft a serious movie. The proposed title for this project is "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" One need not know this history to appreciate the Coens' O Brother. The Coens make but a distant reference, to use the language of Boozer, to Sturges' film; that said, those who know this history are sure to put that knowledge to use throughout their watching of *O Brother*. The inclusion of the chain gang at the opening of *O Brother*, for instance, would carry with it an additional seriousness that it might not when separated from *Sullivan*. McCrea's time in such a prison in Sullivan's was so clearly undeserved. Responses to the mania over "The Soggy Bottom Boys" changes a bit, too. Set within the epiphany McCrea has in Sullivan's during the moment in the church when McCrea realizes the value of entertainment, the unexplained popularity of the group's song lacks the criticism of popular culture it might otherwise proffer. Such things speak as much to the difficulty of life as they do to anything else. None of these resonances have an exclusive hold on any of the items mentioned. Such correlations could even go unnoticed and *O Brother* would not change much. The point is that the Coens offer Sturges' film as a frame of reference for those who can see it or who choose to do so. This possibility is enough to occasion the constructivist sensibility being herein outlined.

The Coens do, of course, admit other inspirations and often more explicitly. The film visually opens with the opening lines of Homer's *The Odyssey* on screen:

> O Muse!
> Sing in me, and through me tell the story
> Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending,
> A wanderer, harried for years on end…

And, before the opening credits reach their end, the Coens openly admit that their film is "Based upon *The Odyssey* by Homer." Their inclusion of the opening lines from Homer's poem and admittance that their film has a literary antecedent causes the audience to look for parallels between their film and Homer's story. Again, the Coens do not disappoint viewer's expecting correlations between these two texts. Everett's (George Clooney) designs to get home approximate Odysseus' as does Everett's contests for control with "his men." More explicit connections arise when the film's three travelers encounter "the sirens" or when Everett and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) encounter Big Dan. O Brother is not a literal or close reading of *The Odyssey* by any means, but the Coens do refer to this text just enough to keep it and its concerns in front of their audience.

The twice-framed adaptation the Coens craft in *O Brother* situates the film within the sorts of intertextualities or transtextualities so common in contemporary cinema. Textualities exist according to Gérard Genette at every time (36-40); one text is overtly or more discreetly set within another. This view of adaptation closely approximates a constructivist perspective on how subjects engage knowledge, and begins to suggest the way in which use of already constructed elements might encourage the reconstruction of a text constructivist art expected. Both aspects bring the constructivist use of genre into greater focus. Adaptation scholars have shown that viewers look at texts, especially adapted texts, with other texts in mind. The constructivist use of genre insists on this same point, but maintains that the Coens are making films and their viewers are watching their films

with more than just bits of texts in mind; they are just as often relying on the logic, structure, and meaning of entire genres as well. This shift to higher-level sorts of schema (higher-level because generic readings tend to work from the top-down rather than from the text-up) allows, in the case of *O Brother*, an admitted adaptation to at once exhibit the characteristics of generic adaptation. The film need not insist on this additional relationship or formation, but it is available if viewers are prepared and inclined to see it.

One such additional formation arises in *O Brother* through the Coens' consistent use of the non-integrated musical described in Schatz. Reviewers consistently commented on the contribution the music makes in O Brother. Peter Travers calls the film an "ear-candy score of bluegrass, gospel, and country" (Travers). A. O. Scott goes one step further by noting the way in which the music in the film holds the whole together by adding "an emotional resonance that would otherwise be missing" (Scott). Roger Ebert identified the music as "the heart of the film" (Ebert). The reviewers emphasized what careful analysis would reveal, namely, that *O Brother* functions as a legitimate musical.

Those who know the tendencies of musicals are rewarded for their knowledge, too, as *O Brother* bears more than fleeting references to the Hollywood musical. A look at the particulars of the musical demonstrates as much. Following Schatz, the musical assembles a set of characters that includes 1) a male lead who is at once lover and performer, 2) a womanly domesticator, 3) a "morally questionable" male and female alternative for each of the leads, and 4) a host of other characters meant to hinder the union of the two leads the audience anticipates. Musicals place this community of characters in a narrative that both makes space for musical and/or performative interludes and works toward "the show." It is during the show that all of the conflicts confine the characters are magically removed, which integrates them all into a world that exists at least as long as the show does. Both of these feats are encapsulated in "the embrace" enjoyed by the film's principles at the conclusion of the show, which was typically extended into an epilogue, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of an otherwise improbable social and, more specifically, domestic integration of the male hero.

A comparison of these generic expectations and *O Brother* reveals that the Coens' film is more than a movie with a bunch of good music in it. The film depends on its music to not only express all that the characters want to say, but "to determine the attitudes, values, and demeanor of the principle characters" as well (Schatz 194). More to the point of the constructivist use of genre, the music triggers the viewer to think of the musical as an interpretative framework for the film. This impulse to think of the film as a musical intensifies each time the music becomes the principle means to establish the disposition of or turns in the narrative.

The Coens mark their narrative through music from the moment the film opens. The film begins with the first two stanzas of the old spiritual "Po Lazarus" before shifting to the entirety of the fanciful "Big Rock Candy Mountain." Both songs help establish the droll reality in which the characters move and the whimsical illusion the audience will be able to observe, which is not surprises as this is just the bifurcation musicals tend to tolerate at the beginning of their stories. The images running over both songs could easily be considered performance, too, which further permits viewers aware of the musical to read *O Brother* as such a film. Inmates methodically sing and swing their hammers during "Po Lazarus" emphasizing the oppression and monotony of their world. When the second song begins, the Coens cut to the three escapees fleeing the chain gang with impossible ease. The aural and visual cooperate to establish the very contrast between reality and the world of music so necessary in Hollywood musicals.

The next two songs, "Down to the River to Pray," and the first rendition of "I am a Man of Constant Sorrow," reveal the other half of the music's work in the film. These songs successfully lure characters and audiences into the fanciful world musicals create. Delmar's decision to enter the baptismal waters during the first song illustrates the power of song over the characters; the diegetic audiences' response to the second, which imitates the eventual response of the cinematic audience, exhibits the power of song for the audience. Collectively, the film's first four songs meet the expectations of the musical by indicating the way in which the music in the film establishes the nature of the diegetic world and removing those who hear it from that world.

O Brother maintains its structure as a musical as it creates space for additional interludes throughout the remainder of the film. Each of these moments builds toward the climax of musicals:

"the show." O Brother's show occurs during the political event at which "The Soggy-Bottom Boys" perform. Typical of such moments, the film blurs the lines between performer and their diegetic audience as well as the diegetic world and the audience watching that world. The Coens capture the collapse of these worlds through a steady editing style that implicates all parties into one shot at the end of the sequence. The placement of the camera throughout scene serves as a materialization of the emotional and practical effect of the music. Hard cuts from individual audience members to the band and then to other audience members slowly get replaced with long shots that erase the distance between the performers and their audience. The extreme long shot used during the sing-along of "You are My Sunshine" brings the audience into the screen. Schatz mentions the way in which sing-a-longs like these were typical of musicals. They offered a visual inclusion of all parties into a "wondrous locale where everyone makes music" (196). The effect was not just to conjoin diegetic and cinematic audiences, but to permit the latter to enjoy the same freedom's being realized on the screen, if only for a moment.

And, so, *O Brother* works from beginning to end as a musical, but it works just as well as a social problem film, or at least it can. It does not have to do so. Nor will it for those who do not know the tendencies of the social problem film. Those who do know this genre, however, will be rewarded in just the way those who know the particulars of adaptations or musicals were. The Coens construct in O Brother a sustained use of all three types of texts. Anyone familiar with Preston Sturges's classic comedy *Sullivan Travels* (1941)—or, if not that film, at least the comments made by those eager to make a connection between that film and *O Brother*—knows the Coens intend to situate their film at least nominally within the impulse to make a serious social film. The Coens even admit as much in an interview they give in 2000: "[O Brother] pretends to be a big important movie, but the grandiosity is obviously a joke; it is what it is, it's a comedy" (Romney 127). Even though the apparent path paved by the source text and pronounced by the writers of the primary text both caution against dressing *O Brother* in the garments of a serious Hollywood social problem film, the film begs one to do so. The characteristics of social problem films identified by Roffman and Purdy (1-12) appear with surprising consistency across *O Brother*, which very well might prompt viewers to measure individual items against this generic logic.

Roffman and Purdy locate the birth of the social problem film proper within post-depression audiences' need for entertaining relief that gave "at least token recognition to the ever-pressing social realities of the time" (11). Such films were not so heavy-handed that they made an outright call for social change or even offered a sustained look at any one specific issue. They tended to work more globally ridiculing "the basic tenets" of social interaction (8). Audiences accepted such ridicule, in part, Roffman and Purdy argue, because the criticism existed in a cinematic world that was buffered from the "real world" of the film, which was achieved by grounding the social problem film in a more recognizable genre. Even when that was not the case, it would create a world so zany that viewers were "safely removed from the readily identifiable standard 'reality' (8). Just as routinely, social problem films would operate with a distinct social irreverence "played out within the confines of the Formula where the hero would eventually go straight and the ending inevitably turn out happy" (8). *O Brother* accepts the terms of the social problem film contract in every sense. To begin with, the film openly embraces its task to entertain. For some, there is the pleasure of recognizing the ways in which the Coens find space to include sequences from *The Odyssey*; for others, there is pleasure in observing the story of three hayseed characters meandering through the depressed South. And, if these attractions do not entertain enough, there is the presence of the soundtrack that exists with an entertainment value that no one debates. *O Brother* does not want for entertainment value; neither does it refrain from recognizing and criticizing social realities of "the time."

Safely removed from any reality other than the one some might imagine existed once in the backward South, the film registers a number of social ills that jeopardize all hope for social progress. The film opens with the sound of hammers and signing associated with southern chain-gangs prominent during the 1920's and 1930's. The Coens subtly articulate at least one problem with this practice when they have the camera pan across the chained prisoners to reveal that all the "criminals" are black. In this way, *O Brother* expresses a two-fold complaint against this society: racism and legal responses to misconduct. A number of other social ills also appear as the story unfolds. The world through which the film's three heroes move is beset by social problems: economic hardship,

familial instability, spiritual uncertainty, political duplicity, religious profiteering, and institutional bigotry. Such is the nature of social problem films.

The character's response to these problems offers another important connection between *O Brother* and social problem films. The characters could not entertain the problems too long; theirs was to find a way through these problems. The characters had to operate with a social irreverence that makes it easy to sympathize with the downtrodden and reject the society that operated with such little regard for them. The audience must ultimately recognize what none of the characters can. *O Brother* certainly meets this expectation. Everett's speech after the trio's deliverance from the noose signals as much. Everett is sure that "the South is gonna change" that "a brave new world where they run everyone a wire and hook us all up to a grid" is going to cure the "backward ways" so clearly documented in *O Brother*. The audience knows better, though. The grid did not change things all that much and the changes it did make only created other problems. This moment of clarity for the audience and false hope for the characters is point-for-point what the social problem film delivers.

This opportunity to align oneself against a society so fraught with trouble further associates *O Brother* with social problem films. Audience members needed to feel safely removed from the world on screen to be able to consider the problems being conveyed in the way the genre would want them to be considered. Without some artificiality, the film loses its ability to look at problems. The Coens mark the ending of *O Brother* in a manner that ensures some distance from the problems that still linger in the world just depicted even if some of the issues have been resolved. The chain gangs still swing their hammers, citizens still struggle to find gainful employment, banks still foreclose on them when they can no longer pay their bills, politicians still swindle their constituencies, and people in power still congregate against those who threaten that power. But these problems occur in a world that is not the world the spectators occupy. The Coens reinforce this idea in the final shot by washing the color from the screen in favor of black-and-white. The railroad hand ascends up screen in the push car he occupies into a place that is clearly not the audiences. Those problems he leaves behind him are the very same problems the audience abandons in the theater as well.

The film the Coens put in front of their audience then tolerates several different formations. It exists as another entry in the Coen brother cannon, which suggests one kind of reading. It is an adaptation of a canonical literary text and a distance adaptation of a classical Hollywood film, which asks for another sort of engagement. It is just as well classical Hollywood musical, and the more contemporary social problem film, too. And these are just some of the formations *O Brother* tolerates. One could add others. For instance, the film's geographic selection relates the film to other films set within the South. While not a formally established genre, there may very well be enough of an idea of the "southern" in circulation to justify organizing *O Brother* in this way. The use of genres that are only popularly perceived rather than critical established would not seem to pose much of a problem. The only problem it seems is trying to insist on a too narrow a perception of what it is a Coen Brothers' film actually is. That is yet to be determined, and depends greatly on how one treats the material. The potentiality for the text will be severely limited if approached from a postmodern perspective that expects some crisis in belief that reduces every aspect to little more than pastiche or parody. Such a view refuses inventiveness and ignores the way in which the spectator assumes some measure of authorial control over the film before them. The Coens' spectators are never left powerless. They are never lost beneath of a wave of unfathomable references that can never be reconciled. To the contrary, they are permitted to push and pull the elements in the film in whatever ways their cultural and cinematic astuteness will allow. Those in the theater aware of the generic patterns being utilized across the film will find individual elements being injected with multiple senses that contribute to different organizing principles. Those not yet aware or unwilling to commute elements against higher-level principles might find their own reading of the film. The original authors, it seems, do not hold any one element so tightly that it must be one thing. To do so would reduce them and their audience to little more than "a bunch of Johnny-come-latelies."

WORKS CITED

Altman, Rick, *Film/Genre*, London: British Film Institute, 1999. Print.

---. "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre." *Cinema Journal* 23.2 (1984): 6-18. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1994. Print.

Blood Simple. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. John Getz, Dan Hedaya. River Road Productions/ Foxton Entertainment, 1984. Film.

Booker, M. Keith. *Postmodern Hollywood: What's New in Film and Why it Makes us Feel so Strange*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007. Print.

Boozer, Jack. *Authorship in Film Adaptation*. Austin: U. of Texas Press, 2008. Print.

Coughlin, James. "Joel and Ethan Coen," *Senses of Cinema* 26 (2003). Web. 1 Dec. 2012.

Ebert, Roger. "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" *RogerEbert.com*, 29 Dec. 2000. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.

Fargo. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. William H. Macy, Steve Buscemi. Polygram Filmed Entertainment/ Working Title Films, 1996. Film.

Fer, Briony. "The Language of Construction." *Realism, Rationalism, and Surrealism: Art between the Wars*. Eds. Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood. 87-169. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. Print.

Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Chana Newman and Caude Doubinsky. Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1997. Print.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. W. H. D. Rouse. New York: Penguin Books, 1937. Print.

Intolerable Cruelty. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. George Clooney, Catherine Zeta Jones, Billy Bob Thornton. Universal/ Imagine Entertainment, 2003. Film.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991. Print.

The Ladykillers. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. Tom Hanks, Marlon Wayans, Irma P. Hall. Touchstone Pictures, 2004. Film.

The Man Who Wasn't There. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. Billy Bob Thornton, Michael Badalucco. Good Machine, 2001. Film.

Metz, Walter. *Engaging Film Criticism: Film History and Contemporary American Cinema*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004. Print.

Miller's Crossing. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. Gabriel Byrne, Albert Finney, John Turturro. Circle Films, 1990. Film.

Natoli, Joesph. "Ethan and Joel Coen." *Postmodernism: the Key Figures*. Eds. Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoli. 88-92. Malden, MA. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. Print.

Naremore, James. "American Film Noir: the History of an Idea." *Film Quarterly* 49 (1995-96): 12-28. Print.

O Brother Where Are Thou? Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. George Clooney, John Turturro. Touchstone/ Universal, 2000. Film.

Piaget, Jean. *The Principles of Genetic Epistemology*. Trans. Wolfe Mays. New York: Basic Books, 1972. Print.

Roffman, Peter and Jim Purdy. *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981. Print.

Rowell, Erica. *The Brothers Grim: the Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press. 2007. Print.

Romney, Jonathan, "Double Vision." *Coen Brother Interviews*. Ed. William Rodney Allen. 127-32. Oxford, MS: UP. of Mississippi, 2006. Print.

Russell, Carolyn. *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*. Jackson, NC. and London: McFarland & Co. (Publishers), 2001. Print.

Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres*, Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 1981. Print.

Scott, A.O. "Hail Ulysses, Escaped Convict." *NewYorkTimes.com*, 22 Dec. 2000. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.

Sullivan's Travels. Dir. Preston Sturges. Perf. Joel McCrea, Veronica Lake. Paramount Pictures, 1941. Film.

Travers, Peter. "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" *RollingStone.com*, 20 Dec. 2000. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.

Von Glasersfeld, Ernest. "An Interpretation of Piaget's Constructivism." *Révue Internationale de Philosophie* 36, 4 (1982): 612-35. Print.

The Wizard of Oz. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Judy Garland, Bert Lahr, Ray Bolger. Metro Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939. Film.

Allen H. Redmon coordinates and teaches courses leading to an interdisciplinary film studies minor housed in the English Department at Texas A&M University Central Texas, USA. His research routinely describes classic and contemporary American film genres with particular attention to the ways in which postmodern directors use these genres to shape their films. He also remains intrigued by representations of violence and religion in films from any period or locale.