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**Milking the Coens: The Myth of the American Dream in *Blood Simple*,
The Big Lebowski, and *Raising Arizona***

The Coen brothers are a success story for the American Dream, from their humble roots as middle-class Minnesotan kids, to highly successful and multi-talented Academy Award-winning film directors/producers/screenwriters (Robson, 2003). Ironically enough, the characters in Coen films usually fail miserably in pursuit of their own dreams. In *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Blood Simple* (1984), and *The Big Lebowski* (1998), milk symbolizes the pure, simple idealism of the American Dream, and is a playful nod to the Coen brother's Midwestern roots. As Ethan Coen says "We grew up in America, and we tell American stories in American settings within American frames of reference" (as cited in Gilmore, 2009, p. 7).

Coen movies are often referred to as being neo-noir or film blanc, or a combination of noir and another genre, such as the gangster film or screwball comedy (Conard. 2009). This style was inspired by both the classic film noir and the literature it drew from, which "poses a critique of the American Dream and the alienation that the failure to achieve it creates" (Tangney, 2012, p. 201). As Gilmore (2009) stated "We, in America, are weaned on the milk of aspiration," which results in each character's unique pursuit and ultimate

failure to achieve wealth, success and happiness, and has become a defining element of the Coenesque (p. 9).

***Blood Simple*: “Something can always go wrong...”**

In *Blood Simple*, small details become important. Marty is meeting with Visser, the private detective he has hired to follow his wife. Although Marty has achieved his own version of the American Dream as a businessman and bar owner, his unfaithful wife Abby is threatening the harmony.



We are reminded again of the American attitude that it is our individual responsibility to find success at the beginning of the movie. Images of barren landscapes cross the screen as Detective

Visser says “In Russia they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else. But what I know about is Texas, and down here, you’re on your own.” After Marty has hired Visser to kill his cheating wife and her lover, they meet in his office to exchange proof of the murder for the \$10,000 promised. Marty becomes ill in the restroom after seeing the photographs of Abby’s bullet-riddled body, then returns to his desk, puts his feet up and takes a drink of milk to soothe his stomach. After confirming that nobody else knows about the plot, Visser shoots Marty point-blank in the chest. Marty slumps forward in his chair while blood drips down his shirt, the carton of milk framed between his cowboy boots. When Ray later discovers Marty’s body, the abandoned glass of milk remains on the desk, a reminder of how quickly the American Dream can become spoiled.

As the end of *Blood Simple* draws near, only Detective Visser and Abby are left alive. True to the Coen's view on those who attempt to become rich through questionable means, the money-hungry murderer Visser is shot by Abby. Greed and jealousy have cost all involved with their lives, and nobody is left with anything they dreamt of.

***Raising Arizona*: "But this is a decent family now!"**

The American Dream is not always tied to money and greed; in *Raising Arizona*, H.I. and Ed are newlyweds who just want a simple, happy life as the ideal nuclear family. We are first introduced to H.I. as he is having his mug shots taken; Conard (2012) states that although the American ideal is supposed to be achievable for anyone, "it is not an incidental detail...that the first image we see of Hi is of him thrown against a height measure, which...indicates a certain failure to measure up to the high expectations of society" (p. 10). This failure to act in a way acceptable to society has consequences throughout *Raising Arizona*. First, despite her appearance suggesting she is "as fertile as the Tennessee valley," Ed is unable to have children. Their adoption interview does not go well, due to H.I.'s criminal past, and Ed becomes depressed and desperate enough that kidnapping one of the famed Arizona Quints begins to seem like a good idea. Although H.I. reveals in his narration that it wasn't the best choice to steal a baby in hindsight, he explains that "we thought it unfair that some should have so many, while others should have so few." This is the driving force behind capitalism and the American Dream of



striving for more, but like so many other ill-fated attempts to avoid the hard work that goes into achieving the Dream, H.I. and Ed's plan doesn't work out so well.

After kidnapping Nathan Jr. from the Arizona family, H.I. and Ed are ecstatic to bring their new son home. Their peaceful life as a family unit is quickly disturbed when Gale and Evelle, two escaped convicts who befriended H.I. in jail, come knocking at the door in the middle of the night. The next morning, Evelle is dumping corn flakes into his bowl, an open carton of milk next to him, while Gale alternates between chewing with his mouth open and smoking a cigarette while milk runs down his chin. Gale takes interest in Ed, who is giving Nathan Jr. a bottle at the dining room table, questioning why she has chosen not to breastfeed him. Ed informs him to mind his own business, which inspires Evelle to share a bit of wisdom: "Ma'am, ya don't breast feed him, he hates you for it later. That's why we wound up in prison." This seems to imply that a lack of milk in the diet at a young age is essentially un-American and ultimately creates a criminal.

Ed and H.I. eventually decide to do the right thing and return Nathan Jr. to his parents. Things are looking dire within their marriage, as they are still childless and jobless and Ed doesn't see the point of trying anymore. However, H.I. has a dream of the future that night: "I saw an old couple bein' visited by their children - and all their grandchildren too. And the old couple wasn't screwed up, and neither were their kids or their grandkids." *Raising Arizona* reminds us that "there are some deep deceptions in the American mythos of self-creation, deceptions about the irrelevance of the conditions of one's birth, the role of social class, or money, or race" (Gilmore, 2009, p. 9). Despite losing everything and failing miserably in their pursuit of the American Dream, H.I. still has hope for the future.

The Big Lebowski: "Another Caucasian, Gary."

After the initial opening scene of the tumbleweed blowing down from the hills, the viewer is first introduced to Jeffrey Lebowski by an old cowboy ("The Stranger") at the bar of a bowling alley; he seems to have been transported from another time and place. The Stranger shares that "this Lebowski, he called himself The Dude. Now, dude, that's a name no one would self-apply where I come from, but there was a lot about The Dude that didn't make a whole lotta sense to me." As a cowboy, The Stranger is oddly fascinated with this man, who is "quite possibly the laziest in Los Angeles County"; gone are the days of rising with the sun, milking the cows, and the American work ethic which built this country, for there is a new wild west on the streets of urban cities. Tangney (2012) states that through the eyes of The Stranger, "[The Dude is] just a nameless, impoverished, collapse of a man...and Los Angeles is the proper place for this man because it is the antithesis of the open frontier that might generate the Great American Dreamer" (p. 205).

As The Stranger narrates, we see The Dude, wearing a bathrobe, sunglasses and sandals, walking down the aisle of an empty grocery store. He goes straight to the half & half section, carefully examining several cartons. After reading expiration dates and sniff-checking a carton, The Dude goes through the checkout and writes a check for 69 cents, white droplets of half & half still clinging to his moustache. This scene at the grocery store sets up The Dude's obsession with white Russians throughout the movie, even referring his drink of choice as Caucasians several times, which infers a link between milk and white America.

Unlike the characters in other Coen brother's movies, *The Dude* lives much like the tumbleweed, pushed by the wind and rolling aimlessly around, feeling that "in the same way, life is blind and purposeless" (Douglass & Walls, 2012, p. 148). However, his friend



Walter, a bitter veteran and loyal converted Jew, has his own security business and is determined to obtain his piece of the American Dream by any means. Walter does not accept people breaking the rules, often feeling the need to take justice into his

own hands, convincing the usually passive Dude that he should confront the elderly millionaire, also named Jeffrey Lebowski, about the damage to *The Dude's* rug by some slow-witted thugs confused by their shared names. The rich Lebowski later hires the stoner Lebowski to act as the middleman and deliver the ransom money to the kidnappers, but Walter sees an opportunity to keep the entire million dollars and move one step closer to the Dream.

As *The Big Lebowski* continues on in a bizarre series of events, Walter and *The Dude* realize that the wealthy Lebowski is actually a broke poseur who set up an elaborate scheme to embezzle money from a charitable trust. This highlights the falsity and irony at the root of the American Dream; although *The Dude* is broke and lazy, he finds more happiness and fulfillment in life than those around him who strive for more.

In conclusion, *The Big Lebowski*, *Raising Arizona*, and *Blood Simple* share a common Coenesque element of exploring society's fascination with the mythical American Dream, and utilize milk in a symbolic way. Any character in a Coen film who becomes desperate enough to resort to illegal and immoral means to achieve this Dream end up much worse

off than before. Despite the “total corruption” evident in these films, “it is as if the American Dream still ties us all together,” much like the infamous soiled rug in *The Big Lebowski* (Tagney, 2012, p. 209).

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