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Elijah Siegler, Coen. Framing Religion in Amoral Order

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I would hardly seem the most likely candidate to review a book on the Coen brothers. I have not seen all of their films, and the ones I saw ... well, either I did not understand them or they are really as shallow as I thought them to be. With one exception: I did enjoy *O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* (2000). And I like *A SERIOUS MAN* (2009). So, two exceptions. And, of course, *TRUE GRIT* (2010) – so, all in all three exceptions¹ ... come to think of it, there are more that have stuck in my mind in a positive way, obfuscated by *BARTON FINK* (1991) or *BURN AFTER READING* (2008). Therefore, I was curious whether Elijah Siegler's edited collection would change my view on the Coens. Having googled for existing reviews of the book that might inspire me, I discovered that none are to be found online, apart from the usual flattery in four lines on the website of Baylor University Press, mostly phrases about the unrivalled quality of Siegler's book. Turns out I have to do all the work by myself. Given that I am not familiar with some of the films used to exemplify some of this book's theses, I will be brief on some chapters and give more space to those that deal with the films I know.

FORMAL ASPECTS

Baylor University Press is well established in the fields of philosophy, religion, theology, and sociology. So far, they have scarcely published in the media field, although personally I found two of their books (*Sacred Space*, by Douglas E. Cowan, and *Shows about Nothing*, by Thomas S. Hibbs) particularly useful. The quality of the “hardware” of the book is as I expected: good paper, solid cover, skilled typeface (although dulled by some minor flaws such as the wrong headline on pp. 312f.). The binding, however, is not as good as it should be – the first pages in my copy came loose even before I had completed reading it (which might be linked to my habit of placing books face down overnight, though). Also, the quality of the (comparatively few) pictures is not really outstanding – it seems to me that they are optimised for a different paper type, that is, plain white and smooth. Some pictures even have a black framing, for

1 Similarities to a certain Spanish Inquisition are intended; cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nf_Y4MbUCLY.

they are screenshots from widescreen versions on differently sized monitors (see, for example, pp.193f.) or are poorly trimmed (for example, pp. 209 and 253). They are, however, all carefully placed and important illustrations for the respective text. References are grouped at the end of the book. This practice – unfamiliar to European eyes – benefits the reader. My preference for footnotes – which seem to me better suited to scholarly reading and looking up references – is merely a matter of taste.

The editor chose to group the articles by the period the films were produced in – after the introduction by the editor, the first part thematises the “early” films from *RAISING ARIZONA* (1987) to *THE HUDSUCKER PROXY* (1994). After an intermission on *FARGO* (1996), the second part deals with the “middle” films (from *THE BIG LEBOWSKI* [1998] to *BURN AFTER READING* [2008]). Another intermission on *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN* (2007) separates part two and three, the latter claiming to cover the “later” films (*A SERIOUS MAN* [2009] to *INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS* [2013]). The book concludes with an epilogue on *HAIL, CAESAR!* (2016). This classification is as good or as bad as any other. While the editor is not fully consistent in terms of a timeline, each part and chapter has a systematic subtitle (*Reading Religion as ...*, *Analyzing Religion and ...*, *Theorizing ...*) offering an alternative criterion for the inner choreography of the book (thus, for example, *THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE* [2001] can be found amongst the “later” films).

The references are consistent and clear; the index provided at the end of the book contains names, film titles, and keywords – (too) short, but useful. The list of contributors provided is helpful, too, given that I knew few of the authors. What I miss, however, is a bibliography – if a second edition should be printed, I highly recommend its inclusion.

CONTENT

In his introduction, Siegler presents the Coen brothers as persons and as filmmakers and frames the research question of the book: “What do their films mean?” (p. 1). He does not hesitate to put his finger on a sore spot, pointing out that the Coens’ films are generally open to an interpretation that favours a moral order at least implicitly, but that they also may well be the intellectual and skilful études of two undoubtedly gifted directors who, at some point, chose to test the patience of the audience and its willingness to take seriously what I might consider rubbish (*BURN AFTER READING* would be my evidence for the latter interpretation). Artists, yes, but “postmodern contempt artists” (p. 4) feeling unbound to any code or iconic literacy... or, indeed, artists who enfold a hitherto unseen potential for transmitting moral concerns between the lines and are deeply rooted in North American and/or European tradition? Siegler uses *BLOOD SIMPLE* (1984, the Coen brothers first official film) to consider the (in)sincerity of this approach. Although I am not convinced that sheer counting (“the hero of Miller’s Crossing is addressed as “Jesus” almost thirty times” [p.9]) or implicit reference to biblical allusions is more than just an attempt to link to some rel-

ics of a fading religious iconography, the author certainly makes an important point here: film does not only refer to religion; it can possibly also be regarded as the object of religion, including its own cathedrals, cults, rites, and priests. Siegler refers here – amongst other movies – to STAR WARS (p. 10). I wrote my doctoral thesis on the mythological aspects of the structures of the STAR WARS trilogy and here I absolutely agree with Siegler. The chapter on the “Moral Hero” (pp.12ff) points to a character trait of many of the Coens’ heroes, stating that their peculiarity is mostly not of a superhuman kind but merely knowledge of “their own limitations and [... of the others’] capacity for self-delusion and vanity” (p. 13). This is, for me, the core sentence of the introduction, because it does not confront us with an attractive yet meaningless superhero but with a “mirror dimly” (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). The rest of the book shall be judged in relation to Siegler’s statement.

It is the question of *Morality* that is addressed by Eric M. Mazur in the next chapter, and he brings together film and literature, RAISING ARIZONA with Herman Melville and Isaac L. Peretz. Although I think his allegation against Georg Seesslen – “[he] pushes the interpretation [...] quite possibly into ‘Anti-Semitic-Country’” (p. 27) – completely invalid, he has certainly made an important point: it is inappropriate to assume that, in spite of all Christian symbolism, the protagonist in RAISING ARIZONA should be read as a representative Christian (p. 33). And that goes, I take it, for all the Coens’ heroes: they should not be taken for granted, even if evidence suggests something different.

In Kerry Mitchell’s contribution on MILLERS CROSSING (*Theology*), a film I have not seen, the author points out that in a radical secular world, the existential questions still remain the same. Even though all of the characters are a bunch of crooks (p. 35), they do not make their decisions “in radical freedom, but bearing the weight and even the shape of religious heritage” (p. 37). The author notes that “Jesus” and “Christ” are said thirty times in the film, on twenty-seven occasions addressed to Tom, thus justifying the identification of Tom (a killer) “with Jesus. But what kind of Jesus?” (p. 42). After an interesting excursus on the symbolism of a hat (which has, according to Mitchell, a quite similar meaning to the black dog in Andrey Tarkovskiy’s movies), he concludes by stating that “the Coen brothers relate to a tale of struggle and loss, with the Christian theological narrative drained of its promise of salvation and clarity” (p. 51). I would agree with that, but I am still not sure why the editor chose the subtitle “theology” for this chapter; I would rather refer to it as “radical existentialism”.

Let us glance at the chapter on BARTON FINK (*World Creation*) by S. Brent Plate and Elijah. Siegler. The authors point out that film as religion has the power to create new realities (p. 54). After rejecting various interpretations by film critics and philosophers, they state that the film is in fact self-reflexive on a high level, being a “clever movie about movies and heads and dreams” (p. 58). In this context, the observation that “several scenes of the film might be seen as microcosmos for the entire film” (p. 58) is very interesting. It seems that BARTON FINK is – for the authors – a constructive hologram, the function of which is not merely to provide a narrative but also

to re-construct the worldview of not only the unfortunate protagonist, but also the audience. And this may well result, they conclude, in the creation of hell in our own minds (p. 71).

Ellen Posman treats *Community* in her article on *THE HUDSUCKER PROXY* and immediately refers to the films of Frank Capra (1897–1991), demonstrating a “shift to an individualized, privatized form of American religion after the 1950s” (p. 74). She shows that a Buddhist reading of *THE HUDSUCKER PROXY* is as feasible as a Christian interpretation, in spite of Ethan Coen’s statement addressing this film as a “Capraesque thing” (p. 78). The classic “good guy” / “bad guy” plot scheme fails (as it usually does in Coen movies), and even the concept of karma, originally Hindu, seems to be in vain; the movie instead illustrates the core Buddhist idea. For me, the most important point of this chapter is that given that the sociological shift from collectivism to individualism was incredibly strong in the United States (and in Europe as well, I might add) in the late twentieth century (pp. 89ff.), worldviews that rely on community as their primary reference (Communitarism, Catholicism, Unionism, for example) have lost most of their power. But they left a gap behind: even as they are more individual than ever before, human beings still long for the security and comfort of a collective. This film might well be read as an “insightful reflection of the shift in culture and religion” (p. 91).

In the “First Intermission (So Are the Coen Brothers Religious Filmmakers?)”, which is about *FARGO*, one of the films I have not yet seen, Richard Amesbury broaches the issues of Christian moralism and postmodern irony. He mentions that a moralistic interpretation of *FARGO* seems possible but that it is not quite clear whether the “dividing line between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters is really as brightly marked as the moralistic interpretation requires” (p. 96). He tends towards reading the film as a work of postmodern irony, sketching that “the films real target is not demonic evil, but *banality*” (p. 97). In an analogy with Plato’s Cave, he states that the “characters projected onto the screen can be understood as indicative of our ‘essential displacement’” (p. 107). For him, *FARGO* is grotesque yet “ultimately a hopeful film, which ends looking toward the birth of new possibilities” (p. 110).

I move on to Erica H. Andrus’ chapter on *THE BIG LEBOWSKI*, which, the author states, is the “most religious Coen brothers film” (p. 113). Certainly, the Dude (the main character of the film, played by Jeff Bridges) has his worshippers and a living fan community, but Andrus’ classification does not refer to this so-called “Dudeism”, because its “production of culture ... reflects more the characteristics of a fan culture and less those of a religion” (p. 115). Instead, the author looks to the figure of the protagonist himself, the Dude. Far from being heroic, he resembles an oriental monk more than an ordinary member of an underprivileged part of society. For Andrus, “The Dude’s lifestyle and affect ... give him the quality of being a master” (p. 125) in the sense of Zen Buddhism. I have two grave problems with this chapter. First, it seems to me inconsistent to dismiss the question of the religious dimension of Dude-

ism and to exalt the Dude at the same time as a religious entity. Secondly, I have practiced Iai-Do for some years and I am familiar with the concept of Zen, but still I do not see the Zen master dimension of the Dude. Or, perhaps, is this in itself rather a *Koan*?

One of my favourite amongst the Coen brothers films is *O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* (*Race*). Employing American Southern Baptism as a transparency, the Coens use – as always – bold permanent markers to draw a sketch. And the sketch is, according to author Chad Seales, notably about black(ened) faces and their “significance ... at the center of the story” (p. 132). The four rogues who finally become minstrels and are pardoned for political reasons are merely a vehicle for considering the role of the racial “other”, perpetuated in religion long after the 1930s (the time the film is set in) are over. Indeed the “black minstrel narrative” (as Seales put it) as part of American popular culture is something completely new to me. In my opinion, the “Man of constant sorrow” may well be read as a Job motive (the singer suffers poverty and loneliness and yet trusts in the transcendent promise of salvation), and it contains in an nutshell the fate of the protagonists, who survive, but only just, proving the film to be “dystopia: an imaginery place where everything is as bad as possible” (p. 148). Seales modifies this statement immediately – it might as well be an absurdity, which in itself would be “the joke, the inversion of the inversion, the laughing at the laughter” (p. 148). There is no redemption in *O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* Even though we laugh, the minstrel faces make a difference, and the race question is still unsolved, seemingly unsolvable.

As far as I have understood the chapter on *INTOLERABLE CRUELTY* and *THE LADYKILLERS* (*Money*) by David Feltmate (I have not seen these films either), he seeks to point out that, beyond its potential for corruption, money also has a certain protecting (“purifying”?) function: “The money sanctifies the relationship, making them able to love each other” (p. 161). Humour is the key to catching up with the incongruities that money both represents and causes – an idea I greatly appreciate but have still to verify from the films themselves. Money, Feltmate concludes, has in some respects replaced the integrative power of religion, gaining some sort of religious meaning by itself. Sidenote: I am surprised that a scholar like Feltmate confuses Belshazzar (cf. Dan. 5) with Balthazar (in the Christian tradition one of the magi mentioned in Matt. 2:1) (p. 151).

I turn now to Finbarr Curtis’s contribution on *BURN AFTER READING* (*The State*). In the film, “the state is at once powerful and incompetent, omniscient and clueless” (p. 167). The protagonists share the creed that a superior power beyond the individual social life rules the world, and does so wisely. Curtis quotes C. Schmitt and his thesis that, if the state is threatened, ordinary law may be suspended in a “state of exception”. Given that the United States lives in a state of exception (cf. USA Patriot Act and Homeland Security Act), the parallels are obvious. And indeed the limits of a state painfully occur to anyone who demands absolute security and realises that utmost security means accepting a system more fascist than anything else. But that is not

what this film is about, because this film is about *nothing*, in the sense of a consistent (hidden) meaning: the film is made to be resistant to decoding (p. 175). Here, Curtis quotes the film critic Richard R. Corliss, who stated that “Either the Coens failed, or I didn’t figure out what they’re attempting” (oh, how I feel with Corliss!). Human beings long for revelation – knowledge that is offered to them to cope with the dull everyday and the limits of personal existence, like, “Behold, the wise and mighty state authorities will make your humble life safe and easy”. Curtis makes the link to political theology, but the Coen brothers connect with superstition, thus unmasking these authorities and their attitudes as secular and fallible respectively.

In the second intermission M. Gail Hamner treats *formal coherence* in the Coen brothers works using the example of *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*. As I am a formalist myself (have I mentioned that I wrote my doctoral thesis on the mythological structure of *STAR WARS?*), he is pushing at an open door for me. I agree with many of Hamner’s theses – such as the importance of subtle aspects of a movie – but where are the ties to *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*? The Coen brothers, Hamner argues, use a very specific approach to visualise a representation of religion: light. Now this is something I find very interesting because it is deeply linked to religious ideas (think of the biblical light metaphors in Gen. 1:3, Matt. 5:14, and John 8:12, for example). And indeed, Hamner gradually manages to change my point of view on this very film. Her sentences are beautiful, too: “Landscape and lifescape syncopates the light and breath of eternity with the sights and sighs of each mortal character” (p. 183). Even reflections (actually those on a switched-off TV set) become formal pointers to the “violence inherent in the gridded relations of [all] human culture” (p. 195).

I have not yet seen (pun intended) *THE MAN WHO WASN’T THERE* (*Transcendence*). The conclusion of this chapter, also by M. Gail Hamner, on a film noir about an unfortunate wannabe-blackmailer speaks for itself: “The transcendence is not Christian, but as with so many Coen films the failure of religious institutions never precludes the human needs for religious transcendence, a need that constellates the affective need for peace, the intellectual need for meaning, and the existential need for intimacy” (p. 216).

A SERIOUS MAN (*Hermeneutics*) by Gabriel Levy is of particular importance to me – our research group www.film-und-theologie.de (English version available) used this film at one of its conferences to illustrate aspects of the theodicy question. Levy states that “the film portrays the idea that being too serious a man is what leads to problems. Being a simple (tom like Job) man is better” (p. 222). He unfolds this thesis in five themes (Materiality, Eros, Evil, Activity, and Physics), in each of which he reflects about in the context of Jewish culture. He concludes by looking at “Meaning in Humor” (p. 230), which he ties together with “simple life” – not in the sense of a life of frugality but as “simply to live”, facing the fact that “there is a necessary place for evil, negativity, suffering, and materiality in this simplicity – in that wholeness” (p. 230), a statement that reminds me far more of Zen than what Andrus wrote about

the Dude (see above). The more important point Levy makes here is about hermeneutics. He points out that – in contrast to a common misconception – hermeneutics as a concept cannot be applied to an “object named life” but is merely an inseparable part of this very life itself: “hermeneutics is life, since the energetic dynamics between language and life are not distinct” (p. 231). I will adopt his suggestion (and apply this method for reading this film and other Coen brothers films).

Michael J. Altman deals with *Death*, exemplified through *TRUE GRIT*. He quotes several statements about *TRUE GRIT*'s being the Coens' most religious movie and observes that this attribution depends on the “extent that things audiences recognize as religion show up in the film” (p. 233). In opposition to this (simple) reading, he suggests we consider both the religious and the Western motifs in the film as genre conventions that are used and rearranged to create a post-Western film about death. After a brief description of the Western and its position in U.S. (media) history (pp. 234ff.), he verifies the role of death in the Coen brothers movies (p. 239), stating that it is “not only irrational but also monstrous” (p. 240) and “the story of a loss in the Coens' films” (p. 241). Based on a revenge plot (Mattie is bound to see the killer of her father punished), *TRUE GRIT* breaks a tradition of the common Western movie, in which the (male) heroes are materialists and religion is considered a matter for clergymen and women (given that the gender aspect of the Christian clergy is traditionally vague, religion is depicted as unmanly). In *TRUE GRIT*, religion and materialism are maintained by men and women, but towards neither a secularist nor a transcendent salvation, rather towards death, illustrated by the dozens of corpses lining the way of the plot (pp. 245f.). The Protestant religion that is depicted in the film is more justification for a secular ethic than a liberating message about something that is bigger than this (material) life. So, for Levy, “*TRUE GRIT* is a religious movie, just not in the ways most critics imagine” (p. 248), and he rejects the cursorily interpretations that focus on, for example, mentions of God in the dialogue, empty rites that are performed with some of the corpses, and the Christian hymn that is part of the soundtrack. “*TRUE GRIT* is a religious movie,” he writes, “insofar as it traces the limits of religion” (p. 249).

Jason C. Bivins chapter on *INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS* is subtitled *Absence*, and indeed this film is absent from my “have seen” list. Bivins claims to “improvise on ‘religion’ in three ways, each one indirectly” (p. 255). It is the essence of improvisation to use the well-known canonical components of an art absolutely freely, but it is also the goal of improvising to find a new and coherent configuration. I am not completely sure I understand the chord Bivins strikes, although I admit that his conclusion on “the religious” being “an atmosphere, an environment, a ripple in space-time revealing a future incapable of sustaining the fantasies of present or past” (p. 270) is consistent with a number of the chapters in this volume. In my point of view, this reduces “religion” to something that is inevitably gone and felt only through the pain of missing it. As a Roman Catholic, I personally object to that position (and maybe that is why I'm pretty uncomfortable with the Coen brothers' movies ...).

In his Epilogue, E. Siegler tries to close the circle. The Coens' latest film, HAIL, CAESAR!, is mentioned only vaguely (it was not completed at the time this book went to press), as a reference to the form of worship the Coens receive from their audience. He points out that "the best advice of the brothers themselves [may be] 'None of [our movies] have messages ... You see a moral in them?'" (p. 274). The Coen brothers don't have to look for a message in their movies anyway; the viewer may do so, and if that viewer does not want to turn them down either in total or in part, he or she is even bound to do so.

CONCLUSION

In his Acknowledgements, Siegler thanks the contributors ("all-star roster", p. viii) for delivering excellent stuff cheerfully and on time. Anyone who has edited a book or journal issue in collaboration with several people will dream about such participation, and I am minded to ask Siegler for the contact details of these members of a rare species. Authors usually deliver either cheerfully or on time – well, envy is a grave sin in Christian religion, so I will rather refrain.

The book? Oh yes, the book ... it offers an unexpected number of insights beyond the Coens and their films. The contributors take their job seriously, and their positions are well argued, even though I would not agree with many of their points. They have surely done their work with diligence and are familiar with the most important concepts of contemporary philosophy and media theory.

Siegler's Coen is, in short, a good book and well worth reading. I will watch the Coen brothers' films I have not seen yet, and I will probably return to many of those I already know to review them with a changed attitude. I am pretty sure this goes for other readers of this interesting compilation too.