“Oh, so many startlements . . .”

History, Race, and Myth in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

*by Hugh Ruppersburg*

Despite its comic relief, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* comments on a wide range of topics—from Homer’s *The Odyssey* to southern music and culture to race and American politics. From *O Brother, Where Art Thou?,* copyright 2000 by Universal Studios and Touchstone Pictures, courtesy of Photofest.
was born in 1950 and so did not live through and have no memory of the Depression. Still, I feel in ways as if it is part of my experience, for I heard many stories of it from my parents and grandparents. My father's father owned a farm supply store that failed with the stock market collapse in 1929. He never held another job, though he was only in middle age. Apparently the experience ruined his spirit. He moved his family from the Grant Park area of Atlanta to a small town about ten miles south called College Park. This was an important step in the events that made my coming on the scene possible.

My mother's father began his career in Orange, Texas, in the early 1920s as a race car driver, mechanic, and stunt pilot. With the onset of the Depression in the South, he began to dust crops and moved with his family back and forth through the Gulf states—Louisiana and Mississippi especially—dusting against the inexorable progress of the boll weevil. My mother remembers moving sixteen times in four years and attending thirteen different schools. She recalls spending one Easter morning waking up in the family car, parked on the side of a Florida road. Finally, tired of dusting, my grandfather moved into commercial flying. He settled with his family in College Park and became a pilot for Delta Air Lines. Thus another necessary moment. My father and mother met, married, and here I am.

For many people of my era the Depression, which we didn't live through, was a real and palpable experience. We knew about it, heard family tales about it, shared in its history and folklore. It was part of our heritage. Thus for me at least, and I suspect for many people of my post-World War II generation in the American South, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* speaks in a particular way, as if some of its scenes linger on the verge of memory, as if it is family history, or might have been, as if Ulysses Everett McGill is the paterfamilias of us all.

Reviews of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* tend to praise the film but often describe it as a work of fluff, with much comedy and great music but no substance. For example, Robert Horton of *Film.com* wrote that “this particular excursion into screwball madness is often heavenly, and frankly leaves critical explication somewhat unnecessary.” Joel and Ethan Coen, the film’s directors and screen writers, described *O Brother* as a “Ma and Pa Kettle movie but with really big production values” and as the “*Lawrence of Arabia* of hayseed movies.” Parallels to Homer’s *The Odyssey* were seen as superficial, and both the Coens claimed they had never read the poem.1

This is doubtful. The Coen brothers make films replete with literary references, and it is difficult to believe they escaped reading Homer. Besides, this film really does draw a number of witty and clever parallels with the Greek epic. On the other hand, the plot of *The Odyssey*, with its tall-tale-telling hero and his fantastic exploits, is so ingrained in the cultural consciousness that even if one didn’t
Reviews of O Brother recalled the 1941 film Sullivan’s Travels, in which a film director famous for his comedies decides to make a more serious film—to be entitled O Brother, Where Art Thou?

From Sullivan’s Travels, copyright 1941 by Paramount Pictures, courtesy of Photofest.

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actually read *The Odyssey* exposure would still come through movies, cartoons, and comic books. Many reviews also note a connection to the 1941 Preston Sturges comedy *Sullivan’s Travels*, which chronicles the efforts of a film director famous for his comedies to learn about the life of the downtrodden so he can make a “serious” film about suffering called *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

One might imagine that the Coens’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is the movie that Sturges’s director really ought to have made. The Coens’ film does use a number of conventions from the Sturges comedy—a quest-based travel plot, quick-fire repartee between characters, a concern with the Depression and the poor, with convicts and people on the lam. Both films take a decidedly serious turn at the end. Both also have a scene in which convicts watch a film. In Sturges’s comedy this scene is the central dramatic moment. The director, John Sullivan, changes his name, abandons his assistants, and goes out on the road, incognito, to learn about the poor. After three such adventures, he decides one night to give money to the poor people he has gotten to know, but while he is doing so a tramp knocks him out, steals his wallet, and dumps his unconscious body into a freight car. When Sullivan comes to, many miles away, he can’t remember who he is and gets into a fight with a train yard worker. As a result he is sent to a labor camp much like, we might imagine, the one in *O Brother* (though it is even more reminiscent of the camp in *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*). This is where Sullivan truly learns what it means to live on the periphery, to be oppressed, and to suffer hard and difficult hours of manual labor. One evening, after a long day of work, the convicts are taken to an African American church, and there along with the parishioners they watch a black-and-white Mickey Mouse and Pluto cartoon. Their laughter is uproarious and contagious, and from it Sullivan learns to appreciate the power of comedy. He resolves not to turn to “serious” films but instead, when at last he is rescued and returns to Hollywood, to continue making films that make people laugh.

In the Coens’, film, the scene is less important, but it does stand as a kind of tribute to Sturges. This is the scene in which Delmar and Everett discover that Pete is still alive and hasn’t been turned into a toad. It may be loosely equivalent to chapter XI of *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus visits Hades and converses with the dead. The script describes Pete as “haunted” in appearance and Everett stares at him “as if at a ghost.” But pursuing this kind of parallel really ignores the true nature of the film’s use of the epic poem.

In both the Sturges and Coen brothers films the main characters wander in search of a seemingly elusive goal. The Coens’ convicts are looking for treasure, and Everett in particular is seeking to recover his lost wife. The director in *Sullivan’s Travels* is searching for experience on which to base his serious film, which in fact is a quest for social consciousness. There are other links as well, and *O Brother
While O Brother’s Everett aims to win back his wife, the affluent protagonist of Sullivan’s Travels is questing for social consciousness. From Sullivan’s Travels, copyright 1941 by Paramount Pictures, courtesy of Photofest.
might borrow some of its madcap tone from Sullivan’s Travels, though the Keystone Cops, Laurel and Hardy, and the Three Stooges are probably a stronger influence in this regard.

I do not think the ancestral link to Sullivan’s Travels is especially important, however. It is as much an excuse for the title as anything else. Whereas Sturges and his director finally are quite sober about the poor and their suffering, the Coens never abandon their comic perspective, or their anarchistic amorality, and they show a deeper, richer fascination with the folk culture of their subject, even though they play fast and free with it.

Far more than Sturges, it is Homer and The Odyssey—despite the Coens’ disclaimer—that give this film its plot line and narrative shape. The opening credits tell us that it is based on The Odyssey, and the first lines of the poem then scroll across the screen. Some critics have seen this as irony, pointing out that most viewers will not have read the poem and thus won’t recognize how wildly the film diverges from it. For instance, in his Salon review of O Brother, Where Art Thou? Charles Taylor writes, “The opening credits claim the film is ‘Based on The Odyssey’ by Homer. Like the credit claiming ‘Fargo’ was based on a true story (it wasn’t), that’s a Coen joke. The brothers recently admitted to never having read ‘The Odyssey.’ Perhaps they’ve spent some time with the Classics Comics version. ‘O Brother’ has a soothsayer and a Cyclops, watery Sirens who lure journeying men to doom on the rocks and a hero whose [first] name is Ulysses.” But there are many more links. Most clearly, in an early scene, the three escaped convicts catch a ride from a blind, Teiresias-like old black man pushing a handcart along what seems an endless train track. He utters this Delphic prophecy:

You seek a great fortune, you three who are now in chains. . . . And you will find a fortune—though it will not be the fortune you seek. . . . But first, you must travel—a long and difficult road—a road fraught with peril, uh-huh, and pregnant with adventure. You shall see things wonderful to tell. You shall see a cow on the roof of a cotton house, uh-huh, and oh, so many startlements . . . I cannot say how long this road shall be. But fear not the obstacles in your path, for Fate has vouchsafed your reward. And though the road may wind, and yea, your hearts grow weary, still shall ye folfer the way, even unto your salvation.²

This prophecy scripts the film and its quest for a vaguely defined treasure, with many stops and starts, obstacles, surprises, and adventures. The episodic, tall-tale narrative of the quest, of the road, is central to the film. The handcart prophecy also suggests a spiritual dimension, reinforced by the oracular rhetoric of the old man’s pronouncements, by much of the music, and by the baptism scene in which Pete and Delmar have their sins “warshed” away. The appearance of this same blind prophet once more at the film’s end reinforces his importance as a framing device and a presiding symbol of some of the film’s concerns.
We must consider as well the main character of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Ulysses Everett McGill. He has much in common with Homer's Odysseus (or "Ulysses"), who undertakes a ten-year quest following the end of the Trojan War to return to the rocky coast of Ithaca and his beloved Penelope. Homer presents his narrative as a series of exploits, tall tales, and adventures that Odysseus recounts to people he meets along the way. Two of his more memorable encounters involve the Sirens and the one-eyed Cyclops Polyphemos. When he arrives home, in disguise, he discovers the suitors who have nearly taken over his palace and has to vanquish them. His son Telemachus assists him. Like his namesake, Ulysses Everett McGill is a crafty teller of tall tales. His story of a buried treasure that he must recover before it is inundated by the waters backing up behind a new dam convinces his comrades Delmar and Pete to accompany him on his adventures. In a scene that conflates the Sirens and the Circe episode in Homer’s poem, he and his companions encounter three sirens who enchant them and who, they believe for a time, turn one of them into a horny toad. They also encounter a one-eyed Bible salesman who knocks them unconscious with a wooden club and steals their food and money.

When Everett returns home to his wife, Penny (short for Penelope), he discovers that she is about to marry a new husband, a suitor who, when they first meet, beats Everett up and has him thrown out of the Woolworth's store. Everett finally overcomes Penny’s suitor at a political rally where he and his friends ap-
pear in disguise as the famous Soggy Bottom Boys to sing their hit song “Man of Constant Sorrow.” Both Odysseus and Everett have to prove their mettle to win their spouses back. Everett, however, not only must vanquish his wife’s suitor but must also retrieve her wedding ring from the family homestead. One final link worth noting is that the Greek equivalent of Ulysses’s name, Odysseus, means a “man who is in constant pain and sorrow,” a direct echo of the song that Everett and the Soggy Bottom Boys record.3

The Odyssey and Sullivan’s Travels are only two of the ancestral narratives of O Brother, Where Art Thou? Certainly one myth faintly present in the film’s background is that of the vanquished, fallen South. Early in the film, as Everett, Delmar, and Pete continue to evade the men who are tracking them, they sit eating around a campfire, among the tumbled Greek columns of an old southern mansion. The movie pauses only briefly on these ruins, then passes them by, but the point is made.

Another tradition the film inhabits is that of the southern chain-gang film: I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, directed in 1932 by Mervyn LeRoy and starring Paul Muni, was one of the first films in the genre, and it is still a classic. Cool Hand Luke, made in 1967 and starring Paul Newman and George Kennedy, is a more recent example. Another is Jim Jarmusch’s 1986 film Down by Law, featuring Tom Waits and Roberto Benigni, to which O Brother may be somewhat indebted both in plot and tone. The chain-gang film depicts a life of sorrow and pain that is, at least in the southern context, an inheritance of the vanquished southern past.

Yet this is only a start. Layered one on top of the other, deftly interwoven in the film, are multiple popular and deeply ingrained myths of Americana. They are so numerous as almost to defy categorization: the film is a Depression story, the tale of how three down-home white boys and their African American friend make a hit song and strike it big (echoes here of Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and films and film parodies about rock groups such as Spinal Tap, The Rutles, and That Thing You Do). It’s a southern tall tale whose main character stands in the tradition of the nineteenth-century ring-tailed roarers, Davy Crockett, and Sut Lovingood, whose exploits, like those of Odysseus, defy credulity. It’s the story of a confidence man, of a treasure hunt (for buried money and for pomade), of a man trying to prove himself to his children and estranged wife, of a political campaign, of a buffoonish demagogue, of three buddies on the road, of the quest for home, and so on. It exploits many southern stereotypes. Setting the film in the 1930s Depression South; faintly tingeing it with the ambience of Faulkner and Welty; setting it to blues, bluegrass, and gospel music; vaguely associating it with historical events and figures—the 1927 Mississippi flood, Baby Face Nelson, the blues singers Robert and Tommy Johnson, southern politicos, the early days of the blues and bluegrass, the rise of radio, the electrification of the rural South—the
Coens created a compelling, not entirely credible patchwork portrait of America (and not just the South) in the decade preceding the Second World War.

In a sense the film portrays a parallel universe, a fabulistic world both like and unlike our own. It plays fast and loose with facts. It's highly selective. It creates characters who are like real people but who never existed, and others who never existed and who are not like real people at all. (I think particularly of the one-eyed Cyclops Bible salesman Big Dan Teague played by John Goodman). It uses a number of historically real characters—George “Baby Face” Nelson, Robert and Tommy Johnson, and Pappy O’Daniel—but radically changes the facts of their lives.

The 1920s and 1930s South was rife with rumors and legends of bad men rampaging across the countryside. (I remember my grandmother, in her last days, rambling on about two outlaws who terrorized the Texas countryside where she lived in the 1920s; only later did I realize she was talking about Bonnie and Clyde.) In *O Brother* the bad man in question is George “Baby Face” Nelson. The film’s Nelson is a manic-depressive lunatic who drives wildly, dares the police to capture him, and hates his nickname. The historical Baby Face Nelson was a machine-gun wielding gangster and bank robber who terrorized the Midwest and the FBI during the 1930s. He was regarded by many other gangsters, including John Dillinger, as too crazy to trust, though Dillinger did team up with him for a short time. The trouble is that the historical Nelson spent his entire career in the West and Midwest. He never set foot in Mississippi, and he died in a shootout with FBI agents in 1934, well before the time of the film. It’s possible that the character in the film is an impostor, a wannabe who models himself after the famous gangster and appropriates his name, but that’s doubtful. The *O Brother* Baby Face wears a cloth cap similar to the one Baby Face wore in a famous photo, and there’s even a physical resemblance. In the tall-tale, fabulistic narrative of the film, it’s more likely that he is who he says he is, or he’s part of a yarn spun by Everett for his wife and children long after the time of the story. He’s just another element that doesn’t quite fit, part of the film’s own mythology.

Another historical character in the film is Governor Pappy O’Daniel, sponsor of the Pappy O’Daniel Flour Hour. There really was a W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel. He owned a flour company (Hillbilly Flour), sponsored a country-music radio show during the 1920s and 1930s, wrote country music, and performed with a group called “The Hillbilly Boys.” He organized another group, the “Light Crust Doughboys,” that gave Bob Wills his first break. O’Daniel’s slogan was “Pass the biscuits, Pappy.” His popularity as a performer and self-styled character was great enough that he was elected governor of Texas in 1938 and senator in 1941.

The real Pappy was as ineffective in office as the Coens portray him to be in the film. Yet they significantly alter the facts of his life, making him the governor of Mississippi instead of Texas. In the film, O’Daniel, reminiscent of Faulkner’s character Senator Clarence Snopes in *The Mansion*, is a stereotypical old-time
O Brother takes its place in a long tradition of southern chain-gang movies, including I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (left page, above; copyright 1932 by Warner Studios), Down By Law (left page, below; copyright 1986 by Black Snake, Inc.), and Cool Hand Luke (right page; copyright 1967 by Warner Brothers.) All courtesy of Photofest.
southern demagogue constructed from bits and pieces of numerous southern politicians of the 1920s and 1930s—a combination of Big Daddy, Boss Hog, Huey Long, and countless others. He’s a feckless populist, willing to do or say whatever will win votes. His pardoning of the Soggy Bottom Boys recalls Governor Pat Neff of Texas, who pardoned the blues singer Leadbelly after hearing him perform a song he had written expressly to convince the governor to pardon him. He also bears the mark of Jimmie Davis, governor of Louisiana at the end of the 1940s and again early in the 1960s. Davis began his career as a country singer and songwriter. His trademark version of “You Are My Sunshine” made him famous in 1940. Not surprisingly, in the film Pappy O’Daniel leads supporters in singing this song several years before it was actually written.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is intentionally reckless in its treatment of southern and American popular culture, its use of fact, its invention and reinvention of myth, its fabrication of falsehoods, all of which are woven together into the fabric the film presents as reality. In essence, the film creates its own myth of the American South in the 1920s and 1930s, a myth that is as much a tall tale as are the exploits of Everett, Pete, and Delmar. The point of the myth is to celebrate
that which is worth celebrating—the folk culture, the music, the history, the life of a time different from our own, a time just before the modern world when rural electrification dawned. But is the myth so selective that it lacks relevance?

Certainly one of the ways in which the Coen brothers’ depiction of the 1930s South differs from reality is in the issue of race. The film’s treatment of racism is strangely oblique. It’s as if the film were made in the pre-Civil Rights, pre-Cold War 1940s, when a film such as Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* might express its progressive attitudes merely by having a black actor present in a silent supporting role. One might argue that *O Brother* hardly acknowledges the issue of race and that this is indeed part of its mythic, romantic history-making. However, while the film is not exactly about race or racism in the American South, it does not flinch from these issues, and in several subtle and open ways it denotes awareness of them. The opening scene portrays a line of men, mostly African American men, working on a chain gang. The Soggy Bottom Boys briefly present themselves as African Americans to a blind radio station owner, until they discover that he doesn’t like black music. And the gubernatorial campaign that is an undercurrent throughout the film is a contest between two candidates, one of whom turns out to be a Ku Klux Klan leader. Finally, one of the main characters, Tommy Johnson, is African American. He’s deferential and often stands in the background, but he’s treated with friendship and respect by the white members of the group. He is also free to speak his mind. He’s befriended by the other members of the Soggy Bottom Boys and with them records a hit song and performs at a community political meeting where he is the only black man present.

We first meet Tommy when the three convicts pick him up at a crossroads in the middle of an empty expanse of farm fields. He tells us he’s just sold his soul to the devil in return for guitar-playing skills. He describes the devil as a white man with empty eyes and a bloodhound. In other words, the devil is the same man, Sheriff Cooley, who pursues the escaped convicts throughout the film. Other than Tommy, however, we hardly see another black person in the film, except in the guise of field hands, men on a chain gang, gravediggers, and a blind soothsayer. Many viewers thought Tommy Johnson was based on the famous blues man Robert Johnson, King of the Delta Blues and one of the most influential figures in the development of the American blues and rock and roll. Robert, who died at the age of twenty-seven in 1938, probably after being poisoned by the jealous husband of a romantic interest, was actively performing in Mississippi at the time of the events in the film. In one of the two existing photographs of Robert, he wears a hat at a slant very much like the one worn at a slant by Tommy in the film. Not surprisingly, however, there was also a Delta Blues singer of the twenties and thirties named Tommy Johnson. He bragged often, like Robert, of having sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the ability to sing and play guitar. He and Robert probably borrowed from and competed with one another, though
Robert, with his tragic premature death and the handful of classic blues songs he wrote in his short life, clearly won the competition. It’s likely that the Coens drew from both these figures in the creation of their character Tommy Johnson.

In various ways the Coens deeply embed the issue of race and the experience of African Americans in the South in the film’s text: through the music the film celebrates; through the reform candidate for governor, Homer Stokes, who turns out to be a member of the Klan; and through one of the central scenes of the film, the disturbing and bizarre Klan rally presented in the style of the marching guards outside the castle of the Wicked Witch of the East in *The Wizard of Oz*. Some critics found this scene offensive. Movie critic J. Holberman of the *Village Voice* described it as “nihilistic” and a “fastidiously smug scenario.” Roger Ebert, critic for the Chicago *Sun-Times*, however, found it the most effective sequence in the film: “The choreography of the ceremony seems poised somewhere between Busby Berkeley and ‘Triumph of the Will,’ and the Coens succeed in making it
look ominous and ridiculous at the same time.” There is no reason why comedy and satire cannot be as effective as tragedy or melodrama in exposing and condemning racism, and this scene is a good example of a comic attack on racism.

In the Klan rally of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* we would expect to find the leading men of the town, the white power structure of the community. Big Dan Teague, the Bible salesman, is there. Homer Stokes, the progressive candidate for governor, is there. This scene makes clear—with its depiction of hundreds of men clothed in white robes, marching in Nazi lockstep, in a religious passion focused on the sacred iconography of the Confederate flag, preparing for the evening’s ritualistic entertainment, the lynching of an available Negro—that racism is at the heart of the world the film portrays, along with a system of law and government that discriminates against the poor, whatever their color, displaces farmers from their land (remember that Delmar’s dream is to buy back the family farm), allows a governor to issue a pardon on the one hand to men who in the
next scene are threatened with hanging by a sheriff who ignores the law. It’s an unfair and unequal world, one that doesn’t quite make sense, like the one we inhabit.

Growing up in the suburbs of Atlanta during the 1950s and early 1960s, my experience with racism was selective, too. As a white boy, my exposure to racism was limited to certain epithets I heard from friends and relatives. There were a few times when my grandfather ordered my grandmother to wash out her mouth with soap after she uttered the “N” word, forbidden to us because it was vulgar, impolite. Because I didn’t know what racism was, I didn’t recognize it when I encountered it. It didn’t occur to me that the dirt road that led down to the shoddy house where the woman lived who cooked and cleaned for our family was somehow linked with racism. It didn’t occur to me that there was something to make of the well-groomed, slick-haired man who cut my hair once every two weeks at the local barber shop, this friendly and kind man who was said to make violins and to belong to the Klan. But there was one small episode. One day, as an
eleven-year-old on a trip to downtown Atlanta in 1961, I entered a bakery to purchase a doughnut. There, standing at the counter, I saw a waitress motion a young black man not much older than me away from the counter. “You get away from here,” she said. “Get away.” I couldn’t look at him, or at her. Something did twist in my gut then.

Just as the Coens drew on historical figures such as Baby Face Nelson and Robert Johnson to create characters in their film, so too did they draw on the historical facts of the Ku Klux Klan and of lynching in their depiction of this scene. Historically, the scene is an invention. Klan rallies rarely involved lynchings, which occurred separately, though members of the Klan may well have participated in them. Though the Klan was (and is) heavily dependent on ritual, especially in meetings, the titles of officers, and in its bylaws, obviously no Klan rally was ever as orchestrated and intricately choreographed as the rally in *O Brother*. The rally in the film externalizes the rituals associated with the Klan. Southern history and racism, the false worship of southern womanhood, patriotism, religion, are all tied together in this symbolic, obscene, hilarious parody. Were it not for the fact that the Klan meeting is to end with the lynching of a black man, the film would tempt us to dismiss the scene as one more silly satire. But because Tommy is the intended victim, the Klan rally becomes a powerful and disturbing emblem of the true historical South of the twenties and thirties, one that the film chooses to acknowledge indirectly, just as its approach to many other aspects of the historical South is oblique and glancing, yet nonetheless penetrating.

A final possible literary antecedent for this film might be the medieval mystery play *Everyman*, in which the main character episodically encounters one person after another, asking for someone to accompany him to his death. He is turned down by each in turn until finally he asks Good Deeds, who agrees to go with him. The plot of *O Brother* is intensely episodic, almost picaresque. In ways the film sets itself up as a spiritual quest. The quest structure is enforced early in the film by the blind black prophet on the handcar, who tells the convicts that “though the road may wind, and . . . your hearts grow weary, still shall ye follow the way, even unto your salvation.” It is enforced as well by the sheriff who pursues the men, the sheriff whom Tommy Johnson describes as the devil. A number of scenes show vast empty expanses of farmland or long vistas of empty road, and it is tempting to think of these men pursued by the devil as already dead, though the film doesn’t sustain this temptation for very long. Much of the music in the film is religious. Ralph Stanley’s haunting dirge “O Death” highlights the Klan rally where Tommy is to be hanged, and the grave diggers sing their funereal “Lonesome Valley” when Everett, Pete, and Delmar are about to be hanged. The song “Man of Constant Sorrow” has a scriptural origin. In Isaiah 53:3, the prophet says that the Messiah will have it rough: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him, and
we esteemed him not.” Everett, stalwart unbeliever throughout, actually gets down on his knees and prays for deliverance.

In this sense the Coens present Everett and his companions’ quest for treasure as a spiritual journey. For Everett the quest ends (almost) in reunion with his wife and children. But once again at the end the blind prophet appears on his handcar, trolling his way up the track, suggesting that something that appears to have come to an end is only just beginning. For the Coens, the religious quest, one of the archetypal motifs of our culture, is another intercultural reference that they exploit for their own purposes. This is not a religious film, and it treats the religious elements with respect, skepticism, and irony. Yet it also offers religion as one way of explaining what occurs.

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Early in the film the blind Teiresias-like prophet on the track prophesies that Everett, Delmar, and Pete will see many startlements, one of which will be a “cow standing on a cotton house.” Throughout the film Everett reminds his companions that they must hurry on their way to find the treasure he has buried near the family homestead before it is covered up by a flood that will result from the impoundment of a reservoir used to generate power for rural electrification. This impending flood, which will wash away and submerge the family homestead, hangs over the entire film, and it is, in fact, the symbolic event that divides the mythic southern past—the past the film documents—from the electrified present. Everett tells Delmar and Pete, as all three cling to a floating coffin in the flood:

Yessir, the South is gonna change. Everything’s gonna be put on electricity and run on a payin’ basis. Out with the old spiritual mumbojumbo, the superstitions and the backward ways. We’re gonna see a brave new world where they run everyone a wire and hook us all up to a grid. Yessir, a veritable age of reason—like the one they had in France—and not a moment too soon. . . .

Of course, the Age of Reason in revolutionary France—a time of murder, chaos, and insanity, a blind dismembering of the past and everything associated with it—was anything but. As if in response, at this moment Everett spies the cow on
the cotton house prophesied in the film’s beginning. It is ironic that Everett, so skeptical of the baptismal redemption of his friends Pete and Delmar earlier in the film, can see only good in the power of this cleansing flood that heralds a future in which the past has no part.

In the film’s final scene Everett and his newly regained wife, Penny, walk with their seven daughters past a freshly painted mural that shows well-dressed men and women enjoying the benefits of a modern electrified present—a present made possible by the flood that washes away the nonelectrified past. Whether we think of the past portrayed in the film as historically accurate, we recognize the world of the mural. It is, with a few minor modifications, our world. The mural signifies not only the electrification of the rural South, but its domestication as well. The flood washes away everything the film is about, and leaves us with the present. It domesticates Everett, too; for although the treasure that he sought was one he did not find because it did not exist, the greater treasure he finds, so the film tells us, is hearth, family, and home—though at the end of the film it seems that he has at least one more feat to perform before he will truly be received back in the bosom of his family.

The music in O Brother, Where Art Thou? was for many viewers inseparable from the events and characters of the film. The soundtrack album was a record-setting bestseller. The mood and even the content of key scenes are set by the music that accompanies them—especially the opening vista of the black chain-gang prisoners singing “Po Lazarus,” the song “Man of Constant Sorrow” that wins freedom for the Soggy Bottom Boys, and the singing of the gravediggers as the main characters face their own hanging. Music defines the mythic and legendary South that the movie portrays, and its romanticizing of that South as a place of faith, down-home country values, simple love, and contented people contributes to the myth making in which the film engages. Yet the music is a very real artifact and inheritance of that world, which along with everything else is threatened with obliteration by the flood of electrification and modernity. The film suggests this idea through the image of the gramophone being whirled away by the waters of the flood. Much of the music is about redemption, in some form, and it works a redemptive force on the mythic landscape it embodies—as if to urge the moviegoers, or the soundtrack listeners, to embrace those worthy aspects of the culture that produced it. One very real accomplishment of the film is that it helped rescue this musical inheritance from obscurity.

A historical fantasy rather than a realistic portrayal of history, an encyclopedia of southern cultural icons from the 1930s, a menagerie of half-dreamed memories, myths, tall tales, and distorted realities, O Brother, Where Art Thou? evokes and celebrates the folklore and traditions of the American South without ignoring the realities of racism. It chooses in a deliberate way to highlight what the Coens see as some of the great contributions of the South to American culture: among
O Brother, Where Art Thou? 25

The appeal of *O Brother* lay partly in its soundtrack of old-time music and its lament for the movie’s men “of constant sorrow.” Covers of the soundtrack CD (above) and a spin-off concert CD (below), courtesy of Lost Highway records.
them, a rich tradition of music and comic narrative that are basic elements of the nation’s culture. It is also a comic but sincere plea for racial unity based on the shared experiences and culture of American whites and blacks in the twentieth century.

NOTES


6. According to E. M. Beck, coauthor with Stewart Tolnay of A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of the Lynching of African-Americans in the American South, 1882–1930 (University of Illinois Press, 1995), Klan activities had significantly dwindled during the 1930s, following the active decade of the 1920s.

7. I thank Sam Prestridge for identifying this connection. O Brother, Where Art Thou? [screenplay], 106.