Homer Meets the Coen Brothers: Memory as Artistic Pastiche in O Brother, Where Art Thou?

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The Coen brothers’ 2000 film O Brother, Where Art Thou? presents an intriguing and unusual case for the question of whether historical accuracy is important in films that use classical antiquity as a direct setting or indirect reference point. With key elements of the film based on Homer’s Odyssey, O Brother is set in the American south during the Great Depression. Those familiar with the often whimsical style of the Coen brothers probably did not know what, if any, connection this effort would have to either historical period. However, lovers of Homer have noted many clever allusions to the adventures of Odysseus in the O Brother, while those interested in the myth of a charming Old South appeared pleased at how the film nostalgically presented 1930s southern culture.

Classical Allusions

Homer’s Odysseus becomes Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) in the Coens’ reimaging of the epic Greek story. Though he is also a man who prizes his intellect as a mechanism for making his way back home, Everett soon discloses a shallow obtuseness beneath his clever and fast-talking rhetoric. Still, like Odysseus, Everett longs to get back to his beloved wife Penelope, a.k.a. Penny (Holly Hunter), who is being courted by a suitor. Unlike her ancient counterpart, Penny is not exactly the faithful wife; she divorces Everett in his absence to pursue a more profitable match. And even when the couple is reunited at the end, the last scene depicts Penny nagging her ever-apologizing husband, who is followed by seven daughters rather than one son.

Homer’s blind prophet Tiresias is central in the Coens’ version, too, though now he appears as an old black man (Lee Weaver) who says he works for “no man” and has “no name” (echoing Odysseus’ famous lines). In riddles, this blind seer warns Everett and his companions (Pete played by John Turturro and Delmar played by Tim Blake Nelson) of the perils of the journey but predicts a successful homecoming. In O Brother, the Cyclops takes the guise of John Goodman’s conniving, one-eyed bible salesman, who examples an on-going religious subtext (again similar but quite different from Homer). The Sirens now appear as seductive songstresses in wet dresses (played by Mia Tate, Musetta Vander, and Christy Taylor), also filling Circe’s role as beautiful witch by supposedly turning Pete into a toad (and they even recall the role of Nausicaa and her maids with their clothes-washing). But Ulysses Everett McGill, unlike the ancient Odysseus, has no defense against any of their feminine wiles. Along with his companions, Everett gets “liquored up” and intends “to fornicate” because he does not have the good sense to see that the Sirens plan to turn the men over to the law for the reward money.

More subtle references to Homer’s story include: the hero’s journey to the underworld, which has become the fire and brimstone meeting of the KKK; the conversion of the Lotus Eaters into the glassy-eyed crowd waiting to be dunked in the river for baptism; the saving of Odysseus from the watery deep, mirrored in Everett
emerging from the floods of the Tennessee Valley Authority; the transformation of Poseidon into Sheriff Cooley (Daniel Von Bargen), who also represents an unrelenting and blind revenge (note the sunglasses). And just as Poseidon ignores Zeus' decree that Odysseus shall return home, the trooper also does not care about anyone else's authority—in this case the indifference concerns the governor's pardon at the end. The modern Ulysses also returns home in disguise, through a fake beard and blackface in the film, making Everett appear to be a down-and-out, old hillbilly like the beggar Odysseus. Once again there is a showdown among opposing forces at a banquet. The ancestral home is threatened but still intact, at least long enough to yield an object that gives legitimacy to Ulysses' relationship with his wife (the tree-bed in Homer vs. the ring in the film).

The hero is saved in both cases by a deus ex machina; fate plays a prominent role in both stories—all is "foreordained," as Everett claims. Hospitality for the ancient and modern wanderers is central—Pete's cousin Wash Hogwallop (played by Frank Collison) betrays them, as does the bible-selling Cyclops, echoing a similar concern in Homer. The suffering of the wandering hero is a dominant motif; Odysseus and Everett are both the "Man of Constant Sorrow." Water serves as a rebirth symbol in both versions of the tale, though we might ask in each case whether any real transformation happens. And then there are the cows; Odysseus' men are warned not to eat them, and they act as a comic leitmotif in the Coen brothers' film. The crime and punishment theme, evident in both Homer's epic and the Coens' tale, is a prime example of the effect of the Coens' reworking of their classical model. While divine justice is at work in the Odyssey, the failure of human justice dominates O Brother.3

Within this funny, sweet, and stylishly sentimental story the Coen brothers merge American depression era folk cultural traditions of the 1930s with epic Greek literature, creating a new American styled mythic tale that combines social awareness and forgiveness. On the surface, the film appears to be an indiscriminate mixture of past and present high and low art; but it is the mixture itself that is the filmmakers' focus. By juxtaposing literary traditions with folk cultures, and contrasting lower class popular culture of the period with high brow elitism, the Coens are able to use their placement of ancient history within the contemporary world to set these dichotomies on equal artistic footing. One consequence of these cultural collisions is the undercurrent of a Marxist critique by the Coens of American capitalism (the film clearly takes the side of the working poor), as economic class conflicts serve as prominent backdrop during the Odysseus-like journey of the film's heroes, led by George Clooney. Another outcome is a more subtle discussion of history's often conflictual relationship with memory.

**History vs. Memory**

Hugh Ruppersburg begins his 2003 article in Southern Cultures, "Oh, so many startlements... History, Race, and Myth in O Brother, Where Art Thou?," by explaining how his own family's background in the South makes him feel a special connection to the Coen brothers' film. He writes that "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" (6). Ironically, Ruppersburg contradicts this later, writing that the film is "historical fantasy rather than a realistic portrayal of history," and merely "a menagerie of half-dreamed memories" (24). The tension between the truthful and fanciful memories that Ruppersburg appears to exhibit in his article is a part of the larger scholarly debate about the complex relationship between history and memory. One claim within the debate asserts that it is commonplace to view our memory of the past as being constantly filtered through the lens of the present. A second contention is that history is always told from the perspective of whatever group, for example conquerors, that is fortunate enough to survive to become the documentarians. Just how primary historical sources are documented is a key element. History relies on
eyewitness observations, but second, or even third, hand indirect recollections of an event become “fact.” In some cases history is just plain fabricated. Regardless of its source, history clearly is a hybrid of both artifact and artifice.⁴

In Greek myth, “Memory” is the mother of the nine sister Muses, including Clio, the inspiration of history. In O Brother, the two Coen muses create a memory of the past that is a playful parody of memory itself. As they toy with, joke about, and make sport of our cultural memories, the Coens suggest rich possibilities for new identifications and identities by piecing the past together like a patchwork quilt made from old remnants. But in the hands of the filmmakers the quilt is not the past—it’s context, the juxtapositions of its remnant patchwork parts, and the way we are made to experience these pieces, all combine to change the meaning of the whole into something akin to a new beginning. For the Coens, the patches of the quilt are movies, songs, stories, and legends preserved from bygone eras. Their picture of the past (and ours) is as authentic as those works of art.

O Brother creates a droll look at American folk and pop culture of the 1930s through its use of multiple layers of musical, visual and textual allusion. The soundtrack from the film is a succession of “old timey” music choices while the film stitches together visual cues from famous movies of the period including standards like The Grapes of Wrath, The Wizard of Oz, and the classic American odyssey, Huckleberry Finn.⁶ It is no mere coincidence that the books these three films were adapted from are possibly more iconic than the films themselves. Their selection and inclusion as a part of the tapestry the Coens put on display underscores the complex intertwining of varied levels of cultural production and reception evident in their work. Such American literary and folk references in O Brother compliment the references to Homer’s Greek epic, The Odyssey, which acts as the film’s central narrative and mythic frame. Though the Coen brothers claimed that they never read Homer’s tale,⁷ obvious references to the Sirens, the Cyclops, and the blind Tiresias, as well as more subtle citations, such as the heroic journey to the underworld, the Lotus Eaters, and the vengeful Poseidon, belie, and thus make comically ironic, their denials.⁸

The current renewed scholarly interest in memory can be traced to many sources, but two are especially important for theorizing the use of history in feature films like O Brother. The first is what French historian Pierre Nora connects with the “demonization of history…a marked emancipatory trend among…ethnic groups.” Nora feels that these “forms of memory are bound up with minority groups for whom rehabilitating their past is part and parcel of reaffirming their identity” (Transit). The second source is the postmodern trend of artists who are “re-examining traditions that modernism eclipsed in its pursuit of the ‘Shock of the New,’” according to Ingeborg Hoesterey, a scholar who contextualizes and compares visual and literary theories. As she explains, one of the signs that artistic postmodernism has a profound interest in the past is the return of pastiche as a dominant art form. In fact, Hoesterey feels that postmodern pastiche focuses on “cultural memory and the merging of horizons past and present” (xi).

Moreover, Hoesterey feels that postmodern pastiche is “about cultural memory and the merging of horizons past and present” (xi).

The Coens’ Overarching Project within Critical Discourses

These two strands of interest in cultural memory seem, at first glance, to be utterly at odds. Ethnic memory is connected with social justice for minorities, while pastiche is still seen as a sign of decadence in culture, an art form that is simply a patchwork of borrowings from better originals. Frederic Jameson was blunt in his

4. In the same year O Brother was released, Stanley Lombardo published a translation of the Odyssey where he transforms Homer’s generalized invocation to the Muse to these opening words: “Speak, Memory—“(1).

5. Although the 1939 version of Huckleberry Finn is the lesser known of the three films to contemporary viewers, it was a hit in its own time. It was directed by Richard Thorpe and starred Mickey Rooney as the mischievous hero (the earlier 1931 film, directed by Norman Taurog and starring Junior Durkin as Huck Finn, was the first talking version of the story).

6. The Coens’ disclaimer comes from an interview conducted by Jonathan Romney of the Guardian in May of 2000 at the Cannes festival, where the film was debuted. His interview is subsequently quoted by all the sources I have referenced. The comic nature of the Coen’s denial supports my ironic interpretation. Romney reports: “‘Between the cast and us,’ says Ethan, ‘Tim Nelson is the only one who’s actually read the Odyssey. . . Scylla and Charybdis? Where were they?’ puzzles Ethan. The whirlpool at the end, surely? [says Romney] ‘Oh,’ the brothers chorus, ‘the whirlpool.’” Ruppersburg also documents the Coens’ claim, but disbelieves it too. He notes, though, that the plot of Homer’s story “is so ingrained in the cultural consciousness that even if one didn’t actually read The Odyssey exposure would still come through movies, cartoons, and comic books” (6-7).

7. While some film critics, such as Kevin Jackson, dismiss the importance of the Homeric allusions in the film on the grounds that most film viewers will not see them anyway (Who reads Homer anymore?), Scott A. Belsky, a high school English teacher, uses O Brother as one example of the way Homer is alive and well in contemporary culture.

8. McFarland argues that this sense of sophisticated elitism is “sabotaged” in O Brother (he thinks intentionally by the Coens) during the KKK rally where the proposed lynching demands an ethical and historical response (47-48).

10. None of the twenty plus reviewers I surveyed gave O Brother great marks at the time the film was released, though all of them enjoyed aspects of the film (in addition to those in Metacritic.com, see Cohen, Ebert, Jackson, McDonagh, and Taylor). Jackson states “the old objection leveled against the Coens” well: “they are clever... too clever by half, but where is the substance, the warmth, the passion?” At least in the case of O Brother, Jackson concedes, the Coens show some love for what they mock.

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Criticism of pastiche. He wrote in his Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism that the current evaluation of postmodern pastiche was either morally bankrupt or, at best, a “neutral practice” that lacks the “satiric impulse” of most social criticism (17-18). However, Jameson’s view appears to be in the minority as there is a growing consensus in the discourse against this idea. Linda Hutcheon, in her Politics of Postmodernism, offers one of the most significant arguments in opposition to Jameson, asserting that the parody of pastiche has tangible cultural currency, often involving the “politics of representation,” because its self-reflexive core examines the power structures that create “ideological legitimization” (97). Others agree with her assessment.

Douglas McFarland writes that the “postmodern pleasure of pastiche is the pleasure of recognizing references, so that engaging a text becomes a game of identification,” which then creates an elite audience of those in the know (47). Paul Coughlin writes that it is the Coen’s very use of postmodern techniques that solidifies O Brother’s “engagement with history and ‘real life’” (“Past Is Now” 196). I am also inclined to agree with Hutcheon, especially given the reputation of the Coens as deft cinema tricksters. O Brother clearly is representative of a brand of pastiche that is as organized in its chaos as it is self-reflexive.

However, the film’s moments of overt, slapstick physical comedy, that at times rival the best of the Marx Brothers, does make problematic the case that the film provides serious social commentary on the human condition. However, the Coens’ project successfully accomplishes this with a stinging critique of the class conflicts between rich elitists and lower class “salt of the earth” poor people who are championed by the film on multiple levels. First, there is the subversion of elitist high art. O Brother symbolizes art that could be considered “anti-art.” The filmmakers, artists themselves, are not hypocritically against art per se, but seem dead set against (and their complete body of work will support this claim) making art for the sake of an elitist agenda. The Coens use a complex system of cultural references in O Brother to strike a blow against what they must feel is an elite class made up of snobs.

Second, while the film appears to be a patchwork structure of episodic ruminations formed through a hodgepodge of quotations and cultural parodies, a paradoxical “loose unity” becomes evident from the way the references, once their intertextuality is contextualized, meld into coherency. The Coens do not make any allusions to other texts (literary, visual, or aural) without transforming them in some ingenious way. Often this occurs by virtue of a new context that, while substantially altering the effect and meaning of the original reference, is able to somehow retain the reference’s historical integrity. More than simple nostalgia, more than mere homage, with O Brother the Coens use art to question our unthinking reverence for our cultural heritage. And by utilizing the master narrative that is ancient Greek glory as their pallet, they have chosen western civilization’s most revered ancestry as a point of contention. Most critics were slow to accept this comedic style as the basis for a serious discussion of history and memory but still found the Coens’ attempt at layered nuance encouraging.

A small number of film critics and historians, lead by James Mottram and Erica Rowell, both who have performed extensive research of the Coens’ work, argue that there are indeed social meanings in the Coens’ films. On the other hand, while praising the brothers for their quirky and innovative style, mainstream media critics agreed that, while there might be social and class based critiques emerging from the Coens’ work in O Brother, previous films lacked any noticeable social engagement. Moreover, Coen films were cited as being poor in content while providing visually and metaphorically rich aesthetics. O Brother was reviewed no differently. In one review published at the time of the film’s release, TV Guide’s Maitland McDonagh called the film “clever, but fundamentally shallow,” reflecting a consensus among other critics.
Academicians have echoed these sentiments. In his 2007 review of William Rodney Allen’s book *The Coen Brothers: Interviews*, Tony Osborne, an associate professor at Gonzaga University, wrote that there is not a “deeper significance” in the Coens’ films and that they “simply seek to amuse themselves.”

But even those critics who filed poor reviews of *O Brother* admitted to enjoying parts of the film because of the Coens’ clever use of cultural references. For example, Roger Ebert, despite giving the film only two and one-half stars, felt the KKK rally sequence was the most successful moment in the film because the “choreography of the ceremony seems poised somewhere between Busby Berkeley and ‘Triumph of the Will’... making it look ominous and ridiculous at the same time.” This could be said for the entire narrative as the Coens appear to employ a myriad of references from popular culture, music, literature, and real life to enrich their story.

**Pop Culture References**

These references begin with the title of the film, which is derived from Preston Sturges’ 1941 *Sullivan’s Travels*. That story is about a director who wants to make a film entitled “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” to show his social conscience in the face of the Depression in the 1930s, but who concludes that laughter is just as effective a response.

The Coens begin their own construction of the past with George Clooney who, with his slicked-back hair, pencil mustache and suave manners recalls Clark Gable’s 1930s screwball comedies. *Wife vs. Secretary* (1936, co-starring Jean Harlow, Myrna Loy, and James Stewart) and *It Happened One Night* with Claudette Colbert both come to mind. *O Brother* even has a hitchhiking scene that is slightly reminiscent of Capra’s 1934 film. Its inclusion homages the history of other famous American road films.

In spite of his hairnet and use of Dapper Dan pomade, Clooney’s character is only a parody of the dapper Gable, though his performance reminds audiences of Gable’s Blackie Gallagher character in 1934’s *Manhattan Melodrama*, in which Blackie was a criminal who was more good-guy than bad-boy. With his two fellow convicts, Everett behaves more like one of The Three Stooges. He and his partners also employ the Stooges’ classic antics, including their trademark exaggerated physical comedy. The film references continue: as the chain gang breaks up rocks at the beginning of the Coen brothers’ film, the scene recalls Depression-era convict movies, especially 1932’s *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. An appearance by the notorious Baby Face Nelson takes us back to other classic gangster movies from this time, such as James Cagney’s famous *The Public Enemy* (1931) or *G-Men* (1935). However, the Coens’ Nelson is more baby than Cagney tough guy.

*O Brother* is packed full of such visual citations, the successful intent of which is to create humor through the twisting, variation, and re-combination from the original sources. The choreography of the aforementioned KKK scene evokes the work of Busby Berkeley while reflecting the culturally iconic status of 1939’s *Wizard of Oz*. Several situations support this argument. First and foremost, the three convicts with their banjo-playing friend walking down a road together remind us of Dorothy and her three companions looking for their way home to Kansas. But which character in *O Brother* represents exactly who from *Oz*? The three “hayseeds” are all reminiscent of the Scarecrow, though Delmar seems clearly the one without a brain; and none of the three convicts is particularly courageous—a prime example of the way the Coens vary their sources to create humor. In addition, like *The Wizard of Oz*, *O Brother* utilizes color photography bookended by a scheme of black and white images. Finally, the very fact that *O Brother* is a musical of sorts, complete with song and dance routines, connects it with the *Wizard of Oz*. The Coens also copy the chant of the soldiers of the Wicked Witch of the West in the KKK scene. And like Dorothy’s friends, Everett, Delmar, and Pete steal the uniforms of the marching “soldiers” to

12. See Ebert’s review in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 29, 2000. In his review, Ebert explains why he gave the film 2 ½ stars: “I had the sense of invention set adrift; of a series of bright ideas wondering why they had all been invited to the same film.”

13. Starting with Romney’s Cannes interview with the Coens, every critic and scholar I reference examines the importance of the Coens’ reliance on Sullivan’s work. Whether they see this as thematically important or simply another example of the Coens’ cleverness depends on their critical stance.


15. In their DVD commentary, the Coens describe their film as a mixture of the Three Stooges and the hayseed genre.

16. Laderman discusses the importance of such “Depression-era social conscience films” like this (along with *The Grapes of Wrath*, *It Happened One Night*, and *Sullivan’s Travels*) for the development of the road movie genre because “these films link road travel with social isolation and social criticism” (24).

17. For a good discussion of the importance of the gangster film for understanding American identity and film, see Nathan Munby’s *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*.

18. Mottram says that “Roger Deakins’ garish photography which emphasizes the yellows and greens of the Mississippi countryside in a slightly unreal way” is “not unlike the colour scheme that is given over to the land of Oz” (162).

19. The Coens recalled how they “dumped the crippled guy out of the wheelchair” in *The Big Lebowsk*. These comments are from Romney’s “Double Vision” interview (179 in Woods’ reprint).
save their friend Tommy from death. There is also an exact visual borrowing when the soldiers disappear under the bushes, followed by the heroes crawling out of the same bushes in soldier disguise.

**Postmodern Pastiche with Social Conscience**

These references example just how the Coen brothers create a socially conscious postmodern pastiche, in part because they combine a self-reflexive examination of their own artistry with an interrogation of power structures. By joining the theme of art with the theme of social justice, both are transformed while avoiding the pitfalls of dogmatic capitulation. The parody of pastiche keeps the Coens’ film from being preachy or propagandistic, both common flaws of art dealing with social issues.

In her book *The Brothers Grimm: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen* (2007), Erica Rowell describes *O Brother* as a social critique that “boldly looks at race, crime, and punishment like few of its contemporaries” (xi). Focusing on the liberating power of music, Rowell explains how “Politics and folk art demonstrate that the power of democracy can topple out-of-control, over-controlling corrupt powers” (274). She sees Ulysses Everett McGill as a “truly democratic hero, an average citizen who is part of a powerful collective” (249), “as much a street philosopher as a con artist” (255), “a savior” (256), “the little man’s true servant—a brother and a political reformer” (271). While I agree with most of Rowell’s excellent analysis of *O Brother*, she may have forgotten her own warning in her introduction to “be skeptical of surface images” in the Coens’ films since they are tricksters, “prankster mythmakers” (x). To see Everett as either a reformer or a savior is to miss both the surface meaning and the underlying social message. At best, Everett is a lovable fool, like Delmar, though more sophisticated and devious.

While the theme of social justice is dominant in *O Brother*, it never feels like political correctness. One reason might be that, as the Coens agreed in one interview, they are “not big on taste.” To be so would undercut their “message,” which can paradoxically not look or sound like a message or it will not be the message they mean (the Coen’s medium is their message in a very convoluted, indirect way). Rather, it seeks to subvert an unthinking reverence for the past by undercutting a view of art that attempts to freeze it into an icon of power. The ideal of social justice can also become an icon that does not allow for argument or disagreement. Whenever this happens, the Coens playfully draw a mustache on the iconic ideal, not because they oppose the underlying idea or the artworks that represent it, but because without the mustache, the icon is liable to become oppressive, heavy-handed, and deadening.

The Coens humorously remake both Homer and the American folk tradition in a way that protects any of the originals from over-reverence. They keep putting new mustaches on the past, thus creating an on-going dialogue between the past and the present, the ideal and the mundane, to keep us questioning what is good and real, but always indirectly through humor so that we hardly realize the questions have been asked. This kind of satiric technique suggests that the Coens’ mockery may indicate neither a lack of compassion nor ethics, as their critics have accused, but rather it may show a resistance to self-righteous moral systems or art institutions that can no longer examine their own assumptions.

**The Medium Is the Message**

A clever mixture of classical and popular allusion creates “an obvious deployment of irony and parody at every level of the film,” according to Michael Cohen, a reviewer who also expresses his disappointment in the film as being typical of other Coen brothers’ films, writing that they “never seem to be about anything.” He feels this film...
fails because it “avoids social commentary . . . and is unable to present a coherent theme . . . to match its milieu.” While other critics have been somewhat kinder to the film, simply enjoying its humor as simply the purest form of entertainment, most have noted its episodic structure as evidence of the story’s lack of unity.

On the contrary there is another, more useful, perspective. I would argue that the theme of the film is in its form, specifically how it juxtaposes and re-contextualizes many visual, aural, and textual allusions. The Coens’ purposeful mis-remembering of their sources reconfigures previous texts in a way that “democratizes them,” to use Nora’s terminology. By creating artistic tension, between folk and pop culture versus classical and literary culture, *O Brother* stages both on the same textual footing, making no distinction between the singing of Homer, teller of tales, and the singing of the Soggy Bottom Boys. What results is a text that skillfully blends social critique with artistic critique. This joining together of high and low art is a means of subversion, an interrogation of power and hierarchy, as the many references to race and class in the film attest.

**High Art vs. Low Art**

Regardless of the disdain shown by critics from both the media and the academy, audiences “get” the Coens brand of quirky, off center but right on the mark filmmaking. They beguile their fans with memorable settings, characters, and situations. The stunning film noir resolution of *Blood Simple, Raising Arizona*’s lovably dysfunctional babynappers, gay tough guy Eddie Dane in *Miller’s Crossing,* *Fargo*’s charmingly pregnant but persistent-as-hell police chief Marge Gunderson, and the dim witted genius that was Norville Barnes in *The Hudsucker Proxy,* all lay claim to the Coen’s steadfast desire to turn conventional cinematic narraties upside down and inside out. *O Brother* carries on this tradition, managing to entangle its audiences within a complex web of social commentary that critiques both race and class discrimination—even as the film creates a series of madcap comedic moments that only the Coens’ wit can provide.

It is a charming commentary, not at all didactic but sugared with compelling music and various cinematic quotes. As previously mentioned, the title *O Brother* itself is a reference to a fictitious film by a fictitious director who sought to redeem himself from social privilege and a career filled with fluffy musicals by making a serious film, only to find that cartoons are more uplifting when he sees white chain-gang convicts enjoy movie night in a black church.24 Thus, with *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* as the film’s title, the Coens both mock their own artistic pretensions and also suggest that their comedy is more than mere entertainment. Ironically, their film critiques high and low culture while using both on a very fundamental level to structure their film. *O Brother* questions the pretensions of art while lauding its salvific nature for the masses.

Low or popular art, re-contextualized through the kind of artful pastiche used by the Coens, becomes high art, as can be seen with a few examples. The use of muted colors that characterizes *O Brother* is not simply a sign of nostalgia; it also constitutes a stripping away; this is a formalist technique that draws attention to the very act of making art itself.25 The artistic fade-ins and outs in the film have the same effect. With the assistance of cinematographer Roger Deakins, the Coen Brothers do, of course, evoke old movies and the Depression, as does the scene in the movie theater when Pete warns Delmar and Everett to beware. But these techniques also draw attention to the process of film-making. Thus art is valued for its own sake, as is exemplified in the radio recording scene. Here the image of the Soggy Bottom Boys singing passionately is overlaid on the image of the blind radio station owner, who is obviously enjoying their live musical performance immensely. The pleasure of art is thus intensified by the use of overlapping images. Later the Coens use a montage including a spinning record, representing the growing popularity of the Soggy Bottom Boys, which is overlaid.

24. Rowell gives an excellent analysis of the way the Coens use this scene in Sturges’ film (248).

25. In their DVD commentaries, the Coens and cinematographer Roger Deakins both say that the faded browns were used to evoke the Depression Dustbowl, as well as old movies. *O Brother* is important for being one of the first films to create this effect with digital technology.
on scenes of their travels, showing the passage of time. This overlapping technique makes the style “formalistic,” not “realistic,” thus drawing attention again to the act of making art itself. In this way the Coens give equal weight to high art (the modernist concern for pure form) and low art (the postmodern concern for mixing styles and breaking down hierarchies).

**Everett vs. Delmar**

The Coens also deal with this tension between high and low culture—the ongoing debate about who gets to define what “culture” is, who owns it, and who can claim its memories—through their vivid juxtaposition of the character Ulysses Everett McGill with that of the simple and simply good Delmar. Everett sees himself as above the common crowd in intelligence and purpose. He chooses Greek and Latin based words over shorter and more common Anglo-Saxon synonyms: he has “progeny,” not kids; he is the “paterfamilias,” not the father; “succubus” and “refugium” are other terms he employs. Everett is more Roman than Greek in temperament: he wants practical reasons and empirical explanations. He has pretensions to knowledge, education, and rational behavior, even when he is in his proverbial “tight spot.”

When Everett jumps into the moving freight car at the beginning of the film, he coolly addresses the hobos before he is jerked off the train by his chains: “Say, any of you boys smithies? Or, if not smithies per se, were you otherwise trained in the metallurgic arts before straitened circumstances forced you into a life of aimless wanderin’?” The low brow Delmar, on the other hand, is impossibly naïve. When Pete realizes in dismay that there is no treasure and that he will have fifty years added to his sentence for his escape, making him eighty-four at his release in 1987, Delmar smiles brightly, “I’ll only be eighty-two!” When he recounts what he and Everett experienced in Pete’s absence, he says eagerly, “We was beat up by a bible salesman and banished from Woolworth’s. I don’t know, Everett, was it the one branch or all of them?” Delmar is also so guileless as to be almost unbelievable. Not only is he certain that Pete has been turned into a toad by the “Sireeens,” but he is confident that he and Everett just need to find a magician to reverse Pete’s curse. Despite their differences, both Everett and Delmar fall prey to the tricks of the one-eyed bible salesman in another very funny scene where the cunning Everett does not get the point until he is literally hit over the head. He tells the Cyclops figure that he is an “astute observer of the human scene” and yet has no clue that he is being taken in by this giant of a man. Everett the man of intellect is no better than Delmar the simpleton. For the audience, though, Delmar may be the more sympathetic figure; he is the one who is concerned about the livestock, after all (a Coen spoof on political correctness, no doubt). Both high and low class people are mocked in *O Brother*, as in many of the Coens’ films, though lovingly in this one, I would argue.

Everett’s obsession with keeping his hair just so, with his hairnets and Dapper Dan pomade, embodies his commitment to reason and control. He sees himself as someone opposed to the ignorance of the common crowd and hopes that the damming of the water and the resulting electrical power to follow will be the dawning of a new era for his valley and the South, the shucking of “the old spiritual mumbo jumbo, the superstitions and backward ways,” a “veritable age of reason—like the one they had in France,” as he says brightly. The irony is not lost on the viewer who remembers that the age of reason in France led to a bloodbath and heads rolling.

After Everett survives the flood, he denies the power of religion with the above words, disavowing the deathbed repentance and prayer he uttered just minutes before the miracle. When Pete points out his inconsistency, Everett dismisses his own lapse into religion as something anyone would do when facing death. And yet at the moment he makes this disclaimer, he sees a cow on a roof and remembers (but does not admit)
that the mysterious prophecies of the old, black man have come true. Thus, “Old Time Religion” is depicted as being as reliable and unreliable as modern science, which constitutes a refusal to give primacy to reason or intuition. In fact, a sort of religious salvation in the film is linked with redemption from racism and classism. Everett promises his companions a treasure (reflecting the American dream of salvation through wealth), but instead they acquire a new life through social forgiveness—the governor’s pardoning of the Soggy Bottom Boys resulting from their popularity. However, this act does not reflect any real, on-going social change in the story or the characters themselves.

No Rebirth, No Social Change

In spite of all the rebirth imagery and the prophecies of transformation, nothing and nobody changes in the story. Though it is true that the comic, happy ending depends on a reversal of fortune for the Soggy Bottom Boys, still, the characters themselves do not change or see things in a new light. And certainly the social climate of Mississippi and the institutions of the South remain the same, even with the three villains gone (Big Dan Teague, Homer Stokes, and Sheriff Cooley). This is clearly evident in the parallel structure of the opening and closing sequences that frame the film. Other than Tommy, African Americans are largely invisible in the film’s scenes, except at the beginning and end. The memorable chain gang sequence that starts the film focuses our attention on the chains around the legs of the black prisoners, creating a strong visual image of slavery in the antebellum South.

The fact that all of the prisoners in this scene are black, while the guards are all white, stands as a strong contrast to prison movies from the 1930s where African-Americans are almost always invisible. The black and white stripes of the prisoners’ suits in O Brother and the faded-out color of this scene both reinforce the stark dichotomy of the segregated social worlds of blacks and whites and the unequal justice system that keeps them apart. When we viewers have had a good look at the black prisoners, a black and white frame with the movie’s title flashes before our eyes: “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” While the Coens are hardly known for making message films, the title’s question appears to suggest such a theme: Where are you, white brother, when we need equal treatment and fairness?

If we fail to see the way the film is using the past as a mechanism for interrogating the present, the last sequences of O Brother ask us to revisit it again. Though the swinging ropes in front of Everett’s homestead are meant for the three white convicts, the three black gravediggers standing in the background recall countless historical lynchings of African American men who traveled alone to the “Lonesome Valley.” The final image in the film is the lonely figure of the blind, black seer pushing his gandydancer’s handcar along the railroad track, emphasizing the film’s focus on life’s journeys and destinations; and the last voice we hear is his, singing the haunting revival song, “O bear me away on your snowy white wings to my immortal home.” The reappearance of this Tiresias figure at the film’s end highlights his prophetic centrality as the only character with vision in the story; all the rest are blind to their own prejudices and foibles. As the old man fades into the horizon, the color fades too, first to sepia, and then back to the black and white of the film’s beginning. But the muted colors of the film do not wash away reminders of racial and class prejudice, past or present, subtle though the criticism is in this film.

The Film as a Critique of Race and Class

One of the most crucial scenes in the film depicts the recording of the song “A Man of Constant Sorrow.” This event takes place in a little radio station located

26. Other than the opening sequence, the other chain gang sequences in the film show a mixture of black and white prisoners, which, as Rowell points out, shows "the historical reality that chain gangs were one of the few integrated southern institutions during the Depression" (258). Although there is one black man in the crowd of white people in the Homer Stokes’ rally, he is easy to miss unless the viewer rewinds this scene several times.

27. Stanley Kramer, in his 1958 Defiant Ones with Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier, chains black and white man together, which is probably another prison reference in the Coens’ film.

28. Ruppersburg argues that the Coens celebrate the rich cultural “traditions of the American South without ignoring the realities of racism” (24).
29. Ruppersburg discusses in detail the ways the Coens' film explores the myth "of the vanquished, fallen South" (12).

30. Though Cormier is referring here to the Apostle, (the other film she analyzes in her article "Black Song, White Song: Salvation through the Radio in The Apostle and Oh [sic] Brother, Where Art Thou?"), she later says that "the radio becomes a means to salvation" in O Brother as well (9). Cormier is especially interested in "the powerful music that hails from an authentic and uniquely American biblical apocalyptic tradition that gives the stories their optimism and hope" (1).

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32. The soundtrack even contains two archival recordings reflecting earlier eras from the period: "Po Lazarus" and "Big Rock Candy Mountain." "Po' Lazarus" was recorded by James Carter and the Prisoners by Lomax in a penitentiary in 1959 in Mississippi, and "Big Rock Candy Mountain" was recorded by Harry McClintock in 1928.

33. Chadwell further argues that the interconnection between black and white southern music is part of what makes the search for the roots of folk music so elusive. Literally in the middle of nowhere, a setting purposefully constructed to symbolize a stop along the way of a journey outside of, but yet paradoxically connected to, the rest of the world. The blind station owner is like Homer himself—a promoter of oral poetry, the kind of poetry that can be enjoyed even by the illiterate. The three convicts are led to the station by Tommy Johnson, the black banjo player they have picked up along the way, who informs them there is money to be made in recording.

First, the group informs the blind station manager that they are all "Negroes except their accompanist" until they are told that Negro music is not what is wanted. Then they suddenly switch identities. Now they claim that only their accompanist is black. For them race does not seem to matter either way. Their marginal status as convicts links them with blacks, for both exist at the bottom of the social ladder—they are the "Soggy Bottom Boys" after all. The three convicts even put on black face at one point, not in mockery or self-conscious parody, but simply to hide their identity in the dark when they rescue Pete from jail. In this state they are later taken for mulattoes and suspected of promoting miscegenation. "They's integrated," remarks Homer Stokes, in disbeliefing criticism when he sees the Soggy Bottom Boys perform. And it is true that our three heroes show little prejudice toward Tommy, at least for their time period. They even risk their own lives to rescue him from death at the hands of the mob, without weighing the cost or asking if he is worth it.

Tommy believes the devil is a white man, while Everett says the devil wears a red suit. Both are proven right when we see Homer Stokes in his red KKK grandmaster costume. Stokes, in red, talks about saving our "culture," but the crowd ultimately rejects his narrow idea of southern culture for the more inclusive culture of the radio and old time folk music, black and white. It is ironic that Stokes is the "reform" candidate, supposedly on the side of the "little man," when he ultimately represents even a more despicable type of southern culture than the "incumbent" governor, Pappy, who says he is a "fergettin' an' forgivin' Christian," but really is more of a political realist. When Pappy first sees the travelers at the radio station, he calls them "Crackers" and has no need for their class of people.

But in the end they save his campaign with their music; and then he says they are going to be his "brain trust," implying that being in touch with the common people is the smartest approach. Pappy represents the "Old South" with his stately white, columned mansion (in stark contrast to the wandering heroes sitting among ruined columns on their road journey). But in the end there is the realization that a symbiotic relationship of true mutual interdependence exists—the governor cannot win without the Soggy Bottom Boys even though they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and they cannot be saved without the governor's pardon. Music saves the day for both parties.

The Film as Musical Exposition

It is the power of music, and the wide-influence of the radio, that saves the four companions when their song "Man of Constant Sorrow" becomes a hit. Radio air waves cross societal boundaries unimpeded, due both to the nature of the technology and also to the way it cloaks physical appearance. The "radio has a remarkable knack of hiding race," according to Michelle Cormier (8)—and class, I would add. Radio represents both pop culture and oral culture in the film. It is important that music is the art form highlighted in this movie because music, like film, can be accessed even by illiterate common folk. In an interview Ethan Coen said, "The reason for our using so much of the era's music in the movie was simple. It is compelling music in its own right, harking back to a time when music was a part of every day life and not something performed by celebrities" (BBC News Online, Feb. 28, 2002).

Perhaps what most powerfully echoes America in the 1930s is the music of O
Brother. The music of the film is “variously described as bluegrass, roots, mountain music and old-time country,” combining “rustic sounds of harmonies, gospel choirs, mandolins, guitars, violins and banjos” (BBC News Online). In his article “Inventing That ‘Old Time’ Style,” Sean Chadwell argues convincingly that O Brother is a critique of authenticity in the way it hides what is genuinely authentic African-American or white southern music, in part because the categories themselves are elusive. The aural quotations in this film are as complex as the visual and textual quotations. The soundtrack for the film has been called a “mishmash,” usually not derogatorily but merely to describe the wide variety and mixture of music and performers.

The soundtrack musicians themselves appear on screen in three of the songs: the White family sings “Keep on the Sunny Side,” and the Cox family sings “I Am Weary (Let Me Rest)” as folk performers at Homer Stokes’ rally; and the Fairfield Four sing “Lonesome Valley” as the black gravediggers, actual characters at the end of the story. Chris Thomas King, the actor who plays the black banjo player Tommy, is a real blues musician who performs “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues.” Though not a professional musician, Tim Blake Nelson is the lead singer for “In the Jailhouse Now.” In addition, the singer Gillian Welch who performs the song “Nobody but the Baby” on the track, appears on screen as an ordinary woman asking the storekeeper for the Soggy Bottom Boys’ hit. By entangling the performers with the characters in this evocative fashion, the Coens not only break the frame between life and art but also question whether there is an original or authentic version of any song or work of art.

One reviewer said about the film’s music: “nobody expected its music to go on to have so much success that it has taken on a life of its own” (Ibid). Interestingly, the album from O Brother was purchased by many who otherwise would not listen to country, bluegrass, or folk music. Such music, like the Deep South itself, has often faced the opprobrium of being seen as the epitome of the lower class by the larger American culture—a typical technique of the conqueror. Yet the music in the film was powerful enough to seduce mainstream America, possibly because music has more often than not provided a space for common interests within a world overripe with prejudice. It appears that the Coens intent is to present a case for popular music as the pomade that smooths down the “ha'ry” racial and class prejudices that exist in society.

O Brother as Folklore and Visual Literature

It becomes clear that American folklore in O Brother is its most compelling element. This is evidenced by the film’s abundant use of folklore and literature. For folklore, the theme of selling one’s soul to the devil, for example, vividly recalls the blues guitarist, Robert Johnson, who claimed to have sold his soul to get his remarkable talent, just as Tommy does in O Brother (there was a real blues musician Tommy Johnson from this era, too). Soul selling also crosses over from Johnson fable into Puritan tales, like The Devil and Daniel Webster. The movie also reminds us of several literary journeys including Mark Twain’s Huck Finn, which is revered as perhaps the quintessential odyssey in American literature, so much so that being on the road now symbolizes the free-spirited American. Black and white men join together on a journey in Twain’s tale, as they do in O Brother. The Coen brothers’ film also brings to mind images of the Joads from The Grapes of Wrath. Both John Steinbeck’s book and John Ford’s film, created in 1939 and 1940, are central to Depression era images, both then and now. The Joads are visually referenced when the three escaped convicts hitch a ride on a truck loaded up in “Okie” style; and like the Joads, these three are on the road looking for freedom and a fair deal. Erica Rowell sees the “life-buoy coffins” in the flood scene of O Brother as a reference to another American classic book turned into film—Herman Melville’s Moby Dick (254).

34. The Soundtrack pamphlet contains notes by Robert K. Oermann, a well-known music critic who often writes for the Nashville Banner. He describes the music from O Brother as a “joyous mishmash of periods and styles.”

35. Most critics who disliked O Brother still liked the music very much. In contrast, Benjamin Filene, as a cultural historian, worries that the popularity of the film’s folk songs might “relegate them to the backwaters of time or geography” so that people do not see the vitality of any folk tradition is in its constant variation and reconfiguration (68).

36. While there have been several film versions of this 19th century novel, the most famous was made in 1956 with Gregory Peck playing Captain Ahab. Mottram notes other allusions to American culture, pointing out that “Stylistically, the film resembles the work of both the socially committed photographer Dorothea Lange, and writer Eudora Welty” (155).
O Brother, as a dark comedy, also references Shakespeare by concluding the film with “All’s Well that Ends Well.” Just at the moment when Everett utters this cliché, Penny starts the conflict again by refusing the ring that he has risked death to retrieve from the flood, if only involuntarily. And while the movie on one level seems itself to have the classic ring structure, bringing all of the characters and threads together at the end, it nevertheless concludes without a resolution, as only a dark comedy can offer. The rope that ties the McGill daughters together, apparently so the little ones will not get lost, can represent positive family ties as well as marriage chains (they certainly refigure the chain gang from the opening sequence).37

On one level, O Brother presents itself as a light-hearted frolic made simply for fun, but there is a melancholic and serious thread running throughout. The “Man of Constant Sorrow” is in constant counterpoint with “You Are My Sunshine.” This playful movement between entertainment and social awareness returns us to the two strands of critical interest in cultural memory referenced earlier. Whether we are examining O Brother as an example of the way minorities need to reclaim cultural memories to define their own identities, or whether we are enjoying the film as a masterfully funny pastiche, the film allows us to participate in the on-going remaking of folk histories.38

Works Cited


Homer Meets the Coen Brothers: Memory as Artistic Pastiche in *O Brothers: Where Art Thou?*


