

Deception and Detection: The Trickster Archetype in the film, *The Big Lebowski*, and its Cult Following

by William A. Ashton and Barbara A. Ashton

A scene towards the end of the film *The Big Lebowski (TBL)* unmistakably illustrates the connection between the trickster and detective work. The comedy film describes the travails of *the Dude*, whose outsider life is concerned with three things: drinking White Russians, smoking marijuana, and bowling. The Dude accidentally becomes involved in a kidnapping and the seedy world of pornography producers and actors, thugs, loan sharks and violent German nihilists. The Dude is propelled along with the events of the kidnapping by outside forces while his only concern is to get back to bowling. The story has been described as, “a 1940s Raymond Chandler whodunit on acid (Yost, 2003).”

At one point, thugs working for Jackie Treehorn, a pornography producer, have abducted the Dude (Coen & Coen, 1998, 1:15:40). Treehorn questions the Dude about a missing woman, and then is interrupted by a phone call. Treehorn takes the call, writes down something on a pad of paper, tears off the top sheet and leaves the room. Now alone in the room, the Dude examines the notepad, picks up a pencil and begins to rub its point on the notepad in an attempt to trace the writing on Treehorn’s sheet. I think: *finally, the Dude is acting like a detective! I actually feel a sense of relief after watching the Dude sleepwalk through the mystery for so long.* And what did the Dude detect? While talking on the phone, Treehorn doodled a human torso with an enormous penis (Rowell, 2007, p. 350). The Dude has essentially found the Trickster’s calling card (i.e. a large penis, Hynes, 1993, P. 43).

Themes of the trickster archetype are prevalent throughout the *TBL* and these themes are also associated with the film’s fan following, *the Lebowski cult*, which developed four years after the film was released and has grown in popularity over time. While general trickster themes pervade the film, the theme of deception and the detection of deception unite the film with the fan following. Specifically, in the film itself, antagonists attempt to deceive others while the protagonists attempt to detect this deception. As an instance of Jungian synchronicity, the Lebowski cult has grown in popularity as the United State’s culture has become more deceptive and Americans have more of a need to detect deception.

The Lebowski Cult

The film, written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, opened in the spring of 1998 to mixed reviews (Travers, 1998). Four years after the film was released, a cult following for the film had grown large enough for the first fan convention, the *Lebowski fest* (Green, Peskoe, Russell & Scott; 2007; Hodgkinson, 2005; Stone, 2005). This cult following is still strong ten years after the film was released (Lebowski Fest, n.d. B; Robertson, 2006). Lebowski fests are held in about a dozen cities each year (Green et al., 2007, pp. 168-188) drawing attendees who number in the thousands (with one fan traveling from Singapore to the New York City Lebowski fest; Kesner, 2004). Articles on the Lebowski fests have appeared in newspapers, such as the *New York Times* (Edelstein, 2004) and the *Wall Street Journal* (Yost, 2003). Many internet sites sell

t-shirts and action figures related to the film (e.g. Viscosity Clothing Company, 2008). Such t-shirts are simply quotes from *TBL*: “That rug tied the whole room together, man.”, “Hey, careful, man, there's a beverage here!”, or “I Don't Roll On Shabbas.” In reference to the *Little Lebowski Urban Achievers*, cultists wear green t-shirts with the word *achiever* stenciled on the chest. At one point, a large group of cultists wore these shirts on the game show, *The Price is Right*, and one cultist was chosen to play the game (Green, et al., 2007; Lebowski Fest, n.d. A).

A *Big Lebowski* academic conference in 2006 was sponsored by the University of Louisville and Indiana University (Green et al., 2007; Morgenstern, 2006). The conference, entitled, *The Lebowski Cult: An Academic Symposium*, was held in a Louisville bowling alley and featured papers on scholarly topics *a la* Lebowski, such as Lacan, Freud, information-seeking, ritual and masculinity (Green et al., 2007, pp. 164-165).

What is it about *TBL* which could spark such interest years after the movie was released? In examining the film itself, we see that two thematic elements were intentionally placed in the film: a homage to the Raymond Chandler story, *The Big Sleep*, and the Gulf War.

The Story: a Whodoneit on Acid.

In one of the few interviews the Coens gave about *TBL*, Joel said, regarding the Chandler/*Big Sleep* theme of the story they, “wanted to do a Chandler kind of story - how it moves episodically, and deals with the characters trying to unravel a mystery. As well as having a hopelessly complex plot that's ultimately unimportant (Stone, 1998).”

The complex and unimportant plot involves the protagonist named Jeffrey Lebowski -- but called the Dude -- a potbellied hippy living in Los Angeles. Returning to his apartment, the Dude discovers two thugs who demand money they believe he owes to a “Mr Treehorn” (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:03:48). They physically intimate the Dude and one thug urinates on the Dude's living room rug. The thugs realize that they have the wrong Jeffrey Lebowski and leave.

The Dude goes to confront the other Jeffrey Lebowski¹, the intended target of the thugs. Jeffrey Lebowski appears to be a wealthy, philanthropic, stanch conservative war hero. Jeffrey Lebowski does not compensate the Dude for his rug, but the Dude's initiative creates two outcomes: first, the Dude is able to steal a rug from Jeffrey Lebowski's mansion and, second, Jeffrey Lebowski asks the Dude to act as the ransom courier when Jeffrey Lebowski's young wife, Bunny, is kidnapped a few days later.

The Dude's bowling buddy, Walter, talks the Dude into taking him along on the ransom drop, and then bullies the Dude into making the drop according to his own plans. Walter's plan is to surprise the kidnapers, find Bunny (by “beating it out” of the kidnapers) and then keep the ransom money. The plan fails and the kidnapers do not receive the ransom. Walter and the Dude's response is, “fuck it, let's go bowling (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:37:12).” While bowling, the Dude's car, with Jeffrey Lebowski's ransom money, is stolen.

Meanwhile, the Dude's initiative of stealing the rug bears another outcome: the rug the Dude stole from Jeffrey Lebowski's mansion had sentimental value to Jeffrey Lebowski's adult daughter, Maude. Maude and her assistants retrieve her rug from the Dude's apartment, and then

Maude phones the Dude and asks him to visit her. During the visit, Maude tells the Dude that her step-mother, Bunny, is a porn actress (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:35:40). In a later meeting, Maude expresses her belief that Bunny was not kidnapped and that Bunny's porn co-star, Uli, is just pretending to be the kidnapper (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:02:40).

Jeffrey Lebowski tracks down the Dude and confronts the Dude about the ransom drop. Trying to be evasive, the Dude suggests that Bunny kidnapped herself to get money to pay off her debts. In response, Jeffrey Lebowski shows the Dude a severed toe he has received from the kidnappers. Jeffrey Lebowski tells the Dude that he has told the kidnappers that they can get their money from the Dude (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:52:39). The Dude's response is to take a bubble bath (surrounded by candles) and smoke marijuana. During the bath, the kidnappers (led by Uli) break into the Dude's apartment and threaten the Dude (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:55:30).

The police find the Dude's car but not the missing ransom money. After dropping a lit marijuana cigarette butt onto the upholstery of his car, the Dude discovers a student's history exam stuck in the seat. The Dude and Walter pay the student a visit hoping to find the money, but that leads to a dead end. (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:12:00).

Maude shows up in the Dude's apartment to have sex with the Dude (the Dude happily consents). We learn that Maude arranged their first meeting to evaluate the Dude's qualities for a special purpose of hers: she wishes to have a baby and selected the Dude because he is unlikely to wish to share in the rearing of the child. During this assignation Maude reiterates that her father is not wealthy and is living off her mother's money, which she partially controls (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:30:35).

Finally, with the information supplied by Maude, the Dude thinks he has solved the mystery. Jeffrey Lebowski, living on a stipend controlled by his daughter, would have been unable to raise a ransom. Therefore, the briefcase given to the Dude from the Big Lebowski was a fake and Jeffrey Lebowski wanted the kidnappers to kill Bunny (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:35:26). The Dude is only partially correct: Bunny shows up at Jeffrey Lebowski's mansion after returning from Palm Springs. The film ends as the Dude is drinking at the bowling lane's bar looking forward to bowling in the league semi-finals.

In order to understand the synchronistic connections to the Lebowski cult we will need to review the film's Gulf War theme.

The Gulf War

The Coen Brothers admitted that the film is about the Gulf War:

IndieWire: What's the attraction of setting the film specifically in 1991?

Ethan: Well, setting the film during the Gulf War was an opportunity to have Walter gas about something-

Joel: That's the main reason. (Stone, 1998).

This may make the Gulf War seem like a very trivial theme in the story. However, this statement must be taken in context; the brothers are being quixotic during this interview. For example,

immediately after saying this Joel adds, “because just what is present day?” At another point in the interview, Ethan, a former Princeton philosophy major, when asked for his philosophy on filmmaking answered, “Oooh-I don't have one. I wouldn't even know how to begin. You've stumped me there. None that I've noticed. Drawing a blank on this one.” And at other points of the interview, the Coens refuse to answer questions because they consider the questions, “not interesting.”

Comer (2005) builds an excellent argument in support of the Gulf War as the underlying theme of *TBL*. At the beginning of the film the narrator sets the time of film by stating that, “it was around the time of our problems with that Saddam fellow (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:02:18).” To cement the time setting, 30 seconds later we see a television playing President G. W. H. Bush's speech, “This will not stand ... This aggression against Kuwait.”

The setting of the Gulf War appears integral to the main theme in the movie. During the introduction of the Dude, the narrator states that the Dude was, “a man for his time (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:02:40)”, and then identifies the time as the Gulf War. In the third scene of the movie, when the Dude is ruminating about his ruined rug, his friend Walter characterizes his advice by quoting another G. W. H. Bush Gulf War speech, “draw a line in the sand (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:08:40).” One scene later, when the Dude has his first meeting with Jeffrey Lebowski, the Dude characterizes his own motives by repeating the Bush line from the beginning of the movie, “This will not stand, you know. This aggression will not stand, man (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:13:53).” As if not to let us forget this theme, towards the end of the film, Saddam Hussein is featured (in a dream sequence) working the shoe rental counter at a bowling alley (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:21:20). This appearance links the Gulf War theme to the ubiquitous bowling theme in the movie.

Comer (2005) sees *TBL* as attempting to think through the problem of the violence of the Gulf War, and assimilate this wartime violence into our national myth. However, there is evidence that *TBL* is not just a working through of violence as Comer suggests but a protest to the violence. While the Dude is unemployed and without a career, his one claim to fame is his protest activities as a college student: the Dude was one of the authors of *the Port Huron Statement* and a member of the original Seattle Seven (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:28:06). Both references are to actual events and groups from the 1960's and 1970's radical left (Dowd, n.d.; Haden & Flacks, 2002; Smith, 2000; University of Washington Libraries, n.d.). At another point in the film, the Dude states that while in college he spent most of his time occupying various administration buildings and breaking into the ROTC (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:11:48). The Dude is identified as an anti-war radical. We can conclude that *TBL* is, as Comer suggests, about the Gulf War, and about protesting war.

Border Wars and Breaking Boundaries

Given that both the Coens state that a theme in the film was the Gulf War and on the strength of Comer's (2005) analysis, we can conclude that the Gulf War is a major theme of *TBL*. Whether intentionally or not on the part of the Coens, the theme of the Gulf War is one opportunity which allows the trickster archetype to find expression in the film.

The trickster is a boundary dweller and a breaker of boundaries (Doty & Hynes, 1993, p. 19-20) and the Gulf War was a border war begun by a border crossing (F. Lewis, 1990). Thus, the

theme of the Gulf War, which was a major theme of the film, is about boundary crossing – the purview of the trickster. While Comer (2005) states that a theme in *TBL* is the Gulf War, it would be more correct to say that this theme is about the beginning of the war (Bush's speech places the action of the film after the invasion of Kuwait but before the war to liberate Kuwait). Thus, the Gulf War theme is more of a theme of Iraq's border crossing.

While the association of the Gulf War theme with border crossing and border crossing with the trickster archetype may be a tenuous set of links, *TBL* contains strong examples of archetypal trickster border crossing. Specifically, examples of boundaries being broken in trickster ways (e.g. breaking taboos and customs) and examples of people who live on the fringe of our society appear throughout *TBL*.

The protagonist of the film, the Dude, is truly a boundary dweller who lives on the edge of our society. During our introduction to the Dude, he is shopping in a supermarket dressed in a t-shirt, shorts, flip-flops and a bathrobe. His hair and beard are long and unkempt. It is night and he is wearing sunglasses (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:02:18). When Jeffrey Lebowsky asks the Dude if he is employed, the Dude responds, "Employed?" as if surprised or confused by the question (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:13:10). The Dude's car is rust covered and his apartment is mostly empty space. The Dude describes his life as driving around, bowling and having acid flashbacks (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:29:00).

The Dude lives in the liminal world of the Trickster. One of the most salient broken boundaries, however, is in the nature of the story itself.

The most salient broken boundary in the film is that of the narrator. The film begins with a cowboy band playing the song, "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" as we see a tumbleweed blown across a desert setting. The tumbleweed tops a rise and we see modern day Los Angeles (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:01:30). As the music continues and we see the tumbleweed blow through empty Los Angeles streets, the narrator begins to set up the story. The narrator, from his speech and use of words, is identified as a cowboy. Ethan Coen admits that the choice of the cowboy narrator is a boundary crossing: "The Western theme's just another thing that has nothing to do with anything but just seemed right next to the other things (Robertson, 1998, p.44)." As Ethan Coen further explained, "We always like those devices – narration, voice-over. Also it's a Marlow thing, since all the Chandler novels are told in his first-person narration. But it would be too corny just to have the Dude narrating, you know (Robertson, 1998, p.44)?" More boundary crossing occurs when the narrator appears in scenes with the Dude. Sam Elliot plays the narrator and is dressed as an old-fashion western cowboy. The presence of a cowboy in a modern Los Angeles bowling lane is never explained. It is an anachronism treated as normal. This is an example of the *trickster narrative* (Doueïhi, 1993; Rowland, 2006). Doueïhi (1993) holds that the features we commonly ascribe to the trickster – contradictoriness, complexity, deceptiveness, trickery – can also be features of the language of the story itself. The purpose of this is to open our minds to spontaneous transformations of reality that may allow us to see the world in an open and creative way.

Similar to the boundary living and crossing described above, but more concrete, is the violation of sexual and excretory taboos. Just as the trickster is impelled to violate all taboos sexual or scatological (Hynes, 1993, p. 42), *TBL* is similarly driven.

TBL is famous for its use of sexual language. Martin & Renegar (2007) report that the word “fuck” and its variants are used 281 times in the film. In a one minute scene, Walter screams, “This is what happens when you fuck a stranger in the ass, Larry,” over seven times (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:11:53). At their first meeting, Bunny Lebowski propositions the Dude by saying, “I’ll suck your cock for a thousand dollars (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:16:02).” Maude’s first exchange with the Dude is, “My art has been commended as being strongly vaginal. Which bothers some men. The word itself make some men uncomfortable. ... Vagina.” In her next line, Maude refers to the male organ as a rod, dick or Johnson (Coen & Coen, 1998, 02:02:40). During a one minute scene, the Dude’s rug is referred to have been peed, urinated, pissed, or micturated upon seven times (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:12:18).

The penis and the detached penis are common trickster themes (Hynes, 1993) and are themes in *TBL*. As described in the introduction, when the Dude attempts to detect what Treehorn has written on his notepad, the Dude finds a drawing of a human torso with an enormous penis. A minor role (Green et al., 2007, p. 42) in the film is a bowling rival of the protagonists named Jesus Quintana. The actor wears a “huge codpiece (Green, et al., 2007, p. 42)” and a skintight jumpsuit in the movie. In another scene Quintana suggestively polishes his bowling ball (holding it in front of his crotch) and then erotically licks the ball (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:29:45). This is not the only time bowling equipment represents male sexual anatomy. In the Dude’s micky-induced dream two bowling balls and one bowling pin are positioned to mimic testicles and a penis (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:18:17). Finally, a recurring theme is of the Dude’s penis in danger of being cut or bitten off. One scene begins with the kidnappers throwing a marmot into the Dude’s bathtub (at groin level) and ends with the kidnappers threatening to cut off the Dude’s Johnson (which the German kidnappers pronounce as ‘Chohnson’). Later, during the Dude’s dream, the Dude is chased by the kidnappers with oversized scissors (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:23:26).

Lastly, regarding breaking taboos, themes of defecation and urination are ever prevalent. The driving force of the film is the Dude seeking redress for his urine-stained rug (Green et al., 2007; Robertson1998). In addition, a vagrant used the Dude’s stolen car as a toilet (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:56:52), and Treehorn’s thugs repeatedly shoved the Dude’s head into a toilet.

The setting of *TBL* is the Gulf War and by association, the setting is one of boundaries and the breaking of boundaries. The main character is a boundary dweller, the narrative itself plays jokes on us, and dirty talk fills the narrative. This alone would be enough to state confidently that *TBL* embodies the trickster archetype. However, the cast of *TBL* is a host of tricksters.

Deceivers and Detectives

All of the main characters in *TBL* are tricksters. They are tricksters in the sense that they are deceiving others or they are the two fool-detectives, Walter and the Dude, who are attempting (in spite of themselves) to detect the deceptions.

The antagonists of *TBL* are trickster-deceivers. Jeffrey Lebowski conveys the impression of a self-made millionaire, but he is living on his deceased wife's fortune (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:30:00). It is also unclear what his motives and actions are in attempting to secure the release of his wife, Bunny, from the kidnappers. Did he actually give the Dude one-million dollars or was the case empty of money? Fawn Knutson (a.k.a. Bunny Lebowski) was hiding in L. A. from her parents in Minnesota (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:33:35) and most likely hiding her career as an actress in pornographic movies from her husband. Uli, the "kidnapper," was attempting to extort ransom money from Jeffrey Lebowski even though Uli was not holding Bunny prisoner. He went as far as to cut off a female friend's toe to trick Jeffrey Lebowski (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:35:05). Finally, Maude Lebowski tricked the Dude into conceiving a child with her. It is not surprising that many characters in *TBL* are trickster/deceivers. *TBL* is a mystery/detective story and without deceivers, there would be no need to detect.

If a mystery needs deceivers, then it also needs detectives. In *TBL*, the role of detective falls on Walter and the Dude. One of the strongest embodiments of the trickster archetype in the film is the undifferentiated, primal trickster-like qualities of the two main characters, the Dude and Walter. Individually, the Dude and Walter are the undifferentiated fools and together they make up the archetypal pair of fools.

We first see the Dude when he is shopping (in his bathrobe) for half-and-half for his White Russians. Dress is not the only social convention he ignores in this scene: he casually opens cartons of half-and-half and tastes it. When he finally goes to the check out of the store, he has half-and-half on his mustache (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:03:15). It seems that the Dude does not intend to insult others with his flaunting of social convention but this is due to the Dude's overwhelmingly passive nature (as also noted by Comer, 2005). Thus, the Dude's border crossing is motivated by his laziness (Martin & Renegar, 2007, p. 307) or we could say lack of self-consciousness, a characteristic of the trickster (Jung, 1969, p. 143).

Another trait of the trickster exhibited by the Dude is that of situation-inversion (Hynes, 1993, p. 37). The Dude is able to invert power hierarchies and switch from being powerless to powerful (Martin & Renegar, 2007, pp. 306-307). When meeting Jeffrey Lebowski, the Dude introduces himself as "His Dudeness or El Duderino." Thus, the deadbeat Lebowski is elevating himself with royal titles when with the millionaire Lebowski. At two points in the film the Dude awkwardly uses the phrase, "the royal we." As another form of power equalization, instead of showing respect by use of the term, "Sir," the Dude liberally peppers his speech with the word, "man." He uses this term when speaking to everyone, including police officers, Jeffrey Lebowski and the chief of police. By use of this language, the Dude is constantly deflating power and equalizing status differentials. Finally, in the Dude's second dream, Saddam Hussein gives the Dude a pair of silver and gold bowling shoes. The world leader is now the servant to the Dude who receives shoes made of precious metals.

The other undifferentiated fool, Walter, is also a situation-inverter but in a much different way. Walter is unable to keep his anger under control (Comer, 2005, p. 112) and turns many normal situations into abnormal or dangerous situations. For example, in response to a scoring disagreement in a bowling game, Walter pulls a gun on fellow bowler (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:18:01) and in response to a waitress' comment about his cursing Walter brings up the issue of

patriotic freedom and that his friends died in the muck in Vietnam (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:53:50). While the Dude lacks self-consciousness due to his passive nature, Walter seems to lack self-consciousness due to his anger issues.

Thus, the Dude (the passive pacifist) and Walter (the Vietnam veteran with anger issues) make an unlikely pair. In fact, the Dude and Walter together are a classic pair of fools (Willeford, 1969, pp.39-40), which illustrates the trickster's oppositional nature (Hynes, 1993, p. 34; Levi-Strauss, 1963, p. 224).

Walter and the Dude's only common interest seem to be bowling, but beyond that, Walter and the Dude are close friends. When something happens the Dude first calls Walter (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:31:00) and they know intimate details of each other's lives (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:17:17; 01:36:40). A perfect illustration of the oppositional nature of the pair of fools is the ransom drop scene (Coen & Coen, 1998, 00:32:20). In this scene, the Dude calls Walter with the intention (we assume) of Walter assisting him with the ransom drop while Walter enters the scene with the intention of manipulating the situation so that they can keep the ransom for themselves. As their car comes closer to the drop point, both are talking past each other because both assume a different plan. It is unclear from the film whether Walter's plan was doomed to fail due to Walter's incompetence or failed because of the lack of coordination between the pair of fools.

The Dude and Walter, the pair of fools, working against and off each other, drive much of the plot of *TBL*. For example, Walter talks the Dude into going to Jeffrey Lebowski to demand a replacement rug, which sets the story and mystery in motion. Walter's involvement with the ransom drop keeps the story open and ongoing. The Dude and Walter, individually, are barely conscious; and, together, are opposites that often cancel each other out. These two characteristics are what lead to their downfall when they attempt to act as detectives.

Through most of *TBL*, the Dude and Walter, the pair of fools, sleepwalk through the mystery. However, there are four instances when these tricksters attempt to take the initiative and act as detectives. These four scenes are very representative of the mystery genre -- attempting to outsmart kidnapers, interrogating a suspect, searching for clues, and confronting and exposing a deceiver. However, in each of these cases, the fool's initiative leads to either disaster or nothing. The Dude only solves the mystery with clues obtained as byproducts of his appetites and self-interests.

The first disaster comes when the pair of fools attempt the ransom drop, in this scene, their oppositional motives (or possibly Walter's lack of self-awareness of his own abilities) lead to disaster. One consequence of the botched ransom drop is the second scene when the fools try to act like detectives, during their visit to little Larry's house. Walter is able to track down the student who left his exam in the Dude's car and again plans to act proactively and recover the stolen ransom. Walter dresses in a shirt and tie and, with the Dude, visits the student's house. In front of the house, they see a new Corvette that Walter incorrectly assumes the boy bought with the money stolen from the Dude's car. Walter and the Dude present themselves in a way that causes Larry's mother to assume that they are police officers. The pair then begin to question Larry. Walter opens up his briefcase and pulls out the homework, in a clear plastic bag, and asks

him, “Is this your homework, Larry?” Larry stares mutely. Walter questions Larry repeatedly with again no response from Larry. Walter announces that “it’s time for Plan B” and leaves the house, takes a tire iron from the Dude’s car and begins to destroy the Corvette parked outside the house, all the while yelling, “This is what happens when you fuck a stranger in the ass!” A neighbor comes running to protect his new Corvette and proceeds to attack the Dude’s car in retaliation. Walter and the Dude leave with no new information on the missing money.

Both of these two scenes could have appeared in traditional detective stories. If Walter would have questioned Larry once, realized that this was a “cold lead,” and left, then the scene would have fit perfectly in a traditional mystery. If Walter would have only taken one or two swings at the Corvette, noticed that Larry was unmoved by this method of persuasion and left (perhaps Larry is a *hardboiled character*), then again this scene would have fit perfectly into a traditional mystery. What makes these scenes comedy and not mystery is the repetition of Walter’s lines. The line, “Is this your homework, Larry,” appears over eight times in one minute and Walter yells, “This is what happens when you fuck a stranger in the ass!” over seven times in the same time period. A detective should persevere on a case, but Walter’s foolish lack of self-awareness (of others’ responses and his own abilities) creates comedy.

The third situation, where the fool attempts to act as a detective, is described in the introduction. Left alone, the Dude attempts to trace the notes Treehorn took on a notepad during a phone conversation. This is the one situation where the detective/fool does not cause disaster. The detective is very conscious of what they should be doing. However, this is the exception that proves the rule: how will the Trickster respond when the fool acts wise? The Trickster himself directly intervenes and plays a joke on the fool who is trying to be a detective.

Finally, the Dude and Walter go to confront Jeffrey Lebowski with their guesses concerning the ransom money that Jeffrey Lebowski may or may not have given the Dude. This could have been a traditional mystery denouement from Chandler, Hammett, Doyle or Christie. The Dude accuses Jeffrey Lebowski:

You thought Bunny'd been kidnapped and you could use it as a pretext to make some money disappear. All you needed was a sap to pin it on, and you'd just met me. You thought, hey, a deadbeat, a loser, someone the square community won't give a shit about. (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:37:37).

Jeffrey Lebowski then agrees with the Dude by saying, “Well? Aren’t you?” Jeffrey Lebowski has been caught in his lies and in mystery-story fashion admits to his crime.

If this were the end of the scene, it could have been a classic denouement from the mystery genre. However, Walter’s foolish lack of self-awareness and inability to control his anger again leads to failure and comedy. Walter rages against Jeffrey Lebowski and accuses him of being a phony millionaire and a phony paraplegic. Walter then pulls Jeffrey Lebowski out of his wheelchair, Jeffrey Lebowski then falls to the floor and cries (Coen & Coen, 1998, 01:39:01). While the Dude was correct in his accusations and thus gained the initiative, Walter’s incorrect assumption embarrassed the pair and squandered the initiative.

If the fool's intentional actions lead to failure or he is tricked himself, then how does the fool solve the mystery? In the Dude's case, it is through the unintentional consequences of his selfish actions. For example, his self-centered act of going to see Jeffrey Lebowski with the expectation of demanding a new rug is what ensures the Dude's involvement in the rest of the mystery. In addition, stealing the rug from Jeffrey Lebowski's mansion leads to his meetings with Maude Lebowski. During these meetings, the Dude learns of Jeffrey Lebowski's lack of wealth and dissatisfaction with Bunny. This information allows the Dude to develop what may be an accurate guess as to what was going on.

After the failed ransom drop, the Dude and Walter selfishly go bowling. This leads to the kidnapers sending the toe to Jeffrey Lebowski, who then forces the Dude into continuing his involvement in the mystery and thus the motivation for the trip to little Larry's house. The Dude, in attempting to simultaneously drive and smoke marijuana finds Larry's school work and gives the fools the means of finding little Larry.

Throughout *TBL*, we see the characteristics of the trickster archetype: in the Gulf War/border crossing theme, in the background elements of the story, in the transgression of social taboos and in the characters themselves. This theme also extends to the Lebowski Cult. In order to describe this connection, we must return to the Gulf War.

Synchronicity and the Lebowski Cult: Two Wars with Iraq

One theoretical approach to the trickster is that it is a Jungian archetype (Jung, 1969) and thus may serve as the focus of synchronistic events. According to Jung, synchronicities occur when archetypes in the collective unconscious come into play and provide meaningful connections between acausal events (Jung, 1971). Since archetypes in the collective unconscious exist outside of time, synchronous events may appear in unusual time sequences, as if one event *predicts* another. While one might describe such an occurrence as *precognition* it is not, because the term precognition implies a causal chain of events.

TBL was written in the early 1990's during the Clinton administration. This was a prosperous time for the American economy and the United States was in no large scale military conflicts (Comer, 2005). And yet, during this time period the Coen brothers decided to write a film script set during, about and critical of (Martin & Renegar, 2007, p. 301) the Gulf War. *TBL* then spawns a cult following four years after its release (the first Lebowski fest was held on October 12, 2002; Green et al., 2007, p. 3). The presence of this cult following four years after the film was released suggests that the film resonated with people at that time. The beginning of the Lebowski cult coincides with the build up to the Iraqi War. Is this coincidence or synchronicity?

In order to answer this question, I must describe the Gulf and Iraq wars. These descriptions are general characterizations of the wars and I do not intend to draw definitive conclusions about the wars. In addition, my intention is to be descriptive of how some Americans view the two wars and not to proscriptively espouse a political point of view.

The Gulf War (1990-1991) was undertaken in direct response to Iraq's invasion of its southern neighbor, Kuwait. Thus, the Gulf War was generally seen as justified and was conducted with support from the United Nations (P. Lewis, 1990). The Gulf War was fought with less than 300

American lives lost and at a cost of \$61 to \$71 billion (CNN, 2001). As of April 2008, costs of the Iraq War tally to (2003- present) 4,058 American dead and in March of 2008 the Pentagon placed the to-date cost at \$600 billion (Herszenhorn, 2008).

The rationale for waging the Iraq War has been significantly criticized. The Iraq War Resolution (H. Res. 114, 2002), after being approved by the House of Representatives and Senate, was signed into law on October 16, 2002 (two days after the first Lebowsky fest) by President G. W. Bush. This resolution authorized force against Iraq for several reasons, including the threat to the U.S. posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program and that Iraq was harboring known members of al-Qaeda. However, the CIA's Iraq Survey Group concluded that even though Saddam Hussein had intentions to build weapons of mass destruction, he did not have the chance to do so (Borger, 2004; MSNBC, 2005). Regarding the second issue, members of the 9/11 commission (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks enpaneled by President G. W. Bush) found "no credible evidence" that Iraq was involved in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda hijackers, and they concluded that there was "no collaborative relationship" between Iraq and Osama bin Laden (CNN.com, 2004; Pincus & Milbank, 2004).

The above inconsistencies between fact and White House Policy may have been due to honest mistakes. However, in 2005, the *Downing Street Memo* was leaked to the press (Pincus & Milbank, 2005). This memo, from British intelligence to Prime Minister Blair, dated July 23, 2002 said that, "Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy." If the validity of the *Downing Street Memo* is to be accepted, then one can conclude that the Bush White House deceived the American people into supporting the Iraq War. Many individuals and organizations have made such conclusions (e.g. Center for Public Integrity, n.d.; Conyers, 2005; Iraq Veterans Against the War, 2008). To summarize this view of the rationale for the Iraq War, the Bush Administration deceived the public with false information in order to obtain the public's compliance.

Which war is symbolized in *TBL*? Jeffrey Lebowsky, who bears a resemblance to Dick Cheney (Martin & Renegar, 2007, p. 301), lies to the Dude to gain the Dude's compliance. This deception on Jeffrey Lebowsky's part is staged for personal gain. *TBL* bears more of a resemblance to the Iraq War than the Gulf War. In both *TBL* and the Iraq War, evidence was created and falsehoods told in order to deceive and manipulate people. Since 2002 (the beginning of the deception about the Iraq War and the first Lebowsky Fest) America has been, as the Dude is, struggling against and becoming cognizant of deceptions that powerful others have imposed upon us.

We must assume that the Coens had no knowledge of the future and that they were writing a film based upon the Gulf War. However, with the trickster involved with their script (the deceivers in the story, the pair of fools, the other references to trickster qualities) the Coens had opened the door to Trickster. With this archetype in play, synchronicity could have crafted a story more appropriate to a future war, than the war the Coens intended.

The Lebowsky cult's existence and the reason the cult flourished four years after the movie was released is that *TBL* became meaningful during the build up to and the waging of the Iraq War –

events which are thematically described in *TBL*. Jeffery Lebowski, a Dick Cheney look-a-like and conservative Republican, deceives others so they will act for his benefit. The Coens -- by the coincidence of combining the elements of a story set during the Gulf War, a Chandler-like mystery story of deceivers and detectives, and the war-protester character of the Dude -- produced a film that held more meaning for a future audience than the audience that existed when they wrote and made the film. This future audience would be an audience that would need to detect the deception of a trickster in the context of a war with Iraq.

Conclusions

The two common themes connecting *TBL* and the Lebowski cult are deception and the detection of deception, and a war with Iraq. Connecting these two themes across the film and the fan cult is the trickster-archetype inspired synchronicity. In the center of all of this is the Dude. Recall that the Dude was a war protester in college, an author of the *Port Huron Statement* and a member of the Seattle Seven (the Seattle Eight; Dowd, n.d.; who were arrested and served sentences for their part in an anti-Vietnam War protest). The *Port Huron Statement* is the founding manifesto of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) from which the “authentic spirit of the Sixties radicalism issued (Haden & Flacks, 2002, p. 18).” In writing a fortieth anniversary retrospective on the document, the main authors of the *Port Huron Statement*, Tom Haden and Dick Flacks (2002), begin the essay by referring to *TBL* and say:

We don't remember the “dude” being there, but it's gratifying that the founding manifesto ... still lives on in the nostalgia and imagination of so many (p. 18).

About the *Statement* itself, they write:

Like today, 1962 was a time when many students were waking up, but the vast majority were smothered in apathy. We couldn't resist ... war ... without first piercing this freezing indifference bred by affluence [and] conformity (p. 19).

Thus, *TBL* identifies the Dude with the early stages of the Sixties' protest movement and a document that addressed the nation's apathy towards the war. Due to the Iraq War, the nation is in a similar situation of war and public apathy. And as Hayden and Flacks say, *TBL* has placed (in name, at least) the *Port Huron Statement* in the minds of our current generation.

Following the trickster archetype in *TBL* has led us on a wide-ranging journey from the Iraq War to *The Big Sleep*. Looking ahead, I would like to address two areas of future interest, the trickster and detective, and the Lebowski cult.

Radin warns us that in viewing the trickster we must be careful:

The impression one gets in perusing these various trickster cycles is that one must distinguish carefully between his consciously willed creative activities and the benefactions that comes to mankind incidentally and accidentally through the Trickster's activities (Radin, 1972, p. 125).

I feel that applying Radin's remarks to the detective clearly summarizes my view on the trickster and the detective in *TBL*:

One must distinguish carefully between the trickster's consciously willed detection and the clues that come accidentally through the trickster's foolishness.

I have described how the Dude and Walter, our trickster-detectives, were incompetent at finding clues in the mystery and how intentional plans to manipulate the situation led to utter disaster. The Dude was able to solve the mystery only as an accidental outcome of his own desires.

This view of the trickster-detective from *TBL* suggests an intriguing question. *TBL* is a comedy based upon a classic mystery novel (*The Big Sleep*). What elements of my analysis are due to the film being a comedy and which elements are due to the film's basic narrative structure (a mystery)? For example, in the classic detective story *TBL* is based upon, *The Big Sleep* (Chandler, 1988), Marlow is hired to help Carmen but in the end discovers that she probably killed Regan. Carmen loses her mind and is placed in an institution. Thus, the result is not helpful to Carmen. In another classic detective story, *The Maltese Falcon* (Hammett, 1989), the bird statue is a fake. Thus, we see that these non-comic detectives are tricked by their cases and that the detectives' initiatives often lead to useless or counter-intended ends. Is Marlow a fool-detective also? Such questions are beyond the scope of a paper on *TBL*.

The Lebowski cult has grown in scope, popularity and scale since its beginning in 2002. Why? My answer is because of the synchronistic connections between *TBL* and the Iraq War, the film resonates with the zeitgeist. There is another answer to this question, *TBL* contains elements of carnival (Martin & Renegar, 2007) and thus lends itself to the carnival-like activities at a Lebowski fest. At Lebowski fests people drink White Russians, dress up in costumes and dance. While not officially part of the 2002 Lebowski fest, the first fest was held at a bowling lane located amid strip clubs (Green et al., 2007, p. 168). However, this theory does not explain why it took four years for the carnival to catch on. The Iraq War/Synchronicity theory offered in this paper fits the timing of events much better and is more meaningful.

A second possible approach to the Lebowski cult is empirical. Over the last decade, some researchers have published empirical articles on fan cults. For example, Obst, Zinkiewicz & Smith (2002) examined the psychological sense of community among science fiction fandom at *Aussiecon 3*. Such an examination of the Lebowski fandom may be interesting. Or, a study related to this paper's interests could empirically examine Lebowski fans' political attitudes. Are Lebowski fans more wary of being deceived by the government and do they hold more negative attitudes about the Iraq War than non-fans? Are they more likely to protest the war? Such an empirical approach may detect whether Lebowski cultists are just there for the party (carnival) or if they are there to seek the fellowship of others who wish to drink White Russians, bowl and wake up to our culture's apathy towards the Iraq War.

References

- Borger, J. (October 7, 2004). There were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. *The Guardian*. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/oct/07/usa.iraq1>
- Center for Public Integrity (n.d.) *Iraq – The war card*. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from <http://www.publicintegrity.org/WarCard/>
- Chandler, R. (1988). *The big sleep*. NY, NY: Vintage. (Original published 1939).
- Coen, J. (Writer/Director), & Coen, E. (Writer). (1998). *The Big Lebowski* [Motion Picture]. United States: Polygram Filmed Entertainment.
- Comer, T. (2005). This aggression will not stand: Myth, war, and ethics in *The Big Lebowski*. *Substance: A Review of Theory & Literary Criticism*, 34(2), 98-117.
- Conyers, J. (June 6, 2005). Did Bush deliberately deceive America about Iraq? *Counterpunch*. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from <http://www.counterpunch.org/conyers06062005.html>
- CNN (2001). *In-depth specials –Gulf War*. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/gulf.war/facts/gulfwar/>
- CNN.com (June 18, 2004). *Cheney blasts media on al Qaeda-Iraq link*. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from <http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/06/18/cheney.iraq.al.qaeda/>
- Doty, W. G. & Hynes, W. J. (1993). Historical overview of theoretical issues: The problems of the trickster. In W. J. Hynes & W. G. Doty (Eds.), *Mythical trickster figures: Contours, contexts, and criticisms* (pp. 13-32). Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Doueihi, A. (1993). Inhabiting the space between discourse and story in trickster narratives. In W. J. Hynes & W. G. Doty (Eds.), *Mythical trickster figures: Contours, contexts, and criticisms* (pp. 193-201). Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Dowd, A. (n.d.). Who is the real conspiracy? *Vietnam War Era Ephemera Collection*. Retrieved on July 8, 2008 from <http://content.lib.washington.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/protests&CISOPT R=378&REC=20>
- Edelstein, D. (August 8, 2004). You're entering a world of Lebowski. *The New York Times*, p. 21.
- Green, B., Peskoe, B., Russell, W., & Shuffitt, S. (2007). *I'm a Lebowski, you're a Lebowski: Life, The Big Lebowski, and what have you*. NY, NY: Bloomsbury USA.
- Hayden, T., & Flacks, D. (2002). The *Port Huron statement* at 40. *Nation*, 275(5), 18-21.
- Hammett, D. (1989). *The maltese falcon*. NY, NY: Vintage. (Original published 1930).
- Herszenhorn, D. M. (March 19, 2008). *Estimates of Iraq War cost were not close to ballpark*. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/19/washington/19cost.html?_r=1&oref=slogin
- Hodgkinson, W. (May 11, 2005). Dude, let's go bowling. *The Guardian*. Retrieved April 28, 2008 from <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,1481323,00.html>
- H. Res. 114, 117 Cong., 148 Cong. Rec. 7739 (2002) (enacted).
- Hynes, W. (1993). Mapping the characteristics of mythic tricksters: A heuristic guide. In W. J. Hynes & W. G. Doty (Eds.), *Mythical trickster figures: Contours, contexts, and criticisms* (pp. 33-45). Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Iraq Veterans Against the War (2008). *Why we're against the war*. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from <http://www.ivaw.org/faq>

- Jung, C. G. (1969). *Four archetypes*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (1971). On synchronicity. In J. Campbell, (Ed.), *The portable Jung* (pp. 505-518). NY, NY: Penguin Books.
- Kesner, J. (August 8, 2004). NYC welcomes his Dudeness convention update: forget the GOP, here comes the Lebowski fest. *Daily News (New York)*, p. 6.
- Lebowski Fest. (n.d. A) Retrieved April 28, 2008, from <http://lebowskifest.com/tpir.asp>
- Lebowski Fest. (n.d. B) Retrieved April 28, 2008, from <http://lebowskifest.com/7thannual.aspt.com>
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural anthropology*. (C. Jacobson & B. G. Schoepf, trans.). NY, NY: Basic Books. (Original work published 1958)
- Lewis, F. (April 28, 1990). Baghdad rages on. *New York Times*. Retrieved on July 7, 2008 from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE1DB103BF93BA15757C0A966958260>
- Lewis, P. (November 30, 1990). Mideast tensions; U.N. gives Iraq until Jan. 15 to retreat or face force; Hussein says he will fight. *New York Times*. Retrieved June 21, 2008 from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE6D6103FF933A05752C1A966958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=2>
- Martin, P. & Renegar, V. (2007). "The man for his time" *The Big Lebowski* as carnivalesque social critique. *Communication Studies*, 58 (3), 299-313.
- Morgenstern, J. (October 7, 2006). Deconstructing the Dude. *The Wall Street Journal*, p. P13.
- MSNBC (April 25, 2005). *CIA's final report: No WMD found in Iraq*. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7634313/>
- Obst, P., Zinkiewicz, L., & Smith, S. G. (2002). Sense of community in science fiction fandom, part 1: Understanding sense of community in an international community of interested. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 30 (1), 87-103.
- Pincus, W. & Milbank, D. (June 17, 2004). Al Qaeda-Hussein link is dismissed. *Washington Post*, p. A01.
- Pincus, W. (May 13, 2005). British Intelligence warned of Iraq War. *The Washington Post*, p. A18.
- Radin, P. (1972.) *The trickster: A study in American Indian mythology*. NY, NY: Schocken Books. (Original work published 1956)
- Robertson, W. P. (October 13, 2006). The Big Lebowski fest: Hey, nice marmot. *The Guardian*, p. 12.
- Rowell, E. (2007). *The brothers grim: The films of Ethan and Joel Coen*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Rowland, S. (2006). Jung, the trickster writer, or what literary research can do for the clinician. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 51, 285 – 299.
- Smith, A. (2000). Present at the creation ... and other myths: *The Port Huron statement* and the origins of the new left. *Peace & Change*, 25(3), 339-363.
- Stone, D. (March 9, 1998). The Coens Speak (reluctantly). *indieWire*. Retrieved April 28, 2008 from http://www.indiewire.com/people/int_Coen_Joel_Ethan_980309.html.
- Stone, J. (October 19, 2005). Careful, man, there's a cult phenomenon here: White Russians, bowling and a Dude join forces at Lebowski Fest. *The National Post*, p. AL4.
- Travers, P. (March 19, 1998). Bowling for laughs with the Coen Boys. *Rolling Stone*, 782. Retrieved April 28, 2008 from the Academic Search Premier database.

- University of Washington Libraries. (n.d.). *Vietnam War Era Ephemera Collection*. Retrieved July 2, 2008, from <http://content.lib.washington.edu/protestswb/index.html>
- Viscosity Clothing Company, (2008). *Lebowski action figures set – The Dude and Walter*. Retrieved April 28, 2008 from <http://www.rock-n-roll-action-figures.com/bigleacfisest.html>.
- Willeford, W. (1969). *The fool and his scepter*. Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Yost, M. (July 23, 2003). 'All Things Lebowski' as fans of cult film gather to bowl and drink White Russians. *The Wall Street Journal*, p. D10.

End Notes

ⁱ *TBL* is a story about mistaken identity. Thus, writing about *TBL* can be confusing. I will refer to the Dude as the Dude and the millionaire Jeffrey Lebowski as Jeffrey Lebowski.

Author Note

William A. Ashton, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Psychology Discipline, York College, CUNY, 94-20 Guy R. Blvd., Jamaica, New York, 11451. E-mail: washton@york.cuny.edu The author wishes to thank Dr Barbara Ashton for her comments on drafts of this manuscript.

Barbara Ashton received her Ph.D. in Mathematics (Hyperspace Topology) from Virginia Tech. She has taught Calculus and Analysis, and designed and taught courses on the mathematics of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, and sacred mathematics. She is currently working on a paper entitle, "Cross-Stitch and the Least Path Problem," and is an associate professor at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York.