

**The Original Port Huron Statement:
The Big Lebowski and the Religion of Laughter**

Alan Baily

Stephen F. Austin State University

I. An Introduction to Lebowskiana

The “Stranger” —our narrator, a nineteenth century cowboy, who, somehow, is also an observer, and erstwhile participant in the story—delivers these introductory lines:

A way out west there was a fella, fella I want to tell you about, fella by the name of Jeff Lebowski. At least, that was the handle his lovin' parents gave him, but he never had much use for it himself. This Lebowski, he called himself the Dude. Now, Dude, that's a name no one would self-apply where I come from. But then, there was a lot about the Dude that didn't make a whole lot of sense to me. And a lot about where he lived, like- wise. But then again, maybe that's why I found the place s'durned innarestin'.¹

Jeff Lebowski is the man for his time and place: Los Angeles, 1991. The Stranger continues: “I only mention it 'cause some- times there's a man--I won't say a hee-ro, 'cause what's a hee-ro?—but sometimes there's a man... a man who, wal, he's the man for his time'n place, he fits right in there—and that's the Dude, in Los Angeles.”

The Stranger’s prefatory remarks clue us in to Jeff Lebowski’s status as “representative man.” The Stranger’s narration is confused and halting; it’s only consistency resides in atavistic use of the language of philosophical history. This makes it clear, not only that “the Dude” is the protagonist of the story, but also that meaning in history is the central theme of the Dude’s story. And yet the empty, tautological, quality of the Stranger’s ramblings—and indeed, the Dude’s lifestyle—brings the whole notion of meaning in history into question. The reason for this is that “history” has come to an end. But the “end” can be read in one of two ways. In short: this “end” is the culmination of a metaphysical destiny, or merely the senescence of a certain way of thinking and speaking of things. Whether the former or the latter is the case is the paradoxical question that *The Big Lebowski* sets out to expose, in a playful, ironic way.

The Dude is the film’s hero. But if it is the end of history, there would seem to be no need for heroes. History in the Hegelian sense is motivated by the physical desire to overcome scarcity, and the

¹ All unattributed quotes in part one of this essay are from *The Big Lebowski*

psychological desire to enjoy equal recognition. According to thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, industrial capitalism answers to the first desire, and liberal democracy satisfies the second. *The Big Lebowski* is set at the very moment when Fukuyama declared the end of history, in this sense.

Heroes—"world-historical individuals"—are catalysts in the historical process. Seeking to satisfy their own burning ambition, in pursuit of *unequal* recognition, they unwittingly carry the historical movement toward its own progressive *telos*. At the "end of history," such individuals would be not only useless, but even dangerous. Now, Jeff Lebowski is *not* this sort of dangerous individual, and perhaps it is this that makes him the man for his "innarestin'" time and place. Like a Hegelian hero, the Dude does seem entirely unconsciously to abide in the *Zeitgeist* of early-1990s LA. And as modest as it may seem, to insist on being called *the* "Dude" in a culture where everyman is called a "dude," is to insist on unequal recognition, to stake a personal claim to one's world-historical representativeness. But this LA *Zeitgeist* is all about cultivating the appearance of unconsciousness and no one is more self-consciously unconscious than the Dude. Finally, as the Stranger observes, 1990s LA is history's laziest moment, and the Dude is the laziest person in LA. Thus, in a time and place where every desire can be (and so, in principle, has been) satisfied, the Dude strives, earnestly, for nothing. In "fit[ting] right in there" the Dude excels, surpassing all others.

The Dude lives alone, is unemployed and his life seems devoid of any activity, other than bowling. He is a chronic marijuana smoker, and a connoisseur of White Russians. Despite the run-ins with liars, thugs, a pornographer, and a gang of German bogeymen (and women) who are self-described nihilists, the Dude is the real nihilistic hero of the story. The Dude's "lack, not only of faith, but of any lived relation to a social structure or political community of any sort, other than that of the league, or 'bowling together'—is absolute... The Dude's anomie, the nihilism implied by his lifestyle, in fact, is far more nihilistic than anything of which the self-proclaimed nihilists in the film can ever dream."²

Now, this was not always the case. The film reveals little of the Dude's life story, but enough to indicate his past as a participant in the New Left campus uprisings of the 1960s. He claims to be one of the Seattle Seven ("me and, uh, six other guys") and prior to this, to have been, "uh, one of the authors of the Port Huron Statement.—The original Port Huron Statement... Not the compromised second draft."

So, perhaps the dude is the man for his time and place, or maybe he is a refugee from another "end of history"—the apocalyptic 1960s. How is this castaway from the sixties significant in the

² Joshua Kates, "The Big Lebowski and Paul deMan," in Edward P. Comentale and Aaron Jaffe, eds., *The Year's Work in Lebowski Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009) p. 153

nineties?³ The juxtaposition of the late-sixties activism of the Seattle Seven and the early-sixties pacifism of the Port Huron Statement adds another layer of irony. With only a few (now well-known) exceptions, the early leadership of the Students for a Democratic Society had splintered or dropped out of “the movement” before it was overtaken by Weathermen-style activism. Moreover, what could the Dude mean by “The original Port Huron Statement” as opposed to the “compromised second draft”?

Of course it is not my intention to give a literal interpretation of these remarks, or the film as a whole. Suffice it say that the common thread I see here, is the quest for authenticity. The problems of authenticity and the end of history are related in an ironic manner. The Big Lebowski sheds comic light on this ironic relationship.

Briefly, the “ironic” relationship I refer to is as follows: Thinkers from Rousseau to Marx have intimated that the end of history (the perfection of human freedom) actually is a sort of return to authentic humanity. Be it the authentic self-love of the state of nature, or the authentic community of primitive communism, the end of history will mark a return to un-alienated humanity, albeit through the perfection of civilization. Claims to authenticity take two common forms. In the first, authenticity is achieved by maintaining faithfulness to an original or foundational moment; in the second, by eschewing foundations and committing oneself to one’s own style (autonomy). The appeal of formulas like Rousseau’s and Marx’ is that they are ambivalent between these two visions: the perfected freedom of the end of history entails both a return to original humanity and the free creativity of one’s own self.

Interestingly, the Dude’s reference to the “original” SDS manifesto is also ambivalent with respect to these alternatives. One way of seeing the Port Huron Statement is as just such a founding moment: “The tale of the magnificent manifesto written around the clock by a convention that stayed up to watch the sun rising over Lake Huron, followed in short order by the saga of the brilliant brief worked up by sleepless cadres fighting off a sneak attack by paranoid elders—this was the stuff of SDS’s founding legend.”⁴ Perhaps the Dude’s own myth of himself is anchored to this “original” moment. But the tensions written into the Statement led to rifts within the New Left that developed into obvious fault-lines by the time of the Dude’s involvement with the Seattle Seven.

This irony in the Dude’s self-mythologizing mirrors the tension in the Port Huron Statement’s aims. The manifesto placed equal emphasis on the whole community and on personal authenticity. On the one hand, it declares: “Loneliness, estrangement, isolation describe the vast distance between man and man today. These dominant tendencies can’t be overcome by better personnel management, nor

³ All we know of the Dude’s lost years is that he was a roadie for Metallica during this period.

⁴ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, revised edition. (New York: Bantam, 1993) p. 120

by improved gadgets, but only when a love of man overcomes the idolatrous worship of things by man.” This is a classic diagnosis of anomie as the product of atomistic ideology and technological society. Yet, on the other hand, the manifesto goes on to claim that human beings “have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. It is this potential we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potentiality for violence, unreason, and submission to authority. The goal of man and society should be human independence: a concern not with image [or] popularity but with finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic.”⁵

Todd Gitlin perceptively argues that the New Left was able to finesse these contradictions—for a time—by adopting expressive politics. The “expressive side to the movement culture[was] rooted in the subterranean ethos of the Fifties, and in the long run revolt against the containment of feeling and initiative in a society growing steadily more rationalized. Participatory democracy entailed the right of universal assertion.” Squaring the circle between communitarian values and individual expression, this style precipitated the now familiar notion that “the personal is political.”

The implicit theory of expressive politics was that the structures of private feeling begin before the individual, in capitalist acquisition and the patriarchal family; public in its origins, private feeling should therefore be expressed where it belongs, in public. Its faith was that a politics of universal expression would make the right things happen—and be its own reward.

Gitlin acknowledges that the New Left tended towards a “belief that political style is central to political substance—a fetishism of style,” but he also points to the importance of style for all modern mass-political movements. “We shared [this belief], in fact, with Kennedy’s managerial liberalism... The New Left’s disruption of established procedure was a counterpolitics to the managed world of institutions—a system which professes the glory of democracy while its bureaucratic rules mask the ways in which correct procedure has taken a weight of its own.”⁶

Over time, Gitlin suggests, the channels dug out on each side, between expressive and managerial styles, can harden into identities. The opening scene of *The Big Lebowski* alludes to this clash of styles/identities. We meet the Dude, in his bathrobe and jelly sandals, as he renders a \$0.69 check for a pint of half-and-half. Evidently he is the lone customer in Ralph’s grocery store. As the Dude checks out there enters a ghostly presence: George H. Bush, on television, announcing our first invasion of Iraq. The

⁵ This and the above quote from the Port Huron Statement are from Gitlin, pp.106-108. A view unexamined here is that the Dude is referring to the un-amended version of the Port Huron Statement, which was less stridently anti-communist than the version finally adopted. (For a narrative of the battle between Old and New Left over anti-communism in the Port Huron Statement see Gitlin, pp. 171-192)

⁶ All quotes in this paragraph are from Gitlin, pp. 134-135.

televised president, and in particular, one of his phrases will become a virtual character in the film: "This unchecked aggression will not stand."

About the Story

In a classic 1960s gambit, the youth culture took the pejorative, "dude," and transfigured it into a badge of honor. At some point (probably in his college years), Jeff Lebowski baptized himself "*The Dude*." If Jeffery⁷ was "the handle his lovin' parents gave him," then Dude is more an anti-handle than a substitute one. Taking the opposite of a name does not prevent the Dude from suffering the misfortune of mistaken identity, however. In the scene that sets the story in motion, we witness two thugs harassing the Dude, their interrogatory crescendo culminating in, "where is the fucking money, shithead?" They submerge his head into a toilet and, upon surfacing, the Dude replies, "It's uh, it's down there somewhere."

Following further interrogation and violence, which the Dude abides by lighting up a joint, it emerges that he has been confused with another man named Jeffrey Lebowski. Evidently this other Lebowski's wife, Bunny, owes a lot of money to a well-off pornographer named Jackie Treehorn. The Dude convinces the thugs that he is not the man they seek—as his circumstances indicate, he is of less than modest means. The story would end here but for one of the thugs having micturated on the Dude's rug. As the Dude will become convinced, this rug "really tied the room together" and thus its desecration is an injustice that demands rectification.

The Dude does not arrive at this conclusion immediately. His enthusiasm for this peculiar cause is stoked, even incited, by his friend and bowling teammate, Walter Sobachek. Walter, too, has put on a second identity, having converted to the Judaism of his now ex-wife. A Vietnam veteran, Walter, like the Dude, seems to be stuck in the late 1960s. The two characters evoke two distinctive types of that era: The Dude is a marijuana-smoking, forty-something hippie. An epitome of casual style, he is a veritable Jerry Rubin in his mastery of the expressive politics of irony. His only memories of college include "smoking Thai stick and occupying various administration buildings." Conversely, Walter, the war veteran, owns a private security agency. Walter habitually carries a pistol, to which he is wont to take recourse when diplomacy fails. We are first introduced to this behavior when he brandishes the gun at a bowling alley, in order to ensure that a rival team's player records a foul. "HAS THE WHOLE WORLD GONE CRAZY," Walter fulminates, "AM I THE ONLY ONE WHO GIVES A SHIT ABOUT THE RULES?"

⁷ Hereafter, "Dude."

Walter's relentless, characteristically arbitrary, and convenient application of rigid codes to all the quandaries of life typifies the posture of militant activism. The relationship between the Dude and Walter (friendship, and bowling, keeps them together in spite of incommensurable disagreements) is at the heart of the film. It may not be too much to say that these two characters represent decomposed essences of New Left political styles, "one of individual moral rectitude along the lines of Thoreau, the other 'Leninist-Maoist.'"⁸

Buoyed by Walter's conviction, the Dude approaches Jeffery—the "Big"—Lebowski. This elderly, wheelchair-bound, Lebowski (hereafter, Jeffery) is the epitome of a 1980s "Reagan" conservative. He is clearly wealthy, though the source of his wealth (his deceased wife, most of whose money he has already squandered) will not be revealed until much later in the story. A philanthropist, Jeffrey sponsors a program for children lacking "the necessary means for a necessary means for a higher education," called the Little Lebowski Urban Achievers. He has also taken a twenty-something "trophy wife," Bunny, whose apparent abduction fuels much of the film's antic storyline. Upon meeting the Dude, Jeffrey remarks, "Okay sir, you're a Lebowski, I'm a Lebowski, that's terrific, I'm very busy so what can I do for you?"

That having a name in common carries absolutely no implication of kinship seems to be the one point mutually acknowledged by these two Lebowskis. But the Dude insists that Jeffrey is liable for the desecrated rug, and should replace it. Taking the hard line on individual responsibility, Jeffrey maintains that the goons alone are responsible for damages to the Dude's rug. The sequel is a confrontational dialogue between the Dude's casual-cum-lazy mores and Jeffrey's rhetoric of individual-responsibility. Jeffrey confirms that the Dude is unemployed, whereupon he proceeds to browbeat him with that most Nixonian of epithets—"bum"—chanting, "The bums will always lose." The Dude abides this skirmish with the aid of another joint, and then retreats. Before leaving the mansion, however, he informs Jeffrey's assistant that he has been authorized to take any rug in the house.

With the Dude having recovered a suitable rug, once again, the story should end. Two complications prevent this resolution. The first is that Jeffrey's young wife, Bunny, disappears. Jeffrey finds a ransom note and recruits the Dude to participate in her rescue. The second is that the Dude's new rug happens to have been a gift from Maude Lebowski—Jeffrey's daughter—to her now deceased mother. Desiring to keep it in the family, Maude first has the Dude knocked out so that she can repossess the rug. Later Maude enlists the Dude's aid when she becomes suspicious that Bunny's

⁸One of the reasons that we had difficulty coding the whole phenomenon of the Sixties, [says Howe,] is that at first we couldn't see the interweaving of these two...and secondly even if we could see it, we didn't know how to cope with this.' Gitlin, p. 176.

kidnapping is a hoax. ("This compulsive fornicator is taking my father for a proverbial ride.") Maude also liberates the dude's ejaculate in order to conceive a child. Her rationale: "Look, Jeffrey, I don't want a partner. In fact I don't want the father to be someone I have to see socially, or who'll have any interest in rearing the child himself."

The convoluted relationships among these and other characters—including, notably, a pornographer who is a pillar of Malibu community, a German gang of self-described nihilists, and a third bowling team member named Donny, who can't tell the difference between John Lennon and V.I. Lenin—comprise far too many ins-and-outs to recount here. In any case these plot twists, difficult enough to follow on screen, are not the main source of the movie's appeal. The point is to laugh. Jeff Bridges, the actor who played "the Dude," sums up *Lebowski's* charm aptly: "I usually point to the end of the script, to what the Stranger says at the end of the movie. I think the Stranger's enjoyment of the movie sums up what people like about it:

The Stranger

...I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that. It's good knowin' he's out there, the Dude, takin' her easy for all us sinners... Made me laugh to beat the band. Parts, anyway... I guess that's the way the whole durned human comedy keeps perpetuatn' itself, down through the generations, westward the wagons, across the sands a time until—aw, look at me, I'm rambling again. Wal, I hope you folks enjoyed yourselves.⁹

A Community Organized for Inaction in History

When *The Big Lebowski* premiered, in 1998, critics and moviegoers alike reacted with puzzlement. Like many films destined to become "cult classics," *Lebowski's* audience did not materialize immediately, but slowly gestated into a modest but passionate band of fans on whom the film exerts a weird and wonderful pull. This attraction may flow from viewers' understanding the film's many, oblique, philosophical references, or from an appreciation of its playful portrayal of post-anti-heroism as the proper response to "the end of history." Probably it owes something to both. Bridges registers surprise that the movie did not perform better at the box office. "But now...well...I'm glad people are digging it...that it found its audience." For Bridges, the Stranger's denouement conveys "what's great" about the film, "how it says it all without really saying anything. Maybe that's one reason why people dig the movie and are able to watch it over and over again. It's like picking up a kaleidoscope. You see something new each time."¹⁰

⁹ I'm a Lebowski, You're a Lebowski, p. xiii

¹⁰ I'm a Lebowski, pp. xii-xiii

What is “sociologically” interesting about *Lebowski* is the relationship the film engenders among its community of fans. Since I cannot assume that the reader has seen the film—and it is even less likely that you have seen it “at least three times,” as one prominent guide to *Lebowski* fandom insists—I want to focus on the on the mystique of *Lebowski* fandom as a particular case of the general phenomenon of cult-fandom. I shall only make passing references to the film’s plot, which is in any case the mere occasion for its characters’ to display their distinctive styles, the latter being the primary source of viewers’ fascination.

This is not to say that cinematic form is insignificant to the film’s appeal. Indeed, one might suggest that cinematic culture is the “authentic” protagonist of *The Big Lebowski*. In properly post-modern fashion, the fictional world in which the movie’s events transpire comprises a Frankenstein-like patchwork of cinema history, highlighting Western, noir, and buddy-movie tropes. The lack of any distinctive Los Angeles landmarks in the film (excepting the In-N-Out Burger franchise) reflects the irony of the film’s opening lines, where we are told that the story is about a *certain* man (the Dude) and a *certain* place (Los Angeles) in a *certain* time (1991, or, the End of History). “All of the characteristic postmodern tricks are on display—the subversive mockery of narrative, the method of inhabiting a genre to expose its artificiality, the satirical thrust of its allusion to the classics, its disbelief in the old structures, tropes and systems”¹¹

Yet, as the authors of the above lines continue, this playful transgression drives beyond, or beneath, the familiar cynical message that most postmodern art portends. For brevity’s sake, let’s say that the clichéd message of the typical postmodern production is: “authentic communication is impossible, and so trust, friendship and love is, too.” *Lebowski* affirms the first, but not the second part of this proposition. “These mortals may be fools, but they actually love each other. This makes them—and arguably, (their creators,) the Coens—very different from the characters and film-makers of the typical camp postmodern mode, which generally ends in cynicism and showy surface-effects rather than affirming life and ultimately choosing real feelings.”¹²

The message seems to have hit a nerve. Since 1998, the negative critical reactions and lukewarm audiences have gradually yielded to recognition of the film as a classic and a swelling multitude of steadfast fans. What is more, the *Lebowski* mystique seems to have strong pull on intellectual types: in just a few years, the academic literature on the Dude has become too cumbersome to master. NPR reports that the Dude has “been cited in literally hundreds of doctoral dissertations and academic

¹¹ J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters, *BFI Film Classics: The Big Lebowski* (London: British Film Institute, 2007) p. 105

¹² Tyree and Walters, p. 104.

papers over the last decade. He's a fictional hero who has inspired a real-world lifestyle—even semi-annual Star Trek-style *Lebowski* conventions across the country."

Lebowski fandom has also given rise to a circuit of "Lebowski Fests." In the words of Fest organizers, "Few experiences compare to an evening of throwing strikes and gutters among a group of like-minded Achievers." ("Achiever" is the favored moniker for fans). They continue, "the Common love of the film transcends age and race, religious and social boundaries."¹³

Since film culture already has produced paradigms for cult-fandom, it is a matter of course to compare achievers with Trekkies, Sweet Transvestites and other cult-fan types. But there are in fact important differences between Lebowski Fests and other fan-gatherings. "Lebowski Fest is...well, let's just say it's more laid back... More contemplative. Sure, it's not particularly productive contemplation—but it's contemplation nonetheless." William Preston Robertson labels the Lebowski Fest paradigm, a 'verisimilitude of failure.' Rather than indulging in collective performance art, à la *Rocky Horror*, or slick, high-tech fantasy consumerism in the mode science fiction and comic book conventions, Lebowski Fests are typified by a "lazy, second-rate quality [that] is not merely willful: great care is taken to represent no care at all." Robertson concludes, "Lebowski Fest is really a celebration of concepts."¹⁴

Lebowski fest is the only fan gathering to have been convened in conjunction with its own academic symposium, complete with published proceedings. This occurred at the sixth annual Lebowski fest, held (in accordance with tradition) at a bowling alley in Louisville Kentucky. Reflecting on the fest-symposium, Robertson concludes:

¹³ I'm a Lebowski, You're a Lebowski, p. 5

¹⁴ *The Year's Work in Lebowski Studies*, pp. 458-459. Anyone who peruses the philosophy section of a retail bookstore will notice a proliferation of mass-market books that offer philosophical ruminations in popular art. *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, of course, and also *The Simpsons*, *House*, *Transformers* and myriad other popular entertainments have been assimilated to this "*X and Philosophy*" formula with what one must assume is at least modest commercial success. Not so *Lebowski*. There are many mass-market books on *Lebowski*, but none of them claim to be "philosophical." On the religious front, one finds the *Dude Te Ching*, which translates the Tao into quotes from the film; as well as a Judeo-Christian inspired book of Duderonomy and another on the gospel of the Dude. A recently published folio merges Shakespeare with Lebowskiana. But the most peculiar, perhaps the most characteristic, product of Lebowski-inspired contemplation is *The Year's Work in Lebowski Studies*, published by Indiana University Press and endorsed by such a luminary as Simon Critchley. This highly contemplative tome is the yield of an academic symposium conducted at the Sixth Annual Lebowski Fest. Whether the ruminations compressed within its pages count as "productive scholarship" is no less vexing a question than that of "productive scholarship" in general. What is certain, however, is that much of its prose would be impenetrable to readers without an advanced academic degree. (see Michael Dirda's review *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2009)

The two events, the 2006 Lebowski fest, that drunkard's Oneiros, and its more scholarly lead-in, *The Lebowski Cult: An Academic Symposium*, were not actually all that dissimilar, give or take a year—or maybe ten—of postgraduate study. Both, in their own way, were really just playful, drunken celebrations of concepts... [Both] undeniably met at the point that was Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Big Lebowski*.

So, the occasion for this essay is a comedy of concepts, with a peculiar fandom whose hyper-ironic, diverse-yet-like-minded devotees cultivate a "verisimilitude of failure" and call themselves "achievers," yet worship the uber-lazy Dude. What is the spirit of this celebration of concepts? And what is it that brings together these credentialed and un-credentialed¹⁵ celebrators of concepts?

II. The Religion of Laughter

J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters affirm the view that *Lebowski* is a comedy of concepts. Above all else, the movie aims to amuse us with pastiche and deconstruction. Thus it would violate the movie's spirit to submit it to direct analysis. But as Tyree and Walters maintain, this does not mean there is nothing to say about the film. "[In] fact," they "insist that *The Big Lebowski* is a film of ideas, a film whose ostensibly ramshackle form turns out to be the perfect vessel for a story whose very subjects are disjunction and miscommunication, the abuse of genre convention and the defiance of received notions of heroism and masculinity."¹⁶

Tyree and Walters situate *The Big Lebowski* as part of "an emerging *Zeitgeist*" that they name the "Religion of Laughter." "Religion of Laughter" is a reference to Laurence Sterne's novel, *Tristram Shandy*. The seventeenth century, like the twentieth, was high on style; and indeed, *Lebowski* seems to owe a debt to Sterne's book, particularly with its absurd play on the thaumaturgy of naming. But it is characteristically late-twentieth-century in its uses of names. "*The Big Lebowski*'s characters are...predominantly poseurs of one kind or another, using consciously constructed if not downright misleading personae as a way of going about their business without having to expose or even acknowledge their 'essential' selves."¹⁷ From a postgraduate perspective, the problems of transparency and representation—of authenticity and style—are central to *Lebowski*. The relationship between transparency and representation is a central issue in modern aesthetic theory, as I shall discuss below. It has also been central to modern social and political theory, at least since the time of Rousseau.

¹⁵ In the parlance of *Lebowski*, achievers with, and without, "papers."

¹⁶ Tyree and Walters, p. 12.

¹⁷ Tyree and Walters, pp.26-27.

I what follows, I venture an explanation of the Religion of Laughter. My discussion of the Religion of Laughter is divided into three parts. In the first, I review Stephen Toulmin's gloss on Sterne's reference to the myth of Momus. Toulmin reads Sterne as a critic of the inherent solipsism of modern epistemology; and this reading of Sterne leads to an ironic reverse-reading of the central metaphor of modern political theory—the State of Nature. In the second section, I summarize the development of conceptual and aesthetic irony in modern art. Here I rely on Ortega y Gasset's view of Modernism as a sort of "revolt of the elite" against the demotic and sentimental wave of Romanticism. For my purpose, two aspects that Ortega identifies with Modernism are crucial: its intellectualist irony, and its "non-transcendence." The final section traces how modernism's concept-driven irony, an aloof and elitist gesture, became the property of the postmodern masses. Here I rely on David Foster Wallace's argument that television has catalyzed the rise of an "irony function" in U.S. popular culture.¹⁸

The Myth of Momus

Momus, the classical god of laughter, ridicule, and irony, wished that men should have transparent (or glass-covered) bodies. This way one could see into their souls and know their true feelings and motives. Sterne's narrator rejects the scheme:

If the fixture of Momus's glass in the human breast had taken place...nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man's character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly...and looked in—view'd the soul stark naked;—observ'd all her motions,—her machinations;—traced all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth...then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen, and could have sworn to:—but this is an advantage not to be had by any biographer on this planet;—in the planet Mercury...it may be so...for there the intense heat of the country...must long ago have vitrified the bodies of the inhabitants (as the efficient cause) to suit them for the climate(which is the final cause); so that, betwixt them both, all the tenements of their souls, from top to bottom, may be nothing else, for aught the soundest philosophy can shew to the contrary, but one fine transparent body of clear glass...[so that] his soul might as well...play the fool out o'doors as in her own house.

But this, as I said above, is not the case of the inhabitants of this earth;—our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood; so that if would come to the specific characters of them, we must go some other way to work.¹⁹

Stephen Toulmin proposes that we take Sterne's fancy seriously as a criticism of the theory of mental interiority (the so-called "Cartesian theater" of the mind) and its practical consequence in public life. "The Problem of Inwardness," as Toulmin calls it, "is a topic whose ramifications go far beyond all

¹⁸ The reader will notice a paucity of references to *The Big Lebowski* in this section. For the most part, I have contained such references to the footnotes. I will return to the film at the conclusion.

¹⁹ *Tristram Shandy*, vol. I ch. 23.

purely abstract philosophical concerns. Its ripples spread out further, to stir and enhance our contemporary sense of personal isolation and civic decay."²⁰ This sense of private isolation and public decay, this solipsism, is a central theme of contemporary discussion. The Momus myth provides Sterne with an opportunity to criticize the theory of mental interiority associated with Descartes, Newton and Locke. (And just as "Sterne is a critic we should take care not to underestimate," merely because he couches his criticism in humor, I propose that *Lebowski* addresses weighty conceptual matters in much the same spirit of Sterne's satire.) Indeed, levity can be an appropriate mood in which to address the grave implications of modern thought.

It was not for nothing that [Sterne] chose to have printed on the title page of *Tristram Shandy* as a motto some words from Epictetus:

Tarassei tous anthropous ou ta pragmata alla ta peri ton pragmata dogmata.

—"What upsets people is not things themselves, but their theories [opinions] about things."

The epistemological "Problem of Inwardness" results from the confusion of two traditions of thinking about human consciousness. The first, the domain of the poets, takes in the "whole repertory of practical skills and experiences of kinds that we are accustomed to thinking of—and describing—colloquially—as 'inner' or 'inward.'" These comprise a variety of learned behaviors that include self-dialogue, mental calculation, deliberation, planning, imagination, and so forth. "[One] way or another, this first tradition focuses on the 'inwardness of our mental lives in a quite direct, experiential manner. Unavoidably, it ends by straining the resources of everyday language in the interest of fidelity to this experience."

The second tradition—that of Descartes, Newton, Locke and Hobbes—"Strives to be both more theoretical and more literal minded." At the expense of compromising fidelity to experience, this more "theoretical" perspective insists that consciousness literally is locked in the prison of the mind, which is located in the head, in the brain. In spite of its implications being in some cases directly opposed to our experience, this is the tradition that "[became] commonplace among 'enlightened thinkers' for the next 200 years." The ascent of "interiority" has sweeping implications:

Once the interiority of all our mental activities is taken for granted, the problem of developing any adequate conception of the "external world" (question-begging phrase!) is like the problem facing a lifelong prisoner in solitary confinement who has no way of figuring out what is going on in the world beyond the prison walls, aside from the sounds and pictures reaching him via a television set in his cell.

²⁰ Unless attributed otherwise, all quotations in this section are from Stephen Toulmin, "The Inwardness of Mental States." The 1979 Nora and Edward Ryerson Lecture, University of Chicago. Retrieved at: <http://www.sylloge.com/inwardness.html>.

Without denying the reality of inwardness, Toulmin aims to correct the psychopathology of interiority.²¹ The practices of inwardness make deliberate choice and personal accountability possible, just as it makes possible the experiences of guilt and personal conscience. "Like all other instruments (that is to say) the arts of internalizing can be used for good or ill, and so can be a mixed blessing." An important corollary to this is that "the moral and emotional ambiguities of our inner lives are simply the moral and emotional ambiguities of our open lives, internalized." And, just as our public moral and emotional concerns can become the stuff of inward contemplation, theories and opinions can become the stuff of public concern. They can also contribute to the shape of public life. It is here that the epistemological theory of "interiority" begins to touch on the matter of social and political thought. The implicit assumption of interiority "leads to a familiar metaphysical Great Divide":

[At] the far end of this road... (we are told) there is an "outer" world—the public, external world of space and time, which is equated with the objective, physical world of material things. On the other hand, there is an "inner" world—the subjective, mental world of moral sentiments and personal attitudes, which is equated with the private world of inner experience.

Toulmin "object[s] to this opposition...because it telescopes *for purposes of theory* half a dozen distinctions that *in practice* cut along quite different lines...it exhorts us to run all these contrasts together into a single, comprehensive dichotomy: between the "inner" mental world of moral sensibility and good intentions, and the "outer" material world of physical objects and brute forces." As a corrective, he emphasizes the practical origins of inwardness. Since inwardness is not an essential

²¹ On Toulmin's account, "'inwardness' is in many respects an acquired feature of our experience, a product: the product, in part of cultural history, but in art also of individual development. So understood, our mental lives are not essentially 'inner' lives. Rather, they become 'inner' because we make them so." As examples of the instrumentality of inwardness, Toulmin points to the practice of private reading, which makes the act of reading more efficient, or doing sums in one's head, which can have a similar effect on the practice of calculation. In both cases, the movement is from outside to inside, from public to private. The language we use to read or think in silence is the very same language we acquire in public, and there is nothing different in kind between doing sums on paper and performing calculations in the mind's eye. Moreover, these and other inward operations are as variegated as the concrete activities from which they derive, and "these several distinct *kinds* of inwardness are easily confused."

The image of the Mind as an Inner Theatre within the brain invites all these notions to come home to roost within it. But if we reject that image, we are at any rate free to examine all these different kinds of "inwardness" on their own terms... [As] for the sense of being "locked up within" one's head or breast, the feeling—far from being a universal condition of human experience—represents merely one particular form of psychopathology among others, even if it is currently a somewhat widespread one.

quality of human consciousness, but is instrumental, then there is no *necessary* reason to equate the private, the personal, the secret and the moral with interiority *per se*. There may be pragmatic reasons for doing so and these may be good reasons, but by themselves such reasons cannot justify such a categorical concept of interiority.

Having stressed this matter, Toulmin returns to Sterne's figure of Momus, god of censoriousness and ridicule. "[From] the more specific standpoints of practical life," he observes, "when there is good reason to disguise our states of mind—the point of [Sterne's] reference to Momus begins to be clearer. For the fact that we develop an 'inner life' in our early years may *enable* us to conceal our thoughts, but it does not *compel* us to do so." The most practical reason to learn to conceal one's inward life is to protect oneself against "censoriousness or ridicule. And if unsympathetic onlookers cannot 'read our minds' without resort to Momus' glass, that is because *their mockery* has forced us to adopt the disguise."

In short: what we learn during infancy and childhood is not the art of *showing* our minds. (That comes naturally enough.) Rather, we learn to *conceal* our minds, to be reticent, diplomatic, secretive—to keep poker faces or stiff upper lips—in a phrase, we learn *to wear masks*. Some people never get very good at this: lacking effective disguises, their minds show plainly on their faces... But secrecy and disguise...represents only one variety of inwardness among others... If that were not the case—if all inwardness were, in essence, secretiveness—it would follow, paradoxically, that the true virtuoso of the "inner life" was Richard Nixon.²²

In brief, Toulmin suggests that specific contemporary conditions such as the narrow emotional compass of the nuclear family; the "fragile and untrustworthy" quality of social relationships; public trends including the decline in "civic trust," and "civil morality," and concomitant overemphasis on the capacity of "Law...to redress the failings of Morality," all reinforce the tendency to take refuge in interiority and its ideological scaffolding. To a certain degree, the ascent of interiority runs parallel with these sociological conditions. And with respect to civil morality, in particular, Toulmin concludes: "A world in which nobody accepts anybody else's good faith is, indeed, a world of faultfinding, criticism and mockery—a world that deserves to have Momus, the god of Ridicule, as its tutelary deity."

²² Above the Dude's mini-bar, there hangs an iconic photo of Richard Nixon, bowling. Nixon was a pioneer in adopting the technique of irony in (political) advertising. I have in mind the "Checkers" speech, in particular. From the perspective sketched here, it is not hard to understand why the Dude might have taken Nixon (ironically, of course) as his own hero.

At this point Toulmin offers an ironic reading of modern political thought. Modern political science, he avers, might return to the fundamental question of political theory, the State of Nature—but in terms of the end of society, rather than its origin:

For us, today, the State of Nature is surely significant, less as the condition human beings who are *not yet* in society, than as the condition of human beings for whom there are *no longer* any effective bonds of communal life. Our own condition, that is to say, is threatening to become, not *pre*-social, but *post*-social. The bonds of community are not dissolved by the fear of mutual violence alone... Without civic trust, there is no civil morality; and a community short on civil morality can be even more a-social than one that is torn apart by mutual fear (As Hobbes himself understood, fear itself can actually be a bond.) So perhaps it was always a mistake to think of the State of Nature as an especially *violent* state. Maybe, we should think of it rather as a world...in which we are indeed...driven to take refuge in the asylums of our "inner lives," for lack of external openness and public understanding...in which we are all of us *opaque* to one another. If that is indeed our case, we should probably think about the State of Nature in terms of a different image. Rather than being a world of *weapons*, it will be a world of *masks*.

This reading of the State of Nature resonates with similar views that depict modern progress not as the liberation of humanity but as liberation *from* humanity. If it is true—and historically there is scant evidence to the contrary—that human beings are social creatures, that interiority is learned, then the freedom toward which modern progress leads is not human as we know it. The world of masks is a dehumanized world, in this sense.²³

Ironic Destiny

How does art participate in the "de-humanizing" tendency of rationalism? For an answer, I turn to Ortega y Gasset, the theorist of "mass man." Ortega's perceptive essay on the *Dehumanization of Art* is especially sensitive to the sociological significance of modern aesthetic sensibility. Also, Ortega illuminates the comic aim of modernism. Modernism's comic de-humanization is the iconography of the religion of laughter.

If Romanticism epitomizes art for the masses—and Ortega claims it does—then modernism is its dialectical opposite. If Romanticism appeals to sentimentality and pathetic equality, Modernism appeals to intellectual inequality, or at least to the distinction between the canny and the naive. For Ortega, the chief end of modernism is to address the untruthfulness of mass-democratic equality.

²³ Elsewhere Toulmin expresses optimism about the possibilities inherent in our "post-modern" epoch. "Since the 1960s...both philosophy and science are back in the intellectual postures of the last generation *before* Descartes... Scientifically and philosophically that is, we are freed from the exclusively theoretical agenda of rationalism" (*Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) p. 168). This dead-end is also an occasion for the reinvention of humanism.

Before the Romantic period, Ortega argues, art *presupposed* a distinction between the few and the many, and this assumption rested on a concrete stratification of social classes. "For example, in the Middle Ages, in accordance with the division of society into the two strata of noblemen and commoners, there existed an aristocratic art which was 'conventional' and 'idealistic,' and a popular art which was realistic and satirical."²⁴ The modernist appeal to inequality, by contrast, is not based on any socially institutionalized distinction. Rather, the inequality or difference is a matter of conceptual sensibility. Importantly, this sensibility rests on principle; its claim to aesthetic distinction appeals to abstract rather than concrete sociological conditions. But the sociological function of this art is to realize its principle by creating a new type of work and a new audience. In Ortega's formulation, modernism strives to produce "artistic art." Artistic art "is an art not for men in general but for a very special class of men who may not be better than others but who are evidently different."

What makes "artistic art" and the special class of "artists," who comprise both its creators and preservers, so "evidently different"? To begin an answer, we must first define art. Art is *mimesis* or the fabrication of "second realities" that represent the reality of lived experience. The essence of *representation* is its *distance* from lived reality. In Ortega's words, "an object of art is artistic only because it is not real."

Artistic art, then, is the effort to purify the art-object by redacting from it all but the essential qualities of representation. The first essential quality (to be preserved) is the perspective which is implied by the artist's distance—both physical and emotional—from the reality represented. Ortega lays great stress on the artist's emotional distance from the event. Of four characters at the scene of a man's death—the man's wife, a doctor, a reporter and a portrait painter—Ortega situates the painter at the farthest remove from the event. Indeed the distance between the wife and the painter is so great that the two "are witnessing two entirely distinct events."

In order to see something, for a fact to become an object that we observe we need to separate it from ourselves; it must cease to form a living part of our being. Thus the wife is not present at the scene, she is in it. She does not behold it, she "lives" it...

The reporter, like the doctor, is there for professional reasons and not out of a spontaneous human impulse. But while the doctor's profession requires him to intervene, the reporter's requires him precisely to stay aloof; he has to confine himself to observing... Yet he observes it with a view to telling his readers about it, He wants to interest them, to move them and if possible to make his readers weep as if they were they dying man...

Lastly, the painter, completely unconcerned, does nothing but to keep his eyes wide open... His attitude is purely perceptive; indeed, he doesn't perceive the even in its entirety; the painful inner sense of the event remains at the margin of his attention. He only pays attention to the exterior, to the lights ad

²⁴ *The Dehumanization of Art*, Footnote ii

shadows, to the chromatic values. In the painter we find a maximum of distance and a minimum of sentimental intervention.

Ortega associates "artistic art" with the painter's perspective of extreme distance and minimal emotion.

The realization of this perspective is what Ortega means by "de-humanization." Reality consists of three, hierarchical levels: the human, the animal and the inorganic. Human reality is "lived reality," emotion ally engaged, spontaneous, habitual. But "perception of lived reality and perception of artistic form...are in principle incompatible since they call for a different adjustment of our perceptive apparatus... The nineteenth century was remarkably cross-eyed... far from representing a normal type of art [Romanticism] may perhaps be the maximum aberration in the history of taste."

The dehumanization of art—the inversion of the hierarchy of reality—is the conscious or unconscious aim of modern artists. One might call this Ortega's "revolt of the elite." What is more, the objective of dehumanization is less compelling than the act and the process of de-humanizing.²⁵ In this "dehumanizing" impulse, Ortega glimpses the second essential quality of "artistic art," namely, style. The young artists' "inspiration, extravagant though it may seem, touches again, at least in one point, the royal road of art. For this road is called 'will to style.' But to style means to deform reality, to de-realize. Stylization implies dehumanization. And vice versa, there is no means of styling except by dehumanizing."

Ortega also depicts this apotheosis of style as a creation *ex nihilo*. "The poet begins where the man ends... The poet augments the world, adding to reality, which is there by itself, an unreal content. Author derives from *auctor*, he who augments." Metaphor is the material, for it is metaphor that reveals the possibility of transfiguration. Metaphor is not the only "instrument of dehumanization," but it is the "most radical." The power of metaphor, Ortega suggests, "verges on miracle working, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of his creatures." What is more, metaphor attests to a deeper "instinct...that induces man to avoid realities." The de-humanizing tendency of modernism is directly related to its radical understanding of metaphor. For the modernist, "metaphor is substantive and not merely decorative."²⁶

²⁵ "In his escape from the human world the young artist cares less for the goal *ad quem*, the starting fauna at which he arrives, than for the previous goal *ad quo*, the human aspect which he destroys."

²⁶ According to Ortega, there are two techniques, surrealism and infra realism, that enable the artist to "invert the hierarchy" of human experience: "The very same instinct of flight and evasion of the real is achieved in the surrealism of metaphors and what may be called infra-realism. Instead of soaring to poetical heights, we can substitute an immersion beneath the level marked by the natural perspective." Both techniques are on display in *The Big Lebowski*. Cinematographically, for example, the surreal "Gutterballs" dream-sequence also exhibits infra-

For my purpose, Ortega's account of the development of modernism is instructive in two ways. First, there is a strong parallel between Ortega's observations on art and the speculation on the end of history, and on authenticity, discussed above. The radicalization of metaphor implies *both* a return to origins ("the royal road of art") and the liberation of metaphorical efficacy—of *style*—from all historical constraints. The most significant of these restraints is *fear*: Taboo originally reveals the power of metaphors, but taboo is motivated by the desire to escape fear.²⁷

Second, if the radicalization of sentiment characterized romanticism, provoking the modern reaction, then might modern intellectualism portend an equally aberrant reaction? Ortega withholds judgment on this question, as it would require him to see the future: "I don't know, really don't know, but I believe a young poet when writing poetry simply wants to be a poet." Ortega only insists that the "new art, coinciding with the new science, with the new politics, and new life, in sum, abhors above all the blurring of frontiers."

Ortega foresees an "ironic destiny" for the new art. In fact, he suggests that "ironic destiny" marks out both the aesthetic and intellectual tendency of modernity:

The relation between our mind and things lies in the fact that we think things, that we form ideas about them... Goethe put it well: that each new concept is like a newly developed organ... In sum, our yearning for reality leads us to an ingenuous idealization of reality. Such is the innate predisposition of man... [I]n short, if we deliberately propose to realize our idea—then we have dehumanized and de-realized them... For ideas are really unreal. To regard them as reality is an idealization, a candid falsification. Yet by making them live in their very un-reality is—let us express it in this way—realizing the un-real as such. In this way we do not move from the mind to the world but the opposite: we give expressiveness to mere patterns, we objectify, we 'worldify' the patterns, the internal, the subjective.

At times Ortega depicts this irony in apocalyptic terms. "In the end...to assail all previous art is to turn against Art itself. For what is art, concretely speaking, if not art as has been created up to now?" Yet he settles on another interpretation of ironic destiny. "All modern art is comprehensible and acquires a dose of greatness when it is viewed as an attempt to create youthfulness in an ancient world." Modern art is a rejection of the weight of transcendence; a weight that traditionally has been imposed on serious art, but that Romanticism imposed too heavily.

realism, with the Dude assuming the space the camera/bowling ball should occupy. See Kates' discussion of this, and the introductory, "tumbleweeds," scene, in Comentale and Jaffe, pp. 169-172.

²⁷ "A good deal of what I have called 'dehumanization' and disgust for living forms comes from...antipathy for the traditional interpretation of realities.... On the other hand, the new sensibility feigns a somewhat suspicious enthusiasm for art that is most remote in time and space, for prehistoric or savage primitivism. In point of fact, what attracts the modern artist in those primordial works—more than the works themselves—is their candor; that is, the absence of a tradition yet unformed."

[Romanticism] expected of art nothing less than the salvation of mankind, given the downfall of religion and the inevitable relativism of science. Art was transcendent in two senses. On account of its theme which dealt with the profoundest problems of humanity, and on account of its own significance as a human power which granted justification and dignity to the human species. One just had to see the solemn air the great poet or the musical genius adopted before the masses—, the air of a prophet and founder of religion, the majestic pose of a statesman responsible for the state of the world.

In light of this history, it seems less surprising “that the new art is unfailingly comic... And it is not that the content of the work is comical—that would mean a relapse into a mode or species of the ‘human’ style—but that, whatever the content, art mocks itself.”

Ortega’s thesis runs parallel with the argument he advances in *The Revolt of the Masses*. “[The] very perfection with which the XIXth Century gave an organisation to certain orders of existence has caused the masses benefited thereby to consider it, not as an organized, but as a natural system.”²⁸ The de-humanization of art is its de-naturalization insofar as human, personal reality is the apex of the hierarchy of lived reality by nature. In the next section I will discuss the paradoxical “naturalization” of the Momus-mask of modernism.

Self-Mocking Ironic Destiny, for the Masses

Earlier I referred to Tyree and Walters’ view that *The Big Lebowski* belongs to an “emerging *Zeitgeist*”—the religion of laughter. Attempting to describe this mood, Tyree and Walters turn to the contemporary novelist David Foster Wallace:

Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still are human beings, now. Or can be... We’ve got all this ‘literary’ fiction that simply monotones that we’re all becoming less and less human, that presents characters without soul or love... What’s engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how it is that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, and for stuff that doesn’t have a price.²⁹

The question to which the above is a reply was occasioned by Wallace’s essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” The essay is a justly celebrated analysis of “televisual culture” as the mass-dissemination of ironic style. Although the essay’s conclusion is ambiguous, there are

²⁸ Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1957) pp. 59-60.

²⁹ Larry McCaffrey, “An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” Summer 1993. Retrieved at: http://samizdat.cc/shelf/archives/2005/02/an_interview_wi_3.html

moments when Wallace's argument with irony approaches jeremiad. Wallace portrays modernist-cum-postmodernist irony as a victim of its own success. With only second realities to offer, the modernist rebels, in the wake of their *coup*, now find themselves in the role of petty tyrants. Wallace rails, in martial imagery, against "the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the question without attending to its content is tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself."

Television is not the cause of the mass-dissemination of ironic culture; rather, its ascendancy in American life merely catalyzes the spread of values that once were confined to an intellectual and aesthetic minority. The greatest agency in this transformation has been advertising. The dominant tone of advertising has shifted in the last generation, from an emphasis on belonging to the crowd (buy this product and you'll be "in"), to a more solipsistic emphasis on transcending the crowd (buy this product and you'll be unique, an authentic individual). "Today's best ads are still about the Group, but they now present the Group as something fearsome, something that can swallow you up, erase you from 'being noticed.' But noticed by whom?"

The paradox here is obvious. One cannot be a member of the largest mass of passive spectators in human history while at the same time standing above the crowd. "The crowd is now...both (1) the 'herd' in contrast to which the viewer's distinctive identity is to be defined and (2) the witnesses whose sight alone can confer distinctive identity."

Televsual culture finesses this paradox through the clever use of irony. Again, advertising, which has the greatest incentive to keep viewers tuned in, plus full access to the techniques of modern social science—the most powerful instruments of market research in human history—is at the head of the charge. Conveying the message that it's better to be apart *from* the mass rather than a part *of* it, televsual irony assuages the viewer's sense that his

ontological status as just one in a reactive, watching mass is at some basic level shaky, contingent, and that true actualization of self would ultimately consist in [the viewer's] becoming one of the images that are the objects of this great herd-like watching. That is, television's real pitch in these commercials is that it's better to be inside the TV than to be outside, watching.

Wallace's thesis depends on the assumption that both literature and television are voyeuristic media (like Ortega's painting). The pleasure of voyeuristic media derives from the feeling of watching without being watched. "For the television screen affords access only one-way... We can see them, they can't see us. We can relax, unobserved, as we ogle."

The protagonist of Wallace's essay is a typical American—"Joe Briefcase"—who consumes an average six-hours of television per day. Joe Briefcase may be atypical in that, like fiction writers, (as Wallace portrays them) he is unusually anemic to other people, and especially allergic to mockery and ridicule. People like Joe are lonely by choice, "they decline to bear the psychic costs of being around other humans." Joe "chooses to sit out the enormously stressful U.S. game of appearance poker." Television satisfies Joe's desire to participate in the human world without exposing him to the risks of "appearance poker." Again, his shaky "ontological status" as a viewer is precisely the result of participating in the human world mainly through this passive, non-participatory medium. But the pleasure is real, the joys of mockery and ridicule are real, and they answer to a real sense that it's "appearance poker" out there.

Nothing conveys this more clearly than the fact that watching TV is not really voyeurism: the actors know very well that they are being looked at. What sets them apart from Joe is that they are supremely un-self conscious about being looked at. This is why the satisfaction Joe really craves is to be *in* the TV, not merely in front of it. Viewing always defers satisfaction of voyeuristic transcendence. Sounding a distant echo of Rousseau, Wallace observes: "Television...is performance, spectacle, which by definition, requires watchers. We're not voyeurs here at all. We're just viewers. We are the Audience, megametrically many, though most often we watch alone: E Unibus Pluram."

Leaving aside the interesting parallel with Rousseau's "Letter on Spectacles," Wallace's discussion of televisual culture resonates with the Momus myth in a number of ways. First, the chief spirits of televisual culture are mockery and ridicule. Second, the social ecosystem in which this culture arises—"the enormously stressful U.S. game of appearance poker"—is, like Toulmin argues, the State of Nature imagined as a "world of *masks*," rather than a "world of *weapons*." Third, the isolated TV viewer is depicted as an almost surreal realization of isolationist epistemology: Joe Briefcase resembles nothing more than a solitary homunculus receiving images in a Cartesian theater. Finally, the paradoxical tendency of televisual aesthetic is to make a knowing joke of its own second-reality-ness. It is as if the masses have taken ownership of the elitist, high-minded mockery that Ortega identified with modernism.

Read in the light of the Momus myth, Wallace's use of the imagery of "glass" is especially striking. For Wallace, the glass pane of the TV screen serves as a shield; unlike Momus' aperture it does not invite mockery and ridicule, but protects us against it. However, Wallace adds, there is a *second* pane of glass that separates the viewer from the mocking world outside. The first pane of glass is the television screen behind which the viewer suffers the pleasure of ersatz-voyeurism. "That [the viewer is]

there is also very much on the minds of those behind the second layer of glass, viz. the lenses and monitors via which technicians and arrangers apply enormous ingenuity to hurl the visible images at us. What we see is far from stolen; it's proffered."

The figure of this "second layer of glass," with "arrangers" behind it, allows Wallace to bring to attention how "consciousness of Audience" pre-conditions the televised image. "What young writers [who, for Wallace, are analogous to TV viewers] are scanning for data on some reality to fictionalize is *already* composed of fictional characters in highly formalized narratives." This gives rise to an interminable feedback loop of images in which the entire distinction between the authentic and the fabricated threatens to be effaced in an endless hall-of-mirrors.

Viewers are aware of all these layers of artifice. "How," then, "can we be made so willingly to acquiesce to the delusion that the people on TV don't know they're being watched, to the fantasy that we're somehow transcending privacy and feeding on unself-conscious human activity?" One answer is that the persons we see on television are preternaturally gifted at appearing not to notice the second layer of glass. The camera lens is "an overwhelming emblem of what Emerson, years before TV, called 'the gaze of millions.'"

The man who can stand the megagaze is a walking imago, a certain type of transcendent semihuman who, in Emerson's phrase, 'carries the holiday in his eye.' The Emersonian holiday that television actors' eyes carry is the promise of a vacation from human self-consciousness. Not worrying about how you come across. A total unallergy to gazes. It is contemporarily heroic. It is frightening and strong. It is also, of course, an act, for you have to be just abnormally self-conscious and self-controlled to appear unwatched before cameras and lenses and men with clipboards. This self-conscious appearance of unself-consciousness is the real door to TV's whole mirror-hall of illusions, and for us, the Audience, it is both a medicine and a poison.

Wallace claims that "it's fair to say we sort of worship [these people]." The claim is hyperbolic, but taken in the context of the "religion of laughter," it has real sense. As Wallace alludes by quoting Emerson, television alone is not the agent of the rise of "televisual" culture. It is more of a catalyst. The epistemological and aesthetic developments associated with the religion of laughter—interiority and modernism—antedate the inception of TV.³⁰ Also, the claim may be true for certain types of viewer; and for these, "the illusion is toxic. It's toxic for lonely people because it sets up an alienating cycle...and it's toxic for writers because it leads us to confuse actual fiction-research with a weird kind of fiction-*consumption*."

³⁰ Ortega writes: "The triumph of sport marks the victory of the values of youth over the values of senescence. Likewise, the same occurs with the success of the motion pictures, a preeminently corporeal art."

These facts, and criticisms, are known by contemporary TV watchers far and wide—especially those who have never lived in a world without TV. This combination results in a strange brew of “weary contempt for television as a creative product and cultural force, combined with beady-eyed fascination about the actual behind-the-glass mechanics of making that product and projecting that force.” Irony comes to the rescue, here, by resolving this love-hate relationship with the screen. Rather than playing on the gap between form and substance, however, it plays on the gap between the first and second panes of glass.³¹ This proffers the illusion that the viewer has “crept inside television’s boundaries.” The opposite is true. “Television, even the mundane little business of its production, has become my—our—own interior. And we seem a jaded, weary, but willing and above all *knowledgeable* Audience.” This knowledgeable audience is “trained” differently from its elders. When they watched, they expected the screen to point beyond itself, to some better version of real life. Wallace compares the new, “knowledgeable” watcher to a well-trained dog: “if you point at something, [it] will look only at your finger.” The new Audience is trained in a form of “metawatching,” which, Wallace argues, conditioned the rise of literary “Metafiction”:

Radical it may have been, but thinking that postmodern Metafiction evolved unconscious of prior changes in readerly taste is about as innocent as thinking that all those college students we saw on television protesting the Vietnam war were protesting only because they hated the Vietnam war (They may have hated the war, but they also wanted to be seen protesting on television. TV was where they’d seen this war, after all. Why wouldn’t they go about hating it on the very medium that made their hate possible?) Metafictionists may have had aesthetic theories out the bazoo, but they were also sentient citizens of a community that was exchanging an old idea of itself as a nation of doers and be-ers for a new vision of the U.S.A. as an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers. For Metafiction, in its ascendant and most important phases, was really nothing more than a single-order expansion of its own great theoretical nemesis, Realism: if Realism called it like it saw it Metafiction simply called it as it saw it seeing itself see it. This high-cultural postmodern genre...was deeply informed by the emergence of television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching. And...American fiction remains deeply informed by television...especially those strains of fiction with roots in postmodernism. Which even at its rebellious Metafictional zenith was less a ‘response to’ televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV.”

Wallace pinpoints the early 1970s as the moment of irony’s apotheosis in American televisual culture. “In the summer of 1974...remorseless lenses opened to view the fertile ‘credibility gap’ between the image of official disclaimer and the reality of high-level shenanigans. A nation was changed, as Audience. If even the president lies to you, whom are you supposed to trust to deliver the real?” Since then, the dominant cultural condition has been one of “abiding in TV.” Having been trained by watching “to laugh at characters’ unending put-downs of one another,” the new Audience also picks up

³¹ The present troubles of Charlie Sheen offer an outstanding example of this phenomenon. It seems impossible to be an American and avoid this story at the same time.

the more general tendency, "to view ridicule as both a mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art-form." Post-1974 television has evolved a highly sophisticated form of irony that inculcates in the viewer a feeling of superiority to the mass, even as the viewer obviously is part of a mass audience. This self-reinforcing character enables televisual mass-culture to stay ahead of developments in "high culture." "[To] the extent that TV can flatter [the viewer] about 'seeing through' the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in him precisely the feeling of canny superiority it's taught him to crave, and can keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling."

Conclusion: The Will to Abide

Where does the Dude abide? How? That the Dude's famous credo leaves these matters open is, of course, no accident. The phrase, "the Dude abides" gestures towards the ironic state of quasi-divinity—transcendence of the masses—Wallace associates with "abiding in TV." At the same time, it describes the Dude's manner of comporting with the condition in which he finds himself.

How if at all, can one be a free, or authentic, human in a community that has traded in a vision "of itself as a nation of doers and be-ers for a new [self-interpretation] as an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers"? The question implicates the present, but it also raises perennial matters of moral and political thought. Lebowsky, comically, raises serious questions of identity, membership, community, trust, and even transcendence.

One thing we know about the Dude is that he "fits right in there." In this sense the Dude abides in the mass, knowingly, and contentedly. He self-identifies as a generic type. The Dude is cipher for mass man. Ortega wrote: "The mass is the average man. In this way, what was mere quantity—the multitude—is converted into a qualitative determination...man as undifferentiated from other men, but as repeating in himself a generic type."

On the other hand, his *style* of "fitting in" is what recommends the Dude to our attention. "I like your style," the Stranger tells the Dude upon their meeting, midway through the film,

THE DUDE LOOKS UP, ABSENTLY:

DUDE

Well I like your style too, man.
Got a whole cowboy thing goin'.

THE STRANGER

Thankie. . . Just one thing, Dude.
D'ya have to use s'many cuss words?

The Dude looks at The Stranger as if just now noticing how out of place the cowpoke is.

DUDE
The fuck are you talking about?

What could be more average than this highly codified “subversive” use of the “F-word” in 1990s Los Angeles? Still, the Dude’s expletive, issuing forth as he recognizes the Stranger’s incongruousness, is a way staking a claim to his *particular* time and place. It is a pathetic manner of being at home in the world. The contrast between the Stranger’s genteel style and the Dude’s obscenity—coarse, but not bellicose—represents the difference between the old and new styles, the doers and be-ers versus the watchers and appearers.

Mathew K. Douglass and Jerry L. Walls suggest that the Dude offers us a vision of principled slackerhood, “laziness as a virtue.”³² Four tenets inform Dude’s ethical lethargy. First, “*reality is inherently chaotic and purposeless.*” This cosmology of Dudeism resonates with democritean and epicurean thought (e.g. Lucretius), as well as certain strains of eastern philosophy and religion; though it is most likely that the Dude picked it up from Sartre.

The Dude’s style comprises a peculiar mix of hedonism and asceticism. Douglass and Walls account for this mixture in terms of a second precept, a corollary of the first: “*One should expend effort only on simple, short-term goals.*” Those who pursue greater goals—greater hedonism, fame, or lots of money, for example³³—often run afoul of their plans. The remaining tenets of principled laziness express the *ethos* and the *telos* of Dudehood, respectively, “*one should accept life the way it is and be content, and the purpose of life is to be as happy as possible.*”³⁴

Laziness may be a form of piety³⁵ but it is not virtue. The Dude’s laziness, presented as a response to his condition, and perhaps a redemptive one, playfully invites the viewer to contemplate the chief question of classical ethics: the relationship between knowledge, virtue and happiness. To

³² “‘Takin’ ‘er Easy for All Us Sinners’: Laziness as a Virtue in *The Big Lebowski*,” in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 209) p. 157.

³³ Jeffrey and Bunny, the Nihilists, and Walter, respectively, pursue these “greater” goals.

³⁴ All quotes in this paragraph are from Douglass and Walls, “‘Takin’ ‘er Easy for All Us Sinners’: Laziness as a Virtue in *The Big Lebowski*,” in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 209) p. 157.

³⁵ On this point see Ortega’s discussion of Buddhism in *The Revolt of the Masses*.

contemplate these questions *is* a virtuous activity though it is not *political*. Yet the exercise leads to politics, since the conditions of one's polis, especially the habits it inculcates in citizens, is from an Aristotelian perspective a crucial element of one's equipment for virtue.

Our political culture is only partially informed this classical tradition. The other predominant influence is Modern social contract theory, which speaks the language of power, the State of Nature and individual rights. It seems inarguable the post-modern condition in America is dominated by the language of individualism. Today, the language of right trumps the language of virtue. This proves to be the Achilles' heel of the Dude's principled laziness: "Ironically...individualism is dude-ism's greatest flaw... [The] dude evaluates particular actions according to pleasantness [for each individual]. This standard is acceptable in most situations, but it fails when confronted by true evil." When it seems possible that Bunny's life is in danger, for example, the Dude tries to save her, "but his decision probably has more to do with assuaging his conscience (since guilt is terribly unpleasant) than doing the right thing."³⁶

Action is essential to virtue; one cannot be virtuous and be a viewer, at the same time. More specifically, the virtues of citizenship depend on loyalty to a principle greater than one's own satisfaction. For the most part, the self-serving characters of *The Big Lebowski* exhibit the opposite of this quality. The best that can be said of the Dude and Walter is that their idiosyncratic poses indicate some greater principle—say, philosophical wisdom, or civic order—but these gestures at substance never transcend the realm of style. By contrast to these stylistic poses, the sentimental bond of friendship does appear to provide a foundation of substance in a world gone awry. This friendship is a human but not a political bond. Indeed, it stand out as an achievement in a political State of Nature that is a world of masks rather than weapons, in which one's "most frightening prospect...[is] leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability."³⁷

Momus is the tutelary deity of *The Big Lebowski's* *fin-de*-everything Los Angeles.³⁸ Richard Nixon and the Dude complete the film's absurd trinity. Critics often observe that the Coen brothers' films depict an incongruous and meaningless world, in which even well-intentioned actions are bound to have unintended, even disastrous consequences; and even worse, it is impossible to read the intentions of others, or to take their trust for granted. Certainly these themes abound in *The Big Lebowski*. I hope I have shown that this is just as much a reflection of the intellectual, artistic and cultural milieu to which the movie addresses itself as it is of the world, or of reality. *The Big Lebowski* means to be amusing to its

³⁶ Douglas and Walls, p. 159.

³⁷ Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram."

³⁸ I borrow the phrase, "fin-de-everything," from Tyree and Walters.

audience. But insofar as the film gestures at political philosophy—a proposition the film’s dialogic clashes of ideology invites us to consider—the question at its heart is whether the religion of laughter can be redeemed. The film does not resolve the question but it does expose our predicament. It is successful to the extent that it invites the viewer to abide in the question.