

**Comments on Alan I. Bailey's "*The Big Lebowski* and a Religion of Laughter," and Tom McPartland's "J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: Mythopoesis, Heroism, and Providence," American Political Science Association Convention, Seattle, Washington, September 1, 2011**

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I would like to begin with a couple of little stories, personal ones, about my experience with the film *The Big Lebowski*.

The first takes place at the home of my good friends Charles Embry and Polly Detels, some years ago, not sure how many. We were discussing many things, philosophical, political, artistic, always a pleasure, when the subject of cinematic art, or movies, came up. I believe we were discussing actors/actresses we liked and Jeff Bridges came up. And I believe it was Polly who asked "Oh Tim, have you seen the *Big Lebowski*?" I confessed that I had not upon which I was told that I absolutely had to see this fabulous film and that I would love it. Both insisted on this. So, shortly after, I visited the local video store, rented the *Big Lebowski*, and went home to enjoy what I knew would be a real treat. I mean I couldn't have a higher recommendation.

Well, a few minutes into the film my honest thought was: "what the hell is this?" I was watching this slob of an aging hippie, addicted to bowling, being violated by, in the language of the film, "nihilists." And in the - do we call it dialogue? - that follows, I had never heard more "f" words, in any context, bars, locker rooms. . . . One source I consulted counted 281 expressions of the "f" word in the film. Now, I really tried to like the movie. I certainly like Jeff Bridges, and he does a great job in the film. And there is a great cast. In fact, and this is mostly for Alan, I wonder if part of the great appeal of the film is in the assemblage of acting talent – in addition to Bridges, we have Phillip Seymour Hoffmann, Steve Buscemi, Julianne Moore, John Goodman, Sam Elliot, even Ben Gazzara – that's quite a gathering of talent. But all in all I was highly disappointed in *The Big Lebowski* and did not find it very funny at all, even as satire. My honest reaction was "vulgar, offensive, violent, strangely one dimensional." I'll come back to this. And so I pretty much forgot about the film.

My second little story involves our oldest son Nathan, now beginning his senior year at Bard College in New York, where he is majoring in East Asian Studies with a concentration in literature. He is quite tuned in to linguistic nuances, being fluent in spoken Japanese. But the story concerns when his mother and I dropped him off for his first semester confident that he would come home at Christmas a stronger and wiser young man. I mean that's why he was going a long way from his home in north Texas to a liberal arts college in New York. Well, two little surprises come the holidays. The first was news of his new girlfriend, serious by all accounts, an event that would soon end badly. And the second was certain linguistic habits he had acquired at Annandale-on-Hudson which his mother and I were not really all that happy about: for example, a tendency to curse more than was his habit earlier. And, more curiously, a tendency to refer to his friends as "dude." On the phone, in the family room, hanging out: "hey dude", "that's right, dude." "cool, dude." "See you soon, dude." When he returned for summer after his first year, this tendency had accelerated and now we noticed that his friends would respond with "dude" as well. Just this summer, his best friend came to visit from Manhattan, a

political science major, and together they punctuated every other sentence with the “dude” salutation. Now I did not connect this especially with any one source, until preparing for my duties here today, in connection with which I, of course, watched the *Big Lebowski* again. I also enjoyed the privilege of reading Alan Bailey’s very fine analysis of the movie, as a result of which I have to ask myself two questions: first, is there something deficient in me, some missing gene, whereby I just can’t see what so many others see, including people I could not respect more; and secondly, is our oldest son’s “higher” education underpinned and informed less by Hannah Arendt, Heinrich Blucher, and other émigré scholars, who shaped the curriculum at his school, than by a somewhat rogue, underground, certainly eccentric pop-cult film where the pinnacle of high culture is embodied in a character who is unemployed, vulgar in both manner and speech, totally irresponsible, committed passionately to bowling, and must be addressed only, and respectfully, as “dude”? As you can see it is imperative now that I come to grips with Jeff, I mean “the big”, *Lebowski*. And I want to thank Alan for helping me do that.

The first thing I had to decide was whether to read Alan’s essay first, or watch the film again first. I opted to read the essay first and upon completion felt much better all around about the film and my reaction to it. His essay is very well written, provides an excellent synopsis of the film, and is overall convincing in its argument that we have here a representative film conducive to midwifing in its audience a “religion of laughter,” a phrase from Laurence Sterne – a bonding together, a curious, but possibly effective formation of community, dare I suggest even, anticipating Tom’s essay, a kind of “fellowship”, even “homonoia”, a like-mindedness anchored in satire and nurtured by laughter. I guess I just missed these nuances the first time and so now looked forward to corrective therapy. So, once again I sat down to watch the film and several minutes into it, I have to tell you, I thought: “what the hell am I watching and where is the humor?” I concede there are funny moments. I think my favorite is Walter’s constant interruption of Donnie whenever the latter, Steve Buscemi, tries to say anything at all: “Shut the ‘f’ up, Donnie.” Is there a more solipsistic character in all of cinema? But why do I not find more humor here?

I am inclined to think that scriptwriters for cinema, especially more recent cinema, such as represented by the Coen Brothers, are more tuned in to “generational” audiences and are little concerned with “big pictures” or grander sweeps of historical patterns, certainly little concerned with what may or may not constitute “modernity” or “post-modernity.” And it is increasingly commonplace to speak, certainly in popular and media cultures, in generational terms, of the WWII generation, Tom Brokaw’s “greatest generation”, baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, Generation Xer’s, born after 1965 and till around 81 or 82, and those since, sometimes called generation y, or generation “next” as a recent visitor to our campus called them. For purposes of our discussion here I would like to limit these categories to the first three – WWII, baby boomer, and Generation X to the present. And to me, each of these “generations” seems to have a definitive or somewhat definitive film that “captures” or “defines” or somewhat captures or defines their experience. To me, amateur tho I be in all of this, the defining film for the WWII generation is *Casablanca*, for reasons that will go unspoken at this time. For baby boomers I suggest *The Graduate*, a film having to do with Ben and Elaine’s counterculture rebellions, however naïve and childish, and the vague lure of “happenings” at Berkeley: “you’re not one of those agitators are you. I won’t have it. Not in my house. Won’t have it.” Is the *Big Lebowski* somewhat definitive for post baby boomers? I think it is certainly a candidate. And maybe this helps explain my reticence to find humor in it. Unquestionably the *Big Lebowski* is a satire of

baby boomers – the authors of Port Huron statements, dope smokers, Viet Nam vets in the movie – a generation for whom success and failure were, to borrow from Michael Polanyi, at the center of “focal awareness”. One either succeeded at some profession or vocation or one failed. In the *Big Lebowski* there are two Jeff Lebowskis, the millionaire senior who is successful, and rich, and the Jeff Bridges character who is, in the senior’s characterization, a bum. As the senior says to the younger Lebowski: “your revolution is over, bum’s lost. Bums always lose.” Could it be that I have difficulty, as a scholar to be sure, but also as a baby boomer, with “failure as funny”? Especially the almost complete failings of the dude, Walter, Donnie, Bunny, Maude, the Nihilists, and Jesus – yes, one of the characters is named Jesus. Truthfully, I ask, what is to “like”, really admire, in any of these characters? Losers all, and just not funny. But, perhaps, and this is a huge perhaps, is it possible that post baby boomers find all of this very funny indeed, “dude,” and could the reason be that it gives them a sense of superiority over their predecessors and parents, a sense of superiority rooted in, as many have observed, experiences of entitlement? If one is entitled to good grades, perhaps just for showing up or making an effort, good jobs with good pay, again for showing up, if one is entitled to graduation, perhaps with honors, perhaps with a minimum of effort, perhaps in a less demanding field such as, dare I say it, film studies and their kindred, if one is “successful” out of entitlement and “credentialed” thereby perhaps the big Lebowski and his bowling circle is indeed funny, or at least “funnier.” So I want to suggest, very tentatively, that Alan’s thesis holds for the post baby boomers, but for earlier generations, those born before the mid 1960s, there is less a “religion of laughter” than a “laughter of, about, and toward religion” which many of us find wanting as “humor.” Walter, for example, is a Shomer Shabbos Jew who cannot do anything on the Sabbath, not even bowl, not ride in a car. But he has no hesitation to rob, steal, assault, humiliate, among other vices, the rest of the week. The Jesus character licks his bowling ball before thrusting it down the lane and is multiculturally creative in his use of the “f” word. And if there is even a hint of accuracy in this “generation think” among post baby boomer film makers, and their audience, what are the prospects for film as fine art in the near and distant futures? Are we, collectively, building a high tech cave wall such that, in time, experiences of *periagoge*, of turning around, of exiting the cave will fade altogether as possibilities. Such is not the case, though, with the literary artist. And this leads me to Tom McPartland’s paper.

Tom states his thesis concisely and clearly. J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* – six books in three volumes, close to 1200 pages – is an example of Eric Voegelin’s concept of “great literature.” It is nothing less than a study of human nature in the midst of a surrounding culture determined to deny that such exists. If we accept that *The Big Lebowski* is representative of the surrounding culture, and for Alan Bailey Jeff Lebowski is especially representative, let us note a scene: Senior Lebowski: “What is a man, Jeff?” Silence. “Isn’t he someone prepared to do the right thing?” “Well, yeah, I guess. And a pair of testicles.” For Tolkien, in Tom’s reading, a man, a human being, is one who experiences, and fully, *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*, and Tom structures his analysis of the trilogy according to how Tolkien illustrates and dramatizes each of these experiences through “an exceptional fusion of the tale of the journeys, the epic, and the fairy tale – perhaps a combination unique to literature.” What a fascinating insight!

It is not possible in this all too brief forum to highlight the connections Tom makes between and among Tolkien’s characters and events whereby the mythic contours of Tolkien’s art are revealed. Let me just say that this reader is persuaded that the *Lord of the Rings* is, indeed, a “literary masterpiece.” One question: we are told that Middle earth represents “no

specific time or place.” And for the most part this is certainly true. But there is many a reference in the tale to the Third Age and to the “end” of the “third age.” In fact, in Appendix B, on the Tale of Years, a chronology of the Westlands, we have an explicit chronology of the First, Second, and Third Ages. Given the importance of trinitarian speculations on the meaning of history in Voegelin’s works, especially in *The New Science of Politics*, might we get your thoughts, Tom, on what this might mean in Tolkien, if anything? A final compliment: That for Tolkien “evil is a privation” and that this places Tolkien in company with a “classic view of evil” as one finds in saints Augustine and Aquinas is, for this reader, a particularly impressive observation and insight.

The question posed by this panel is “what does mass man do with his soul? The subtitle suggests a second question: and what is the role of the artist if mass man is to preserve his soul? We all know that this second question is addressed by all the great theorists in the Western dialogue regarding principles of good government. For artists have gifts for good or ill, the power to appeal either to our “essential selves” – to borrow a quote in Alan’s paper – or to the prevailing *zeitgeist* in the interest, of course, of commercial success and celebrity status. Can we not agree that with respect to the first possibility great literature, such as Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, is philosophy shorn of its wings? And, with respect to the second, can we not also agree that advances in high technology, in digital display – I have two large, flat screen televisions in my hotel room – may yet midwife the perfection of Plato’s cave wall and the sealing of the exit to the cave?

Let me conclude by juxtaposing a scene from Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Ring* with an interview with Joel and Ethan Coen. The Tolkien scene is from “The Shadow of the Past.” Hobbits Sam and Ted are sitting by a fire: “Queer things you do hear these days, to be sure,” said Sam. “Ah,” said Ted, “you do, if you listen. But I can hear fireside tales and children’s stories at home, if I want to.” “No doubt you can,” retorted Sam, “and I daresay there’s more truth in some of them than you reckon.” In the interviews with the Coen brothers, a question is posed: “What is the message in *The Big Lebowski*?” Coen Brothers: “None. None of them (their other movies) have messages. You see a moral in them? Do we have morals?”

Thank you.