

Englit 1470  
Spring 2005  
Wild, D.

L1470

## ENGLIT 1470: Film Directors – Joel and Ethan Coen

CRN # 40419: Spring Semester 2005 (05-2): Wed 6:00 pm – 9:50 pm, LAWRN 209

Instructor: **Daniel Wild**

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The Coen Brothers have been labeled the “filmmaker’s filmmakers,” hailed as stylistic visionaries who can achieve the successful convergence of independent cinema with the commercial mainstream, and dismissed as too coldly cerebral and “technocratic” in their approach. Films like *The Big Lebowski* or *Fargo* have acquired a cult-like status, while others such as *Barton Fink* or *The Man Who Wasn’t There* are considered noteworthy perhaps for innovative production design, visual sophistication or dialogue construction but seem to fall short of certain explicit or implicit expectations that audiences and critics might demand from them. Nonetheless, their films have consistently generated both critical attention and popular interest. In this course, we will analyze the entire body of their work as well as some of the cinematic reference texts and influences with which the Coen Brothers work in their films. In doing so, we will explore central theoretical issues of film studies such as genre, intertextuality, authorship, fandom, and formalism in order to determine the validity, efficacy or limitations of these concepts for their work. Throughout the course we will also develop a set of interpretive and evaluative criteria that will help us situate and assess the work of the Coen Brothers as a part of the larger culture of contemporary cinema.

**Prerequisite:** ENGLIT 0530 Film Analysis.

### **Required Texts:**

Coen, Ethan. *Gates of Eden*. New York: Delta, 1999.

Coen, Ethan. *Ethan Coen and Joel Coen: Collected Screenplays 1*. London: Faber & Faber, 2002.

Luhr, William G. *The Coen Brothers’ Fargo*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

Robson, Eddie. *Coen Brothers: Virgin Film*. London: Virgin, 2003.

Robertson, William Preston. *The Big Lebowski: The Making of a Coen Brothers Film*. New York: Norton, 1998.

Woods, Paul A., ed. *Joel & Ethan Coen: Blood Siblings*. London: Plexus, 2003.

All books are available at the University Book Center. You should also have a collegiate-level dictionary (e.g. *American Heritage* or *Webster's*) and a *Usage and Style Book* (most likely one from a previous class or the *MLA Handbook*) at your disposal.

### Course Procedures

The class is structured into lectures, discussion sessions, and film screenings with short breaks in between them. Attendance is mandatory for *all* classes, not just for the lecture and discussion sections, but also for the screenings. Missing two (2) or more classes may be considered a conspicuous pattern of absence, which may jeopardize a passing grade. It is advisable to practice taking notes during film screenings, as you might have difficulties relying solely on your memory later on. Readings are due on the dates given below.

If necessary or desired, extra or supplementary readings will be made available in class or at the Hillman Library reserve desk. Occasionally films listed on the schedule may not be available. In the event of any change, you are responsible for updating your course syllabus and schedule as we proceed. Please keep any handouts and your class notes in a separate folder, so that you can reference them for the exams and other work on your part.

You are expected to be in class on time. No exams or assignments will be accepted after their due dates, unless you present a formal medical or other legitimate excuse in writing or you have discussed potential difficulties with me in advance. I cannot guarantee adequate comments or careful responses to late materials. All of your written work must be typewritten or computer-printed, stapled, and proofread carefully. Include your name on the first page. Any work that is sloppy in form or difficult to read will have to be resubmitted. Please ensure that you keep a hard copy of your written work for your own protection.

**No plagiarism will be tolerated!** This means that you will have to acknowledge all of your sources according to the standards of academic integrity. If you have any doubts or questions about such reference procedures, please consult with me. In the last few years, online information retrieval and data accessibility has increased exponentially. This means that you are responsible for being especially careful about the problem of accidental or deliberate plagiarism. For your work and research in this class, you are allowed to use any available sources, but only with proper acknowledgment. Therefore, your work may be subject to random plagiarism checks. In some cases, you will be asked to resubmit your essays electronically to the website <[www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com)> for validation in order to prevent plagiarism and to ensure academic integrity.

**Assessment of your work** is based on one test administered in class, which will cover your *quantitative* knowledge of lecture, discussion, and screening material (worth 30%), and one final paper of 8 – 12 pages, which requires in-depth and critical work with more complex issues raised by the lecture, discussion, and screening material. This essay constitutes the *qualitative* assessment of your work (worth 40%). The preparations for this essay (Bibliography, Abstract, and Topic Précis) are assessed at 20% and your classroom contributions will be worth 10% of your final grade.

## Course Schedule

Class 01, Wed. Jan. 05: *Bad Santa* (Terry Zwigoff, 2004)

Class 02, Wed. Jan. 12: *Blood Simple* (1984) Read: Coen, *Screenplay*; Robson; Woods.

Class 03, Wed. Jan. 19: *Raising Arizona* (1987) Read: Coen, *Screenplay*; Robson; Woods.

Class 04, Wed. Jan. 26: *Crimewave* (1985) Read Robson.

Class 05, Wed. Feb. 02: *Miller's Crossing* (1990) Read: Coen, *Screenplay*; Woods.

Class 06, Wed. Feb. 09: *Barton Fink* (1991) Read: Coen, *Screenplay*; Woods.

**Topic Précis due**

Class 07, Wed. Feb. 16: *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) Read: Woods; Coen, *Gates of Eden* pp. 1 – 117.

Class 08, Wed. Feb. 23: *Fargo* (1996) Read: Luhr; Woods.

Class 09, Wed. March 02: *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Read: Robertson; Robson; Woods.

**Abstract and Bibliography due**

Spring Break

Class 10, Wed. March 16: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) Read Robson; Woods; Coen, *Gates of Eden*, pp. 118 - 261.

Class 11, Wed. March 23: *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) Read Robson; Woods.

Wed. March 30 no class

Class 12, Wed. April 6: *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) Read Robson, Woods.

Class 13, Wed. April 13: *The Ladykillers* (2004)

**In-Class Test**

Class 14, Wed. April 20: TBD

**Wednesday, April 27, 1:00 pm Final Papers due** in my mailbox CL 501