There's a curious moment in *The Big Lebowski* when that particular madcap film stands still, or almost does. Walter Sobchak is trying to locate the money, the money left in the dude's stolen car. In front of him is the perpetrator, a young boy failing social studies. The boy doesn't say a word as he stares blankly forward, and it is Walter, the endlessly discoursing older man who is stunned and who, finally, erupts in violence as a way of working through his awkwardness. In the Coen's *No Country for Old Men* something similar happens. Anton Chigurh, like the unstoppable killer that he is, is driving on to the next big thing. But then he glances in the rear view mirror at two teenage boys and a car violently crashes into him. The young man (Chigurh) who was too much for the old man of the title (Ed Tom Bell), who forces the old man into retirement, has just been given an eerie reminder of his own age and limits.

What these two scenes have in common is a confrontation on the part of violent men with youth; this encounter then “interrupts” (to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s word) their discursive or bodily violence. In Joel and Ethan Coen’s 1996 *Fargo*, by contrast, it is an exposure to birth (as pregnancy) that interests me--how the experience of birth
interrupts the “normal” actions of humans who are intent on organizing their world into representational structures which elide that “noise” at the center of every human being.

In his “What is Postmodernism?” Jean-Francois Lyotard writes, “it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.” Lyotard is reacting against artists who attempt to embody reality in their representations; such an aesthetics mirrors back to the viewer a narcissistic “reality,” a reality which merely reproduces the status quo and allows for little change in the world. In Fargo, realistic representation appears to be the norm to such an extent that the Coens even parade their film as a documentary. The detective genre also tends toward the conservative as the complexity of the world is (re)solved on the last page of the novel, leaving the reader in a state of complacency. Formally, the above argument is true except for one small, compelling moment in Fargo which provides both a critique of the violence of realism, and exactly the sort of “allusion” to the “unpresentable” that Lyotard is interested in. It is birth—and a series of related tropes—that open up Fargo’s representation (and the people who construct said representations) to a non-exclusive, hence ethical, outside.

The fact that we are dealing with violence in Fargo is going to come as no surprise as this film includes multiple dead bodies, one of which ends up in a wood chipper. Some of these people are killed with passion (typically, it’s the “funny lookin” guy played by Steve Buscemi who kills with emotion), but many others are murdered with robot-like precision and calm. [show fence line 1] The fact that the film deals with the “sublime” is clearly signaled in several scenes, like this one, in which the enormity of
nature is juxtaposed by the human attempt to represent property lines on its surface: [show fence line 2] as Carl Showalter buries the money along a fence line, marking it with snow scraper, the viewer quickly surmises that his mark will be overwhelmed by the sublime enormity of nature. [Scraping car] In a more famous scene, Jerry Lundegaard is seen losing his self control as he scrapes his car windshield in the frigid, inexorable Midwest cold. Both examples foreground visual clarity and control.

Lyotard writes, “We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to ‘make visible’ this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate” (78). Since we do not see examples of representations attempting to and then failing to present the infinite, the above examples do not meet Lyotard’s definition. They do signal, however, a general (linked) problem—the essential finitude of humanity in the face of the enormity of nature.

[pregnant police chief] The possibility that the film may be a commentary on that violence is probably less obvious even though the pregnant Sheriff, Marge Gunderson, questions Gaear Grimsrud along those lines at the end of the film, “I guess that was your accomplice in the wood chipper […] And for what? For a little bit of money. There's more to life than money, you know. Don't you know that? And here ya are, and it's a beautiful day. I just don’t understand it.” Reading her comment closely we can see both a critique of violence and, again, a reference to human finitude.

It’s probably worth saying at the outset that it would be difficult to see the violence in the film as anything other than highly gendered. The two killers played by the “funny lookin” Buscemi and the astonishingly impassive Peter Stormare, are competing for who can get the job done better. It all begins, of course, with the cop who pulls them
over on the highway. Carl Showalter (Buscemi) attempts, with a smile, to bribe the cop. He fails. Gaear Grimsrud (Stormare) then coldly delivers a bullet to the head of the unsuspecting patrolmen. Yes, Grimsrud gets the job done.

[men at the table] However, the real action—the action that sets up all the literal violence—begins in the world of business suits and family. At the center of the film is a masculine pissing contest between Jerry Lundegard and Wade Gustafson. Lundegard, clearly, feels impotent next to his father-in-law's money, power, and influence over his own wife and family. In response, Lundegaard is pathetically anxious to cut out his own small business empire. (Parenthetically, critics complain about the inclusion of Mike Yanagita in the film. Yanagita, a man who, obviously, has lost all of his masculine control weeps openly at a hotel restaurant during his casual meeting with Marge Gunderson, a woman who is much more controlled than he is. Yanagita's inclusion is a useful counter point to all of the men who obsess after power in the film.)

[jean on couch] The first scene that I want to focus on occurs early in the film. Jean Lundegaard is knitting in front of the television. We see a close-up of a TV with a picture of a sun; the camera pulls back and we see a male TV show host with a female guest. They begin to discuss how to make a “hollidazzle egg.” The man expresses surprise about an empty, yet unbroken egg. He says, “how the heck do I get the egg out of the shell without breaking it?” She says, “You just prick a little hole in the end and blow!” Framed by representation—the television show itself being watched by a woman in a film—the conversation foregrounds some of the central issues to this talk. There is birth (in the form of the egg). But since the issue in the TV show is how to make something decorative out of this image of pregnancy and birth—what other use would
hollow eggs serve?—the show itself is also interested in the issue of representation. The man, tellingly, asks how do I create this holiday decoration without destroying the pristine whiteness of this egg? The woman’s teacherly advice to “prick” a hole in one end of the egg and blow is difficult not to read sexually. At this point, representation, masculine desire, birth, and the (possibly innate wisdom) of women are being linked together. How, exactly, they are linked remains to be seen.

[man at window] It is at this particular moment, of course, that a masked man walks up to the rear sliding door of the Lundegaard house. From her standpoint in front of the TV, Jean can see him, but she does not move. He appears to her as something not quite real, as something on TV perhaps, framed as he is by glass doors. At the point that he hits the glass, breaking free from the “screen,” not with a precise needle “prick,” but with a large messy crash, the enormity of the situation hits her. She screams and runs, but Grimsrud is there. He grabs her and she bites his hand. He releases her and says in his typical deadpan fashion, “I need unguent.”

[unguent slide] There are, then, at least three levels of penetration here: The hollidazzle eggs that only need a delicate prick to release their sunny essence, the domestic (Lundegaard) egg which gets roughly penetrated, and the hand that gets bitten (the additional worry, underlying all of this for Jean, is also the possibility of a final violent penetration, rape). While I am at this point primarily interested in creating a context for what follows, the question at this point might be: What is the relationship between representation, violence, and space (spatial penetration)?

A few obvious points: Grimsrud cannot deal with his own bodily penetration. His wound, apparently, is quite minor--just a “prick”--yet he drops everything in search
of Neosporin. At risk here is not just an issue of penetration, but also of aesthetics and representation. It’s not easy to keep up the pretense of the tall, dark, silent Marlboro man façade (believe me, I have tried). All of this suggests a link between bodily integrity—borders and binaries—and representational coherence in the world of violent males. What are we to makes of the TV host and his female guest? Clearly, he is thickheaded. He does not know how to retrieve the essence of an egg without destroying the shell. It, then, takes a woman, to demonstrate the proper way to drain an egg of its substance with the least possible violence.

[unguent and mirror] It gets even more complicated. Grimsrud finds the “unguent” in a bathroom. We see him messily (violently) throwing odds and ends out of the medicine cabinet and then, his face framed by the mirror, he applies unguent to his hand. Then he realizes that his prey is in the bathtub. [jean as snowy storm] Jean runs out of the room like a giant egg yoke (or a dizzy snow storm). You decide).

[the snowy TV] In another more crucial scene, Showalter and Grimsrud are in a lake house guarding Jean. They are bored. And the television is full of snow. Showalter stands over it and repeatedly pounds it, saying, “Come on, you fucking shit box. Been here for days. Goddammit, nothin’ to do. Fucking TV doesn't even. Dammit, come on! Plug me in, man. Give me a fucking signal.” [more snow] In light of what happens with Showalter’s last pound on the TV, it is probably appropriate at this point to describe Showalter as an “artistic conservative.” He is, as Lyotard writes, the sort of person who is looking for realistic art that would “stabilize the referent” or “arrange [the art] according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning […] and so to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well” (74). And, clearly,
Showalter will do whatever it takes to get the world to conform to his notion of it. Lyotard links this sort of art to totalitarianism because it never allows a person or society to “doubt,” leading to a dangerous emphasis on “unity” and “simplicity.”

[beetle picture] With the last pound from Showalter’s fist the picture flickers into focus. But it is not the same television. There has been a cut and we are now watching the screen from the vantage point of a drowsy Norm and Marge Gunderson. The white noise has dissolved into a picture perfect documentary on the paternal habits of bark beetles; we watch as a beetle carries a worm to its larval young. [marge and norm in bed]

This jolting non-realistic cut associates the electronic white noise and the more bodily formlessness implied by Showalter’s term “shit box,” with birth in view of the beetles and in view of Marge’s distended form. The Coens’ cut at this moment is a response to the conservative aesthetic embodied in Showalter’s pounding fist, a fist that would have the idea and the presentation in sync with one another. Lyotard writes, “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable” (81). Birth is unpresentable, and horrifies Showalter—hence his obsession with clarity; when the Coen cut at this moment and in such a jarring manner, they take an aesthetic stand against a conservative aesthetics; one might also say that they take a stand against maturity in general. That cut shows us, illustrates the work of film making. It shows us the birth of the film in front of us as that which is unrepresentable.
This cut (and what I have written about masculinity above) suggests that the absence of representation forces men (like Showalter, etc) to confront birth. Birth, in other words, is that thing which all of their anxious strategizing is intent on eliding. Lyotard does not write of birth in his essay “What is Postmodernism?” In another short essay, “Unbeknownst,” Lyotard discusses that “unmanageable” thing that all polemics and politics exist, in fact, to elide. He discusses it in terms of birth and dependency. I like how Jean-Luc Nancy discusses in another text:

Since Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, “birth has been used to speak of what is absolutely in excess of representation. Already Hegel grasps essential knowledge--which will engender absolute knowledge--as this movement of arising and negating any representation given with the rising, as well as any representation of the rising”--Jean-Luc Nancy *The Birth to Presence* 2.

Maturity, linked with violence, finds its subjectivity only through the erasure of its birth. Birth for Nancy is a state of exposure in which the self finds itself outside of itself in others and in the world. With subjectivity, concomitant with representation, this outside of itself is erased.

The film ends with a discussion of a representation, specifically Norm’s mallard stamp which, while not winning first place, has won the right to be a three cent stamp. Norm appears slightly depressed. But Marge encourages him. After all, it is the small stamp that is needed whenever the stamps go up in price. Then, referring to their child, they repeat “two more months” twice. Their child has not yet come. And the question,
really, is what happens when the child does come. What happens when the conception (or *name* of the child) is linked with the actual living body of a newborn? Will the child at that moment have a valuation like a stamp, a *three cent* stamp? Or will the child be able to escape the entanglement of representation?

Nancy talks about “whoever comes after the subject, whoever succeeds to the West. He comes, does nothing but come, and for him, presence in its entirety is coming” (2). What this means in terms of Lyotard, I believe, is that at this moment, prior to the actual birth of the child, there is a gap between concept and (re)presentation, the one thing that keeps the world in play, and the violence of realism at a distance. The gap of birth cannot be represented, or presented, because such acts immediately stop birth.

While it may be easy enough to see, Fargo the film, as giving space to the unpresentable, do we see an ethics of the sublime in the film, in its characters? There is something admittedly strange in seeing a sheriff in Middle America as representing a sort of sublime ethics. When Lyotard attacks realism, he attacks it because it gets too easily linked to the homely values that most of us would link to the Midwest. He writes, “But in the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation, there is an identical call for order, a desire for identity, for security […] Artists and writers must be brought back into the bosom of the community [or] they must be assigned the task of healing it” (73).

What evidence do we have within the film that birth interrupts violent subjects? Clearly, birth (as white noise) is disturbing to certain subjects. Are we, however, given any real examples of other ways of being that are grounded in the experience of the sublime? There are parallels that suggest that that Marge Gunderson lives differently,
that she is able to live in light of the sublime (meaninglessness, birth, white noise and so on) and do so both ethically and productively. For example, I'm intrigued by how Grimsrud shoots a man from a far distance in a manner that is paralleled at the end of the film. In the first instance, a person dies. In the second instance (in which Marge is shooting at Grimrud), a man is wounded in the leg. Is it appropriate to see this parallel and its divergence as proof of an ethics of the sublime at work in Fargo? Or perhaps we should look more generally the ability of these midwesterners to live comfortably with an ugly nature, an enormous, sublime, nature as the best proof of an ethics of the sublime.