Pacifism as Ideological Complicity in The Big Lebowski / Todd A. Comer

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Abstract: Insofar as Walter identifies with this myth, his rational imperative is profoundly interrupted. However, this representational interruption also operates on a larger level. Since the film opens and closes with the western actor Sam Elliott (The Stranger) and is shot through with western stylistic motifs, it can be seen as striving toward a traditional western narrative (that is represented microcosmically by the Branded narrative). The film narrative fails because the "original" poet of the western myth, Sellers, lies gasping in an iron lung, incapable of speaking and making his narrative cohere. The Big Lebowski is postmodern in the sense that it represents not only the death and finitude of the "writer" of the filmic narrative, but also the interruption that results. This interruption explains the "impurities" of the Lebowski "narrative:" the intrusion of the pornographic and detective genres for instance in an (allegedly) western narrative. Lebowski can then be understood as an interrupted "narrative" that attests to the impossibility of absolute non-relation: the rational subject can never exercise complete control over difference.

Pacifism, the ideology of nonviolent political action, has become axiomatic and all
but universal among the more progressive elements of contemporary mainstream North America. With a jargon ranging from a peculiar mishmash of borrowed or fabricated pseudospiritualism to "Gramscian" notions of prefigurative socialization, pacifism appears as the common denominator linking otherwise disparate "white dissident" groupings. Always, it promises that the harsh realities of state power can be transcended via good feelings and purity of purpose rather than by self-defense and resort to combat. (Churchill 30)

Ward Churchill's harsh critique of pacifism, "Pacifism as Pathology," triggered fierce debate on the left. And it is no wonder: Churchill's essay considered Gandhi and Martin Luther King only to reject their pacifism as a second-rate substitute for violent protest. It was not Gandhi, but the deaths and expense of World War II which led to the British retreat in India; it was not King, but the aggressive tactics of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown which forced Jim Crow into hiding (43). In Joel and Ethan Coens' first overtly political film, pacifism takes center stage in a similar manner. Read in a straightforward manner, The Big Lebowski privileges pacifism as a response to the Persian Gulf War. However, given pacifism's utter inability to impede violence in the film, such a reading collapses quickly. Lebowski can be read as an ironic critique of a "liberal" pacifism complicit with state violence insofar as it is in dialogue with power, a dialogue that masks itself as inclusive when it is always already exclusive and monologic. Agency, if it can be called that, is found in a radical passivity that interrupts such a dialogue.

<2> Appropriately, The Big Lebowski opens with a monologue by a frontier icon, the cowboy actor, Sam Elliott. The Stranger's opening speech may also be taken as the film's thesis:

Now this story I'm about to unfold took place back in the early nineties - just about the time of our conflict with Sad'm and the Eye-rackies. I only mention it 'cause sometimes there's a man - I won't say a hee-ro, 'cause what's a hee-ro? - but sometimes there's a man. . . and I'm talkin' about the Dude here - sometimes there's 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. . . (Coen screenplay 4; my emphasis)

The Stranger's introduction necessarily poses the following question: In a world controlled by "I's", states intent upon realizing an extreme freedom through violence, how should the singular nation or person respond? The "eye" is linked to what Donna Haraway describes as the "cyclopean self-satiated eye of the master subject" (192; my emphasis). As such it is the I/eye of the Cartesian subject for whom sight is always
a violent affair. The Stranger implies that confronting the "I's" demands as a traditional "hero" reproduces an exclusionary and, hence, violent subject. While he doesn't want to argue that the Dude is a "hero," he indicates that the Dude is heroic and a legitimate response to the tyranny of the "I." But in what way? The script gives some indication in its first description of the Dude, "His rumpled look and relaxed manner suggest a man in whom casualness runs deep" (Coen screenplay 3). The Stranger wraps up the film with a reiteration of this casualness, "It's good knowin' he's out there, the Dude, takin' her easy for all us sinners [read violent "Eye-rackies"]" (140).

The best evidence for reading the Dude's casualness as a privileged response to violence comes in an early scene with Walter. After Walter pulls a gun on a fellow bowler who steps over the foul line during a game, the Dude responds with one of his key phrases, "just take it easy." Walter, a Vietnam vet, counters with, "That's your answer to everything, Dude. And let me point out - pacifism is not - look at our current situation with that camel-fucker in Iraq - pacifism is not something to hide behind." Here, we have in miniature the Persian Gulf War: A border has been crossed, rules have been violated, and violence results. Most importantly, the question of what constitutes an appropriate response to such violence has also been broached. The Dude's pacifism during the Vietnam War is conflated here with casualness. A reading that ignores the film's irony and humor could easily see pacifism as a privileged response to violence.

In what may be the sole extended critical treatment of the film to date, Joseph Natoli holds to an unironic representation of the Dude: "His disrespect is for self-aggrandizement, his unconcern is for being rich, his rebellion is against self-interest. And because he is so startlingly atavistic, so disturbingly nonentrepreneurial in 1998 [sic], after some twenty years of ascendant Dow, he activates a new clash of the culture wars at the same time he and his crew of masterless men push the postmodern envelop a bit further" (245). The Dude is not as "masterless," nor as "nonentrepreneurial" as he first appears, but unconsciously bound to a series of essentially entrepreneurial (or economic) relationships over which he has little progressive influence.

As The Stranger continues his monologue, we watch a tumbleweed roll through the desert, through the city, and along the ocean shore before an abrupt, telling, cut to the Dude walking casually through a supermarket. At a cash register, a television transmits George Bush Sr.'s famous sound bite following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, "This is a call for collective action . . . This aggression will not stand" (Coen 4-5). Bush's statement sets up the next scene's violence as yet another enactment of the Kuwaiti invasion: Pornographer Jackie Treehorn's thugs misidentify the Dude, Jeffrey Lebowski, as the "big" Lebowski, a wealthy conservative.
whose spouse, Bunny, has reneged on a loan. Before realizing their mistake, Treehorn's thugs break into the Dude's apartment, attack him and urinate on his rug. In the later dream sequence, the rug becomes a flying carpet which again draws us toward the Persian Gulf War: the rug (much like Kuwait) is pissed on. In a curious fashion, the Dude uses exactly the same rhetoric as Bush in responding to his loss. When confronting the big Lebowski with his soiled rug - a confrontation that was Walter's idea to begin with - he reproduces Bush's rhetoric, "This will not stand, ya know, this will not stand, man," in his defense (Coen 18). He becomes Bush in a small way.

<6> Left alone, the Dude, a self-proclaimed pacifist, would not have reacted to this attack. Ironically, he allows veteran Walter to badger him into action. Walter begins by repeatedly stressing that "this was a valued rug . . . that tied the room" together (Coen 9-12). Suddenly a rug that operates as a center of fashion is blown into a geopolitical issue. Walter's obsession with protecting the center continues: When Donny interrupts with a question, Walter berates him for having "no frame of reference." Momentarily confused by Donny, Walter is at a loss for words and cannot explain the "point" of his meditation on the "valued rug." Invariably, he returns to his military experience and then to the current Bush rhetoric, "We're talking about unchecked aggression here." And, then a little later, "I'm talking about drawing a line in the sand, Dude. Across this line you do not . . ." Elsewhere Walter says, "there is no reason, no fucking reason, why . . . [the "big" Lebowski's] wife should go out and owe money and they pee on your rug. Am I wrong?" By the end of the conversation, the Dude recapitulates Walter's argument with hardly any variation.

<7> In short, violence is motivated by those who are far more articulate than the Dude. Let's look at a more extended example. The following conversation occurs after Maude Lebowski knocks the Dude unconscious in order to retrieve her rug:

MAUDE

... All right, Mr. Lebowski, let's get down to cases. My father [the "big" Lebowski] told me he's agreed to let you have the rug, but it was a gift from me to my late mother, and so was not his to give. Now. As for this ... "kidnapping"

DUDE

Huh?

MAUDE

Yes, I know about it. And I know that you acted as courier. And let me tell you something: the whole thing stinks to high heaven.
Right, but let me explain something about that rug . . .

Do you like sex, Mr. Lebowski?

. . . Excuse me?

Sex. The physical act of love. Coitus. Do you like it?

I was talking about my rug.

You're not interested in sex?

. . . You mean coitus? (Coen screenplay 60-61)

Maude, Walter, and Mr. Lebowski are able to confuse their listener and control conversation. By contrast, the Dude does not originate language, but exists as a receptacle for others' conversation. In the above scene, the Dude repeats Maude's use of the word, "coitus." Elsewhere we see the Dude reproducing phrases like "in the parlance of our time," "special lady," or, even, "johnson." Maude's foray into the sexual centers on a search for a man who would be willing to impregnate her and then leave both her and the future child alone. It is a predatory conversation in which the Dude is kept under tight discursive control. With this in mind it is hardly surprising that Walter castigates Donny for a lack of concentration and his inability to achieve a frame of reference. Since clear, uncluttered narratives are essential for power to function, Walter finds Donny's inattention (and nonsensical interruptions) threatening. By contrast, the Dude is much too attentive.

The film continually opposes aggression to a liberal order of protest, pacifism, in which, as Churchill describes it, "good feelings and purity of purpose" are expected to prevail over violence (30). In the case of the Dude's casualness, the painful fact is that his presence does not hinder violence. Instead, the Dude is complicit with the violence that kills Donny.

The nature of his complicity is significant for us. Briefly, the Dude should never have engaged Walter in conversation, bowled with him, or even driven him around in his car. The car's methodical demolition at
the unlikely hands of nihilists (the alleged kidnappers) indicates at the very least that something is wrong in America proper when nihilism possesses such strength. In fact, the destruction of the car - read, American dream - suggests that the relationship between Walter and the Dude amounts to a non-difference, a dangerous, entropic homogeneity.

<10> Alphonso Lingis describes this complicity in the following way: the rational community forms itself around a principle of reason which departicularizes those things and beings around it. The traditions of particular sects or communities are overwhelmed by rationalism's "will to give a reason" (2). All along, this imperative puts incredible strain on each of us as sensual beings. We suffer as we are forced to obey the rational imperative and constantly be about the work of self-creation (79). Lingis writes that "in our rational collective enterprises we find, in principle, nothing foreign to us, foreign and impervious to our understanding; we find only ourselves" (6). Reading Walter as a member of this rational community may appear a stretch until one recalls the way in which he constantly pontificates, endlessly intent on demonstrating his knowledge ("I mean 'Nam was a foot soldier's war whereas, uh, this thing should be a fucking cakewalk;" Coen 125). In such a solipsistic world any effort to dissuade a rational character like Walter from action is an immediate failure as the rational project violently assimilates any disruptions.

<11> If the rational world is a work - which it certainly is - what disrupts it must also disrupt the rational project. Lingis calls this the other community which "forms when one recognizes, in the face of the other, an imperative. An imperative that not only contests the common discourse and community from which he or she is excluded but everything one has or sets out to build in common with him or her" (11). To "encounter" this depersonalized other is to recognize the imperative that governs him or her and that would govern each of us. By "facing" the other and recognizing his or her suffering under a separate imperative the other is encountered and the rational project is interrupted (25).

<12> One instance both substantiates this reading of Walter and offers a sort of non-pacifist, or perhaps we could say, a genuinely pacifist moment in the face of violence. For this, we need to turn to a secondary character, the car-thief Larry Sellers. Larry enters the plot by way of an errant social studies test found in the Dude's car. As Walter begins interrogating Larry, he opens his briefcase and pulls out the test in a Ziploc bag as if it were Exhibit A in a courtroom drama. In a commanding voice, Walter asks repeatedly, "Is this your homework, Larry?" (Coen 93-4). Uncharacteristically dressed in a suit and tie, Walter is a parody of juridical reason. In response, Larry says nothing, while looking directly at Walter and the Dude with a totally blank face, a face that could
reasonably convey either drug use or an extreme moment of grief. Larry's silence unnerves both Walter and the viewer. The former self-destructs, storms out of the house, and demolishes a corvette he assumes to have been purchased by Larry (with the ransom money that had disappeared with the Dude's car). When the vehicle's real owner enters the frame and begins to "kill" the Dude's car, Larry remains untouched and silent, watching from a window.

<13> As modern communication theory explains it, dialogue between two "opposing" parties - the pacifist and Vietnam veteran in this instance - is not oppositional, but the communication of two "variants of the Same" (Lingis 86). "Discussion is not strife; it turns confrontation into interchange" (70-72). Their opposition is merely an illusion. Rather the "rhythm" of their dialogue is mutually opposed to an "outsider" or "barbarian." In this case, Larry represents the outsider to be opposed. Rational communication occurs through an "extract[ion]" of background noise and a foregrounding of the message. Larry's silence is a defiant, non-assimilative act and it enrages Walter: "To question someone is not simply to make oneself a receptor for information," Lingis writes, "[it is also] to expose one's ignorance, one's lacks, and one's destitution and it is to appeal for assistance to one non-symmetrical with oneself" (87). Walter leaves the house muttering about "language problems" and "stonewalling."

<14> There is something about the encounter with Larry that disturbs the cycle of rationalist assimilation in Walter and the film narrative. Indeed, as violated "outsider" - more on this momentarily - it is fitting that Donny is told to remain in the car as Walter and the Dude head into their interview with Larry. Larry's silence can then be read as an answer to Donny's violent exclusion. If Larry immerses himself in the assimilative give and take of rational discourse, Donny will be easily forgotten. Larry's silence, however, forces Walter and the Dude to return to Donny, i.e., the noise they would prefer to ignore.

<15> This noise is magnified by the presence of his father, Arthur Digby Sellers, a personal hero of Walter. The former, lying in an iron lung behind Larry, wrote a number of the Branded episodes, a series aired by NBC in 1965 and 1966. [1]Branded's premise was certain to strike a chord in Walter. Jason McCord (Chuck Connors), the sole survivor of the Battle of Bitter Creek, is accused of cowardice and dishonorably discharged (West 23). Set in the 1880's, each episode opens with a vivid reminder of McCord's shame and impotence as his saber is broken in half and his uniform is stripped of decorations. Naturally, McCord is not guilty and remains silent in order to protect his commanding officer and hence the larger military structure from disturbance. Branded's narrative operates then as an individualistic fantasy on one level - a heroic man cut off from all connections -
while on another level it bolsters the military and, hence, the national narrative of conquest (which founds itself on "civilized" principles: honor, altruism, etc.). This contradictory logic reduplicates the paradoxical logic inherent in a "nation of individuals." The series amounts to an endless proving ground for courage, both internal (silence about the truth) and external (actual violence). [2] This proving needs to be understood as McCord's attempt to recover a coherent identity in the eyes of the world, despite his innocence, both for himself and for the narrative he has chosen to protect and identify with. This act of assimilation preserves a coherent and honorable narrative and is precisely the sort of act that Walter would respect. [3]

<16> Sellers is the embodiment of Walter's ultimate mortality, his personal mythology, and the concrete fact that there is no return to the productive years of youth; these early productive years of "ardor and wonder" determine middle and later age as less free and inventive than youth. [4] Possibility takes a backseat to necessity, to "passivity" (Lingis 162). Governed by the rational imperative, each of us is obsessed with making our way in the world. This imperative demands that we exclude any thought of mortality. We recognize others, make agreements, form partnerships and in this way exclude the noise of the barbarian.

<17> This is precisely the sort of assimilative operation seen in Walter and the Dude's relationship. By joining Walter in conversation, the Dude finds himself supporting the rational community; that is, he finds himself assimilated and put to work by a rational world. Donny, of course, throughout much of the film is the excluded barbarian to the Dude and Walter's conversation (Lingis 157). Donny's interruptions are almost always noise. When Walter and the Dude are discussing V.I. Lenin, Donny assumes John Lennon and inserts "And the Walrus" repeatedly and nonsensically into the conversation. The phrase "shut the fuck up, Donny" occurs five times in the screenplay, each time directly following Donny's attempt to enter the conversation (Coen 38, 75). The Dude never attempts to put a stop to this discursive violence. The fight scene with the nihilists exemplifies this exclusion. While Walter and the Dude's individual identities as Vietnam vet and pacifist should make them oppositional entities, they fight off the nihilists together. Donny, simultaneously, heaves in the background, suggestively untouched by the nihilists but suffering from a heart attack. Engaging in a "conversation" with the nihilists amounts to a fatal exclusion. Even as his ashes are scattered in the penultimate scene, his senseless, noisy death is put to work by Walter as he interpolates Vietnam and nationalism into the burial service.

<18> By contrast to such an assimilation, we meet the other not through violence and assimilation, but when these material concerns fall away and all that is left is our mortality. Lingis writes of a "community of
those who have nothing in common" which entails precisely this moment when one's projects and borders are interrupted and one encounters the other in their suffering (157). Together, Larry's youth, silence, grief, and his father's mortality open Walter up to his own mortality and impotence. If his hero can die, then Walter's own mortality must also come under this shadow. Sellers's impending death confronts Walter with the finitude of his own obsessions: patriotism, Vietnam, and religion.

<19> Two events indicate such an interruption for Walter personally. Before Larry has even entered the frame, Walter yells across the room to the supine Sellers, "I just want to say, sir, that we're both enormous - on a personal level, Branded, especially the early episodes, has been a source of, uh, inspir[ation]" (Coen screenplay 93). In the middle of the speech, Walter becomes emotional for an instant before returning to his business face for the interview with Larry. This is the only moment in which Walter's rationalist mask dissolves. In all his previous interaction with the Dude, the Dude cannot shake Walter's allegiance to his imperative. Secondly, his attack on the corvette is entirely misdirected. It is not Larry's car. This confusion indicates the degree to which Walter has been shaken by his encounter with mortality.

<20> Patriotism, Vietnam, and religion - these are the ingredients of a mythic narrative whose origin resides in Branded. While Walter is clearly affected by this encounter, it is the film narrative which is interrupted most profoundly. Jean-Luc Nancy writes of myth in his chapter "Myth Interrupted," describing how prior to the mythic scene humans existed as singularities, [5] not linked by anything other than mitsein, or being-with. Then a poet, Sellers, stood up and began telling a story and in this story the group of separate singularities began to recognize each other and cohere as a community. As the scene of myth, it is also the scene of a community's (re)presentation of itself: "Myth is of and from the origin, it relates back to a mythic foundation, and through this relation it founds itself (a consciousness, a people, a narrative)" (IO 43-45). It is this representation and narrative that then serve as a basis for more concrete forms of assimilation and violence - war.

<21> On a narrative level: in a film whose plot is motivated in large part by witty fast-paced conversation Larry's prolonged silence amounts to a moment of excess, as theorized by Kristin Thompson in "The Concept of Cinematic Excess" (130-131). Film is constituted by sound and images. When these material components are not fully assimilated to the narrative, excess is foregrounded. This could be the chance movement of a fly across a still or something as anachronistic as a watch in a Biblical epic. In this case, the absence of a flurry of words is excessive insofar as this moment does not fit with the
characteristic narrative style of the film. If film like all narrative is defined by its attempt to create a homogeneous field, excess indicates that in a film which cannot be assimilated to a "unifying effect." Stephen Heath argues, "Just as narrative never exhausts the image, homogeneity is always an effect of the film and not the filmic system, which is precisely the production of that homogeneity" (original's emphasis; Thompson 130). In a homogeneous field defined by obsessive repartee, silence appears as the work that takes place prior to all speech: the silence, before speech, is drawn out in this scene, revealing the "material practice," the work or writing/filming, that allows speech/narrative to appear so fully present throughout the rest of the film. Narrative meaning is immediately undermined at such a moment, allowing the viewer to see it in its arbitrariness and as a mediated un-natural presentation (132, 140).

<22> This breakdown in narrative and, hence, in meaning coincides with a more general hermeneutic stall. Keeping in mind that Lebowski is on one level a revision of The Big Sleep, Walter and the Dude in this scene are also simultaneously detectives. Peter Brooks has argued that detective fiction in many ways is exemplary of the nature of narrative: if plot is defined through the interplay of fabula (actual events) and sjuzet (the presented events), then the detective's job (as with the viewer/reader) is to reconstruct the fabula of a crime (13). In this particular case, we encounter an opaque moment in the narrative in which the fabula resists assimilation by its reader detectives. It is true that hermeneutic gaps remain even at the end of the film, but these are easily covered over by a return to the proairetic (the active elements of plot). Here, this opacity cannot be fully recovered, leaving not only the "detectives" but also the viewer in the dark as to the actual events. The hermeneutic adventure stalls. More importantly, the very nature of narrative (as interplay between fabula and sjuzet) is highlighted at this moment, further de-naturing that which is so commonly accepted as natural.

<23> Insofar as Walter identifies with this myth, his rational imperative is profoundly interrupted. However, this representational interruption also operates on a larger level. Since the film opens and closes with the western actor Sam Elliott (The Stranger) and is shot through with western stylistic motifs, it can be seen as striving toward a traditional western narrative (that is represented microcosmically by the Branded narrative). The film narrative fails because the "original" poet of the western myth, Sellers, lies gasping in an iron lung, incapable of speaking and making his narrative cohere. The Big Lebowski is postmodern in the sense that it represents not only the death and finitude of the "writer" of the filmic narrative, but also the interruption that results. This interruption explains the "impurities" of the Lebowski "narrative:" the intrusion of the pornographic and detective genres for instance in an (allegedly) western
narrative. *Lebowski* can then be understood as an interrupted "narrative" that attests to the impossibility of absolute non-relation: the rational subject can never exercise complete control over difference.

<24> However, Walter and the narrative that is coextensive with him are only shaken for a moment before the work of violence recommences. And perhaps this is where Walter's last name becomes telling: Sobchak (sobcheck?). [6] Where should we locate the origin of Walter's crippled psyche, that is, his inability to remain for an extended amount of time in this "community of those who have nothing in common"? While the Dude is implicated in the violence of the film, Walter manifests the problem before us. As he repeatedly tries to make sense of events through the lens of the Vietnam War, it becomes clear that Walter is an extreme example of one who has actualized his life around an experience that he cannot leave behind. To return to the phrase that haunts the film: Following September 11, the younger George Bush pronounced, "Terrorism against our nation will not stand." The manner in which the phrase floats through time, film, and the "real" world should give us pause. If nothing else it indicates the discursive power of the techno-political apparatus. Bush Sr.'s statement operates as a center that changes location and context while remaining essentially unchanged in substance. But more precisely, just as Bush's statement is a product of his own conformity to an imperative, this statement's reproduction indicates that there is a way in which imperatives, or the ways that they have been actualized, are reproduced in others. Walter, trapped by Vietnam and Persian Gulf rhetoric, may be thought of as actualizing Bush's imperative. He owes his inability to enter into community to the discursive-imperative power of the techno-political establishment. He becomes, like the Dude, subject to an imperative that exerts tremendous force to ensure that he does enter the conversation in the appropriate manner, or risk being shunted aside as one more "barbarian."

<25> This military experience has become such a part of his subjectivity that he becomes trapped, unable to leave the paths that he created (Lingis 161). Walter "Sobchak" must keep his tears in check because to let them go would be to radically question his identity. This identity, a creation of the most extreme rationalist enterprise, war, exists at an equivalently extreme level of instrumentality. War, in view of its ostentatious violence, requires the most extreme form of depersonalization. Any subjectivity created through a martial experience must be equally rigid. But Walter is frustrated because the ordered world he has created for himself - a world that does not threaten him because he (and Bush) creates it and limits it - is endangered. Accustomed to the rational conversation of two allegedly opposed while essentially the same parties, Larry's silence destabilizes his world, leaving him feeling uncertain, impotent (Lingis 163).
We have discussed the sonic component in this scene, but have left out any mention of the visual, an important area of interest as it demonstrates Larry's agency while aiding us in understanding the themes of impotence and castration - how, in short, Walter's rigid subjectivity is linked to a patriarchal, scopophilic order that cannot countenance lack. In a film containing a parody of a Busby Berkeley dance sequence, it is difficult not to reference Laura Mulvey on the issue of visual pleasure. Mulvey writes:

The magic of Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. In the highly developed Hollywood cinema it was only through these codes that the alienated subject, torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of a potential lack in fantasy, came near to finding a glimpse of satisfaction: through its formal beauty and its play on his own formative obsessions. (1446)

Mulvey's interest is in denying visual pleasure which arises either from the power that the objectivism of voyeurism conveys or from ego identification with Hollywood's stars (1448). In classic Busby Berkeley's dance numbers, erotic contemplation of the female form was vital. But this pause could not last too long or endanger the narrative's coherence and by extension the phallogocentric order. The Berkeley routine in Lebowski does not pause over some erotic figure. Rather, what would have been a traditionally erotic figure is costumed as a Valkyrie, Maude (the feminist), with the dream/dance sequence blurring into castration anxiety.

However, we do see such an erotic suspension in the scene in question. The camera focuses on the impassive face of Larry in a way that, if he were a woman, would seem quite "natural" in view of past Hollywood practices. The fact that Larry is male indicates that this gaze is not only erotic, but homoerotic. For Walter and the Dude, this can only highlight the implicit homoeroticism in all buddy movies (Mulvey 1449). Insofar as this scene and Hollywood film in general puts the viewer in the eyes of the main male characters, we are also confronted with our objectifying voyeurism (and homoeroticism in some instances). Realism, after all, demands that the gaze of the camera and the audience be marginalized, not ostentatiously out in the open (1453). The scene reproduces the situation between viewer and viewed: the viewer being the active interrogator (Walter, an "Eye-rackie," if you will) and the viewed the mute, passive object (Larry). During this lengthy narrative stall, it becomes very difficult for the viewer to not become aware of his or her own complicity in voyeurism,
interrupting the narrative one yet one more level. Interestingly, when Walter leaves the house to wreak havoc on the wrong car, Larry moves to the window, looking out at Walter and reversing the direction of the gaze: Larry now seems to be in a position of power. [7]

<28> By destroying the corvette, Walter attempts to mend the fabric that is his subjectivity. His actions shake the film back into the non-reflexive violence that motivates the plot (Mulvey 1450). As he destroys the car, he screams (repetitively), "this is what happens when you fuck a stranger in the ass." To make sense of the world and evade the visceral awareness of finitude and impotence in the face of the confusing mass of experience, the rational man or woman violently ignores that which would trouble his imperative: "One stabilizes one's practicable space . . . In this way, one defers the date when one senses that one's powers have ebbed . . . one prevents the occurrence of crises, that is, events whose outcome is uncertain" (Lingis 163). This return to stability through violence is an ostentatious indication of what goes on constantly at a subtle level in the rational community.

<29> By the end of "Pacifism as Pathology" Churchill's position is not simply that pacifism should be rejected outright. He argues against a "hegemonic" pacifism that stands in the way of other potentially more effective means of protest. He writes that "any revolutionary movement within advanced capitalist nations must develop the broadest possible range of thinking/action by which to confront the state" (91, 102). Such extremes as armed struggle and petition drives would be covered by this umbrella strategy. By now, my reader should have realized that the critique leveled at the Dude is no less true for those engaged in armed struggles against oppressive regimes. If the rationalist order can assimilate such traditional stances, then, to that degree, such political strategies are not "oppositional." Writing about the Warsaw revolt of 1943, Churchill asks, "May it rightly be suggested that those who took up arms against their executioners crossed the same symbolic line demarcating good and evil, becoming 'the same' as the SS?" (40). Churchill's (and our) answer is obvious. However, could it be that he has asked the wrong question? The question is not whether there was a difference between the Jews and the SS; the question is whether there was a difference manifest in the Warsaw revolt that could not be put to work by the fascist state. If not, both sides in the minds of the Nazis were the "same," meaning, above all, that the bearers of violence encountered nothing that they could not re-cognize, or assimilate.

<30> This essay has argued against a pacifism that thinks of itself as oppositional when it is merely complicit with violence. It has also described the nature of this violence and put forward an experience that, if we care at all about ending violence, we
should desire its frequent occurrence. While it is not an experience that we can make a project out of or seek out in an instrumental sense, it is an experience that mitigates against violence through its denial of assimilation. If we must live with an imperative, the question would then be, how can we position ourselves so that we may make this experience more likely?

<31> Let us approach this question in terms of Switzerland's dismissal of its long-standing position of neutrality during the Gulf War. Both the Gulf War and the war against the Taliban were successfully implemented through a coalition building that forced nations to take sides in a conversation, rejecting neutrality (or noise) "for the service of our military-industrial complex", hence Bush Sr.'s call for collective action following the Kuwaiti invasion (Lingis 83). Such coalition building constitutes little else than "self-protecting, self-affirming, homogenizing" regimes whose real danger is the manner in which they cut off any relation to the other (Caputo 106, 114). Without the difference registered by a neutral Switzerland, self-identical coalitions persevere and Iraqi or Afghani suffering will not end. Complicit as he is, the Dude recognizes that Walter is living in the past and in essence as a self-identical state. Walter will not, in this case, go beyond his "Jewish" and military background and only the chance encounter with Larry and his father allows any of this rigidity to momentarily disappear. Though this argument comes from a Derridean register, it is quite relevant here. If the question is how can one make these encounters with the other more frequent and prolonged, working toward a more diverse world is a step in this direction. But, admittedly, this is not a simple act and "neutrality" can only crudely gesture in the direction of such a diversity. Neutrality is too easily sublated by traditional politics. Likewise, to simply promote diversity risks falling into a blind, self-serving liberalism that would use the other for "our" own good. A diversity that would make a difference must exceed the rational order and the self that it supports. That Lingis would promote such a diversification is unmistakable. He writes:

To catch sight, beyond kinship [an instrumental, or homogeneous state], of this community in death, we should have to find ourselves or put ourselves, through imagination, in a situation at the farthest limits from kinship - in a situation in which one finds oneself in a country with which one's own is at war, among foreigners bound in a religion that one cannot believe or which excludes one . . . (original's emphasis; Lingis 157)

We must have more diversity so that the rational imperative becomes overloaded and then forced to confront the difference and the suffering it would prefer to assimilate.
This is, as Derrida puts it in The Other Heading, an argument fraught with "fear" and "hope" (6). Speaking of the future Europe, Derrida writes, "We ask ourselves in hope, in fear and trembling, what this face is going to resemble? Will it resemble the face of some persona whom we believe we know: Europe? And if its non-resemblance bears the traits of the future, will it escape monstrousity?" Fear because this mixing could end in a return to a fascist imperative. And, hope, because something unexpected could occur. Clearly, identities are at stake here. Walter can hardly bear an instant with the other because this non-imperative state forces him to recognize his utter impotence - that his works and identity are all profoundly insubstantial. It is a choice between an identity and imperative that must necessarily hurt others, and existing in a much more complex state of affairs: identity is not evacuated in the "community of those who have nothing in common," but it is held and shared at an extreme level of self-consciousness. One never has a moment to feel complacent about the men one killed in Vietnam, or the state, or religion one believes in. But if there is a sort of violence in this second option it remains the most ethical option. It is better to violate one's self than the other.

Works Cited


Notes

[1] Sellers is not listed as a writer in any of the sources I have consulted. [^]

[2] Many of the episode titles explicitly thematize courage, cowardice, and heroism (Lentz "Branded"). [^]

[3] This is a good moment to note that Walter's privileging of the Western myth once again indicates his similarity with the Dude who, recall, was introduced and praised by Sam Elliott, a famous cowboy actor, playing The Stranger. [^]

[4] Lingis describes it this way, "Something of one's arder and wonder is left in youth and will not flame up again. Finding one's forces held in forms that one's own initiatives had actualized and feeling oneself burdened with the weight of one's own initiative is the inner experience of aging. It is the experience of mortality, not in the active form of the power that casts itself unto the possible - possibly impotence - it conceives, but in the passing of one's powers of initiative into passivity" (162). [^]

[5] Nancy's term for an "individual" that possesses identity while not being monadic in nature. [^]

[6] There is a difference between affect and an exposure to death that interrupts rationality and the rational myth; however, in the scene under question it is clear that these two are related. The issue of manhood and tears comes up directly in a conversation between the Dude and the Big Lebowski who is not so much in opposition to Walter as a mirror image of the latter's own obsessive assimilation ("Strong men also cry") (33). Walter also describes the nihilists (and the Dude at one point) as crybabies. Tears are linked to non-meaning, an exposure to finitude where meaning is undermined. [^]

[7] As if the relation between viewer and viewed could be problematized any more, the immediate scene prior shows Walter, the Dude, and Donny at a theatre watching
a "dance quintet." At the very least, this assists in foregrounding this relation in our minds. [^]